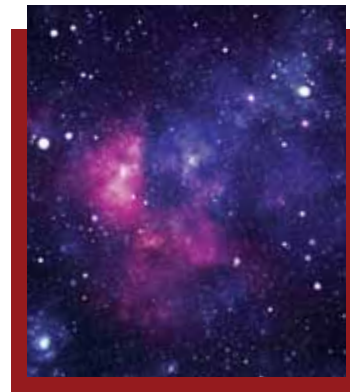


T^{GCI}oday

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

JANUARY – MARCH 2013



PARABLE OF THE
UGLY CAT

FOUR KINDS
OF NOTHINGNESS

ACCEPTING THE
**Good
News**

God's
gift



- 01 Welcome** – the new life of the new creation
- 02 The Self-emptying God** – His fullness
- 05 God's gift** – Scripture
- 08 Four kinds of nothingness** – why is there something?
- 10 Accepting the Good News** – Jesus lives for us
- 12 The parable of the ugly cat** – independent, tough, on the edges

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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Articles on pages 5, 8 and 12 are reproduced courtesy of *Christian Odyssey*.

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

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Printed by Beaudesert Times.

THE NEW LIFE OF THE **New creation**

Jesus is the lens through which we read and understand Scripture, and how we come to know God (John 5:39). He is the centrepiece of God's plan for all humanity. His coming among us was not just one more event in history, but the event which transforms all of history.

Yet he died by public execution, alone on a cross. Betrayed, deserted and abandoned by all but a few brave women; his friends and those who had been with him watched anxiously from a distance. Shock, disbelief, outrage at the injustice – these were just some of the strong emotions wracking those first disciples.

It seemed like the end of all their hopes and dreams. All appeared lost. Worse, fear probably mingled with a nagging guilt among his closest disciples. They were alive, free, while he was dying. At the moment of his arrest, Jesus had said, "If you are looking for me, then let these men go" (John 18:8).

Yet all that changed when Jesus was resurrected. He appeared in their still-frightened midst and offered them peace. They began to understand his death in profound and life-transforming ways. He had not only died so they could go free, he had died for the freedom of all mankind. The significance of this death and resurrection took on cosmic proportions – this was not just for a small band of followers, who had narrowly escaped with

their lives, but had meaning for all humanity, for all time.

And he hadn't just died for them; he was alive for them. As they understood the implications of all of this, they couldn't help share this good news.

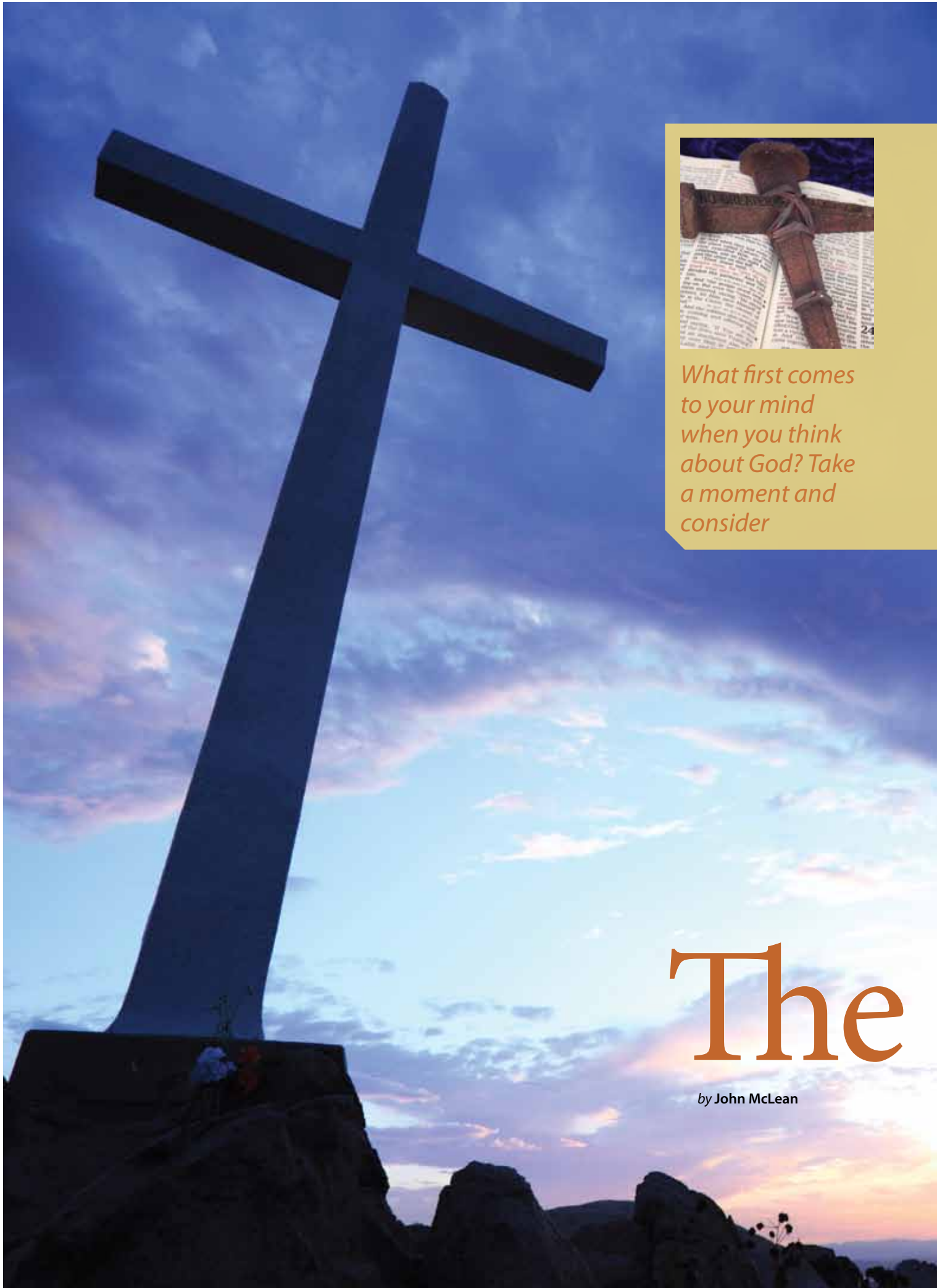
This sacrificial death so many years ago brings good news and meaning to our world today. We see in Jesus' self-emptying life the expression of the self-emptying nature of God, the revelation of the inner life of Father, Son and Spirit, living in eternal other-centred love and service. We see that God's eternal plan has always been to include us in his fellowship.

Through Jesus' union with humanity, becoming one of us, he offers us communion with the Father, Son and Spirit. Jesus is in the Father, and we are in him (John 14:20). He hasn't just done something for us, but to us and in us and through us.

All of life is "in Christ", and that we celebrate at Easter - the new life of the new creation, at one with God, in communion with Father, Son and Spirit, and with one another. All through the lavish love of Jesus, who has entered our world to share with us who he is and the life he has.

John McLean
Mission and National Director,
Australia





*What first comes
to your mind
when you think
about God? Take
a moment and
consider*

The

by John McLean

YOUR ANSWER TO this question may well be one of the most important things about you. Why? Because how we see God, what we think when we think about God, influences how we see and think about everything else – ourselves, others, life, the universe – the lot. It influences priorities, motivations, decisions, actions and reactions. It becomes central to who we are and how we live.

So what we think about God (our theology) is vitally important. Not as philosophical musings, but because it brings us into the very heart of the universe and into the very heart of who God is in eternity. Thankfully, our theology doesn't save us – only God does. But our theology profoundly influences how we experience this life, and experience our relationships with God and one another.

Try this for a minute: marginalised, humiliated, scorned – written off as nothing. Betrayed, insulted, despised. Suffering a brutal death, the ultimate punishment, executed as a condemned criminal. Not much of a biography! No success story here; not a storyboard that is likely to sell in Hollywood or the advertising industry. Yet this is the cosmic story we are reminded of each Easter.

Scripture tells us that the ultimate, full and final revelation of God is in Jesus Christ. Jesus comes from the very inner

life of God to show us who God is, what God is eternally like. Not just to talk about God, like the prophets did, but as God in the flesh.

In his life on earth, his incarnation as a real flesh and blood person, Jesus is the human face of God. He shows us the Father (John 14:9; Matthew 11:27). There is no God other than the God revealed in Jesus. There is no angry Father behind the back of Jesus, who Jesus has to placate, soften, appease, so the Father doesn't destroy us in a fit of rage.

Lessons from the Cross: Carpenter or Caesar?

As Christians celebrate Easter, we focus again on the death of Jesus on the cross, and his resurrection and ascension. The cross can only be understood fully through the resurrection, of course. Nevertheless the cross is often used as a kind of shorthand for Jesus' whole life, death and resurrection. (As Calvin wrote, the whole life of Jesus was nothing but a sort of perpetual cross.) The cross is the central symbol of that life because it shows us something essential about the eternal nature of God.

This is something we would do well to heed, because in every age the challenge to Christians and to the Christian church is to choose – to choose between the

message of a humble Galilean carpenter, or the seductive appeal of sheer, blatant power of Caesar. Which kingdom is our home?

At a moment in human history, Jesus reveals through the cross the changeless being and nature of God. And the heart of it is this: God eternally gives his life to us, generously, lavishly, graciously, sacrificially. Despite our complete unworthiness, in his grace, mercy and love, he forgives and invites us into fellowship, relationship, to share his life and love. His "vast eternal plan" is that he has chosen, in his perfect freedom and love, to share himself with us, to unite himself with us, even in pain and suffering, so we might live together in communion with him for all eternity.

If Jesus shows us the Father, then the cross is the event that explains and settles discussion about who God is and how God works in the world. And it is nothing short of astonishing. It still shocks and astounds, no matter how many Easter celebrations we share.

Love is ...

In the words of Paul (Philippians 2:5-11), in the cross Jesus shows us that God is a humble servant, to the point of being self-emptying in his sacrificial and other-centred love. He doesn't exploit, or even grasp tightly his dignity, his might, his power – in

Self-emptying God



*His power is that of **self-emptying, other-centred service**, not that of spectacular brute force and assault*

fact his power is displayed in giving it away, in sharing it with others.

God reigns, but in grace, gentleness and patience. In an unassuming way, that doesn't constantly draw attention to itself, shouting at us through a megaphone. His still, small voice offers hints, touches, transforms. God's power is not just any kind of power, but the power of love.

God is love, and always has been and always will be, and has his very being in relationship, fellowship. In his divine freedom, he cannot and does not act without love. His nature is giving, not taking; sharing, not grasping; blessing others, not manipulating them; grace not greed; gentleness not harshness; kindness not cruelty. Thankfully, we start with love, not with rules and regulations. Thankfully, our focus is on the Son, not on the sin.

We speak of someone being "full of themselves". We are even encouraged today to think of ourselves as a brand – You Inc. Yet here is God emptying himself in humble service to others, his nature revealed, the story of the New Testament.

"It is not too much to say that *the fullness of God consists in God's self-emptying*, God's power to give up God's very life for the sake of others, indeed of *every* other. It is this which we see in the incarnation: Christ empties himself for the sake of humanity, and in this act of supreme self-surrender Christ affirms the fullness of God's almighty love", writes theologian Michael Jinkins.

Or as John wrote, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers ... God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him" (1 John 3:16, 4:16). Simply put, Christ became what we are in order that we might share all that he is, as sons of God by adoption.

In Jesus, the love of God is shown to be the free offering of oneself to another by self-gift. God himself does not force himself upon us. His power is that of self-emptying, other-centred service, not that of spectacular brute force and assault. Jesus is willing to meet humanity in all its darkness, evil, sin and mess, and suffer the worst humanity can do to him. Jesus, in his birth, life, teachings, death, resur-

rection and ascension back to the Father, takes our humanity into his and redeems it. He joins himself to us – forever, as the Son of God and the Son of Man, whereby the Son of God becomes man that man may become sons of God.

At-one with God

After the resurrection, his disciples began to understand that his death had meaning not just for them, but for all humanity for all time. He died once, Hebrews says, for the sins of all mankind. Paul says, "that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them". Indeed, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:19, 21).

This is not just a legal solution to the problem of sin. Atonement is found not in a legal transaction, but in the person of Jesus – his whole life and being. This was not just to balance the books, to satisfy the solicitors, to move numbers from one column to another. It was not just to restore the old order of things. It was to produce a completely "new creation". In Christ, human history is not simply reversed or restored; it is given new birth, a radical new creation. The prime purpose of this is to lift humanity up to share the life and love of God. In Christ, all parts of our salvation are complete; we are saved from sin and isolation for relationship, sonship with the Father.

Through the cross, Jesus reveals that God is not a harsh, vindictive legalist, a self-righteous moralist, a hanging judge, self-focused and self-concerned, given to anger, demanding satisfaction for offence and damage to his dignity. Nor is he removed, aloof, a cold abstraction of philosophical thought. Jesus did not come to change the mind of an angry God, but to reveal the loving heart of God toward all humanity.

In grace, he comes to us and saves us from ourselves, our darkness, misunderstandings, pain and suffering. He empties himself that we might be filled with the fullness of his love. In Jesus, the Triune God has forever united himself with us, enfolding us in his love, embracing us in the circle of life that is the Father, Son and Spirit, the eternal communion of the very being of God forever. ☉

SCRIPTURE:

God's gift

by Dr Gary Deddo



LEARNED OF THE importance of the Bible as a young child and was encouraged and taught to read it and memorize it. I studied it both on my own and with others, and I'm very glad I did, now years later. The study of the Bible has always been an essential part of my ministry in serving others, whether it was teaching it, preaching from it, studying it with small groups of other Christians, or referring to it when counseling others. When I attended seminary my primary focus was the study and interpretation of Scripture. It was so important to me that I was willing to try to learn Hebrew and Greek to see if I could understand it better!

Along the way, I learned that there were various ways the nature and place of Scripture was understood and also a variety of ways to make use of it. Some of those explanations and ways of approaching Scripture seemed better than others. Some ways seemed to lead to the misuse of Scripture, or even make it irrelevant. I ended up reading books and taking courses to sort out these issues, hoping I could find some wisdom in all this not only to help me, but to pass on to others.

Scripture is so essential to the Christian faith that most every denomination of the church has some official statement about the importance and place of Scripture, and GCI is no exception. These summaries can be a good place to start reflection on the nature, purpose and right use of Scripture. GCI's statement is brief, to the point and fairly comprehensive: "The Holy Scriptures are by God's grace sanctified to serve as his inspired Word and faithful witness to Jesus Christ and the gospel. They are the fully reliable record of God's revelation to humanity culminating in his self-revelation in the incarnate Son. As

such, Holy Scripture is foundational to the church and infallible in all matters of faith and salvation."

I'd like to explore with you what's behind this theological summary of our understanding of Scripture. We do so not so we can enter into endless debate or prove ourselves superior to other Christians who might have a different view. And I don't think we simply want a theory about it. We seek understanding of Scripture because we highly value it and want to honor and make proper use of it. We want to handle it well so we can get the most out of it. These things Holy Scripture itself encourages us to do.

We also can recall that others in church history have benefitted greatly through a deep understanding of Scripture and how to interpret it. But in the end, I think we want to grasp and use it well because we hope to get to know even better the God of the Bible in whom we put our faith.

By God's grace

Many of us have sung the childhood song that says: "Jesus loves me, this I know—for the Bible tells me so." And that's true enough. However, there's a different way to sing that verse that is also true: "Jesus loves me this I know—so the Bible tells me so!" This second way is reflected in the GCI statement that the Bible is God's gift to us, a gift of grace and so of his love. Because God loves us in and through Christ, he has graciously provided us his written Word.


God didn't have to do so, but his love for us, his creatures, has moved him to provide us with his Word in written form. God's love for us comes first, then follows his provision of the Bible. We wouldn't be able to know and love God

if God hadn't first loved us and communicated to us through his written Word. God gives us his Word in Scripture because he loves us and wants us to know that he does. We should always remember that the Bible is God's gracious gift of love to us.

God continues to empower his Word

But that's not the end of it. Human words in and of themselves don't have the capacity to reveal to us the truth and reality of God. Human words are just that, human. They derive primarily from our human experiences. But God is not a creature and can't be simply grasped in creaturely terms, concepts and idea. Words when referring to God don't mean exactly the same thing as when they refer to creation. We can say we "love" and we can say God "loves." But God's love far exceeds our love. We use the same word, but we don't mean the same thing when we use it of God compared to when we use it of ourselves. Yet our love can be a dim mirror image of God's love. So God has to sanctify, make holy and adequate, our mere human words so that we can use them to accurately and faithfully refer to the God of the Bible and not lead us into misunderstandings of God and his ways.

The God of the Bible is active and continually gracious to us by superintending our reading and interpretation of Scripture, helping us to see how they uniquely make God and his ways known to us. The God of Holy Scripture has not become mute since the Bible came into existence. This God continues to speak in and through his written Word, enabling it to refer to him and not just to creaturely ideas or realities. God continues to speak his Word to us



*The Christian church down through the ages has always regarded **Scripture as indispensable for its worship, devotion and life.** Its very existence is bound up with it. The church would not be what it is without it. Holy Scripture is part of the air it breathes and the food it eats.*

through this gift of written revelation. If God ceased to be personally involved and stopped empowering the written Word to accomplish the miraculous feat of enabling us to know him, then God would not be truly known. We would simply have human and creaturely ideas about God to consider and nothing more. The result would likely be not much better than the ancient Greek and Roman mythological gods.

Inspired by the Spirit

If we ask, "How has God spoken and made himself known to us?" it turns out that this work involves the whole of God, that is, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The word "inspired" means "God breathed." The Holy Spirit is identified as the wind or breath of God. By the Spirit of God, certain people down through the ages were called, appointed and specially enabled to speak authoritatively for God. They were "inbreathed" by the Spirit. How exactly the Spirit works we do not and cannot know. But we have been told that the Spirit can and has empowered first the

prophets of the Old Testament and then the apostles of the New Testament.

The Spirit seems to take into account everything about a particular prophetic or apostolic author and graciously makes use of them. The Spirit incorporates their language, culture and social-political background as well as their own relationship with God into his communicative purposes. The Spirit uses the human elements of the selected prophets and apostles. But the Spirit uses these elements in a way that enables them to refer far beyond creaturely realities. The Spirit takes charge of them in a way that gives those words a capacity to communicate that they could never have on their own.

By the Spirit, the Scripture as a whole serves as a written form of communication that God can continually use to make himself and his ways known to his people down through the ages. If the Spirit was not at work with these individuals, we would not have any authoritative and trustworthy access to God's word. So we can thank God for choosing certain individuals down

through the ages and, by his Spirit, inspiring them to speak faithfully for him.

Providential preservation

We have these written words because they have somehow been preserved for us down through the ages. This too must be regarded as the gracious work and gift of God. Because of his great love for us, the God of the Bible not only kicked things off by selecting and inspiring certain individuals, but also by overseeing their writings being handed on and finally collected together. We call this form of God's grace his providence.

Apparently an aspect of God's providential oversight also included some inspired editing of pre-existing materials. God providentially maintained contact with his written words and the process by which it was canonized (brought together in an authoritative collection). Of course if the God of the Bible wanted us to have a written witness to his Word, then we shouldn't be surprised that God would also have to anticipate and secure its preservation down through the ages.

*The Scripture as a whole serves as a **written form of communication** that God can continually use to make himself and his ways known*



The self-revelation

The gracious gift of revelation as it traces through history does reach a crucial high point. All the prophetic words prepare for and look forward to the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. All the apostolic writings look back to the time and place where God himself, as himself, reveals and interprets himself in and through Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, we don't have simply another inspired word about God, but we have the Living Word of God himself, in person—in time and space and in flesh and blood. Jesus tells us that he is, himself, the Way, the Truth and the Life. He does not show us a way or tell us about the truth or give us things that lead to life. He himself is these things. Thus God's gracious revelatory work reaches a qualitatively different level

with the birth of the Word of God in human form. As it turns out, the written word of God's Spirit-inspired prophets and apostles point to the fulfillment of their own word with the coming of the Living Word.

John the Baptist, as the last of the prophets and representative of them all, serves as an authoritative witness when he points to Jesus as the light, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the Messiah, the Son of God (John 1:8; 29-34). He (John) declares he is not the light, comes after Jesus, and must decrease—unlike Jesus, who is the light, who was before John was, who is the Lamb of God, who will baptize with the Spirit and so who must increase. Jesus, then, is the center of the center of God's revelatory work and so stands at the very center of all of Scripture.

Faithful and infallible

The written Word derives its authority and faithfulness from the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit. Because God is the Living and speaking God, we have a written word that puts us in touch with the Living Word of God, all by the Spirit. The Bible's authority is established and maintained by a living and real connection of God to the Bible. Scripture can serve as it does because it remains connected to the infallible God. The Bible does not have its own authority or faithfulness apart from God, but in actual and daily connection with the whole God, Father, Son/Word and Spirit. So when we read or listen to Scripture, we can expect to hear the living God speak to us once again. 🌐

Dr Gary Deddo is Special Assistant to GCI President Dr Joseph Tkach

One of the more enigmatic questions posed by our understanding of the cosmos is “Why is there something instead of nothing?”

YOU MIGHT THINK that is a rather dumb question. However, to many scientists, this is of major importance. Why does matter exist at all, and—since it does—where did it come from?

The first words of the Bible inform us that God created the heavens and the earth. This fundamental revelation is what guided the children of Israel away from the false gods they had worshipped in Egypt, and turned them towards the true Lord of Creation. Through prophetic revelation God taught these people, in language they could understand, foundational truths about his own identity and the nature of his relationship to all creation.

Genesis was not intended to be the last word about the intricacies of exactly how the various parts of the cosmos work together. Using what we call scientific methods and tools we know much more about the details of the inner workings of creation than those ancient people did. However, the biblical revelation has not been superseded as a first word and starting place for researching the nature of creation. The biblical word provides us theological/philosophical

presuppositions upon which we can build our scientific research of creation which science cannot provide itself.

Many scientists scoff at the biblical and Christian answer as to why there is a cosmos at all, considering it science fiction—with the emphasis on fiction. I enjoy good science fiction. For me, some of the most enjoyable of this genre comes from the Star Trek series. Captains, Kirk, Picard and Janeway tackled all kinds of social and moral issues with a backdrop of all kinds of imaginative devices to beam them from one place to another, travel at warp speed, eat and drink items synthesized from a machine, and explore all kinds of life forms. What makes Star Trek so good is that it has a real basis in science. You can read about it in a book entitled *The Physics of Star Trek* by a theoretical physicist, Lawrence M. Krauss.

Krauss has written another book entitled *A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather Than Nothing*. Dr. Krauss is one of several scientists who try to prove that every particle and force sprang into being “from nothing,” but without God being part of that process. To reach this conclusion, Dr. Krauss explains that there are three kinds of nothingness.

The first kind of nothingness is a concept we inherit from Greek observation and thought—the **nothingness of empty space**. This kind of nothingness is not really “nothingness” because we know that so-called “empty” space is teeming with energy and particles. These are the features of creation that we currently have the ability to investigate, but it has been estimated to comprise only 6% of what is there. It

seems that the other 94% of space is filled with what we call dark matter and dark energy. These aspects of the universe are, so far, beyond the reach of our physical senses and the instruments we have made to enhance them. So we can’t explain exactly what they are and how they work. But we know something else is there since what we can detect is being affected by things other than what we can now detect.

Krauss describes a second kind of nothingness as the “**nothing without space and time**.” His conjecture is that whole universes bubble up out of this kind of nothingness. Each bubble has its own space-time and simply pops into existence. But even if this is true, Krauss notes, we still have to ask, where did the bubbling something come from?

A third kind of nothingness is a **more profound nothingness in which even the laws of physics are absent**. Krauss attempts to explain how this happens by saying that an infinite assembly of universes exists in this nothingness. It’s called the multiverse and each universe in it has its own randomly determined rules, particles and forces. This, for Krauss is where the story ends—or should we say, begins.

But does it? Once again, if such a third kind of nothingness contains an infinite assembly, we must still ask, “Where did that infinite assembly come from?” And furthermore we can ask, just how the idea of multiverses amounts to a scientific claim at all? What empirical research has provided any evidence that this is the case? Indeed, could this assertion ever be verified scientifically at all?

FOUR KINDS OF

Nothingness

By Dr Joseph Tkach



If I were to seriously propose that “full-grown unicorns could simply pop into existence from nothing”, people would rightly dismiss me as insane. But substitute ‘universes’ for ‘unicorns’ and suddenly, we’re talking science!

Science fiction author Theodore Beale has pointed out the fatal problem with Dr. Krauss’s ideas. Being a bit facetious, Beale says: “There is, of course, a fourth type of nothingness. And that is the amount of scientific validity contained in Krauss’s desperate attempt to use a fraudulent veneer of science to avoid the obvious conclusions driven by the relevant philosophic logic. This isn’t even science fiction, it’s just purely evasive fantasy. If I were to seriously propose that full-grown unicorns, little rainbow-colored horned equines, could simply pop into existence, like bubbles in boiling water, ex nihilo, people would rightly dismiss me as a fantasist and a possibly insane one at that. But substitute ‘universes’ for ‘unicorns’ [as Krauss has done], and suddenly, we’re talking science!”

Krauss’s position, as Beale notes, is not the result of scientific experiment, but rather a pure philosophical speculation. And it certainly doesn’t explain why there is something rather than nothing. His view amounts to saying that there has always been something of some sort. The universe we currently know came from other stuff that simply existed in a different form. There are just multiple forms of cosmic existence.

The biblical and Christian answer as to why there is something rather than nothing is entirely different. Its answer is theological and is based on a particular revelation granted to the ancient Hebrew people through particular persons, and preserved for us in Scripture.

In continuity with the revelation of Genesis the author of the New Testament book of Hebrews (11:3) tells us “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.” Theologians refer to this as “creation ex nihilo (from nothing).” What is meant by the word translated here “worlds” and other

biblical words such as “heaven and earth” the “cosmos,” the “universe” or “creation”? The biblical writers are referring to all that is, that is not God. Thus they would include “bubbles,” “multiverses” and anything else either actually existing or hypothesized by cosmologists.

What is meant by “from nothing” in this theological statement? It means that prior to the moment of creation, there was nothing except God, not even space or time (or multiverses!). In other words, God didn’t make the universe from anything eternally pre-existing—there was nothing at all pre-existing along with God before God created. So when speaking of Creation in a way consistent with divine revelation, we mean all that has ever and will ever exist that is not God and in any and every form, whether discovered by scientific research or imagined by philosophers or fiction writers.

There was a time when the cosmos was not, when there was only God and nothing else in any form. Creation has not existed eternally along with God. God does not exist alongside or within the time and space of any universe or multiverse. Time and space (and multiverses, if there were such) are created things that came into being by the agency and act of God. Unlike everything else that ever existed in any form, there was never “a time” when God was not.

So the Christian answer is neither that the cosmos existed eternally (along with God and so always was) nor that the cosmos was generated by nothing. God gave existence itself to that which has ever existed and in fact he continues to hold everything in existence. If God forgot about the universe even for a nanosecond all that is not God would cease to exist!

This revelation means also that creation is not an extension or emanation or a part of God. The cosmos is not divine and God is

not created or made. Creation and its entire history is dependent upon God even for its existence. Creation is neither self-existent nor eternal or divine. God, however, is no way dependent upon creation. Only God has eternal self-existence, what theologians have called down through the ages, God’s aseity. There never was a time when God was not. God is not a created or made thing. So the biblical revelation, from the Old Testament through to the New, informs us as to why there is a universe, a cosmos, at all. It does not exist on its own but exists because of the agency and act of God. Now there’s an answer to the question!

We have made, and continue to make, astounding discoveries that are increasing our understanding of the cosmos and its history. But those working at the leading edges of the experimental spectrum—the very big and the very small—admit that they still may be just beginning. Each breakthrough seems to open up new phenomena to investigate. In describing their work, quantum physicists find they must resort to language that is more metaphysical than scientific. Some admit that, scientifically, there may be a limit to “knowability.” And it is widely admitted, especially by philosophers of science, that the entire scientific enterprise is based on philosophical (or theological) assumptions that the scientific method itself cannot provide.

That is why those first words of Genesis should be taken seriously. God told us something we cannot discover for ourselves, and cannot disprove. Why is there something rather than nothing? Because, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, making a cosmos that we can touch, feel and measure—all out of, well, nothing. ☉

Dr Tkach is Pastor General and President of Grace Communion International

ACCEPTING THE Good News

by John McLean

All Christians know that Jesus Christ died for them. But often we don't focus enough on the fact that Jesus lives for us.

THE CROSS, RESURRECTION and ascension are inseparable. Together they constitute the good news of the gospel. Yes, Jesus died for us – but he was resurrected for us, and ascended to the Father for us, too. He has so taken our lives into his that his death has become our death, and his life our life. In this sense, Paul can say we are alive (have been resurrected) in Christ and seated in the heavenly realms of the Father with him (Ephesians 2:4-10).

Yet this Easter season, many Christians will sincerely worry if they really are “right with God”. They will spend a lot of energy and emotion anxiously wondering, “Is my faith strong enough, have I been obedient enough, have I prayed well enough?” The list goes on. And on. They may even wonder if they are “worthy” enough to be accepted by God, or even to take the bread and wine of communion. And this is nothing short of an evangelical tragedy.

With only a modicum of intelligence and honesty, we all know deep down we are human, fallible, messy, frail. It's easy to feel a failure, inadequate that we don't “measure up”. Sadly, ironically, often religious people can feel this pain the keenest of all.

After all, the thinking goes, God is perfect – surely he doesn't mess around with imperfection and frailty. And so religion often tries to tell us what we have to do to get right with God. What knowledge we must possess, what

behaviour we must do, so God will no longer be against us, but can accept us. The problem with this kind of thinking is that it puts the responsibility and the critical step in the process, firmly upon our shoulders – what we need to do to have God love and accept us. And deep down we know that if any link in the chain depends on us, the whole chain is suspect. And that's always going to end up being bad news.

Ultimately and finally, this all comes down to our view of God. And that's the real question here – is it our view of God that determines our attitudes, feelings and behaviour, or is it the view of God that Jesus came to reveal to humanity? The good news that the New Testament writers were so excited to share with the whole world?

Not what we do but what God has done

The good news is that Jesus came not to tell us what we needed to do to get right with God, but what God has already done to make us right with him. He came to show us not what we need to do for God, but what God has already done for us in him. Our response is to repent (from *metanoia*, to change our thinking) and believe. That is, we need to change our thinking about God to that revealed by Jesus.

Jesus is the human face of God. He shows us the Father (John 14:9; Matthew 11:27). There is no other God than the God revealed to us in Jesus. In his love, according to the plan the Father, Son and Spirit take such delight in, he has adopted us in Christ as his children “before the creation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4-5). That is, the Father has loved and accepted us in his grace before one star, one atom, one quark, was created, before he said, “Let there be light”. Before birds and bees, fish and fins, flowers and fruit, man and wom-

an. He has always loved you, and always will; he has determined not to be without you. He wants to share himself with you.

Once we accept the truth of what Paul has written to the Ephesians, and as we stop projecting our own ideas about God (our own theologies) onto the Father, we can believe in the unconditional and unfailing love the Father has for us. We can be freed from the anxiety and pain of self-centredness, worry and fear. In believing, we can experience the freedom of the Son.

Sons of God

Just think for a moment. How does the Father love the Son? Is the Son worried, anxious, concerned whether he is accepted, loved, delighted in? Or does the Son see nothing but overwhelming grace, joy and love in the Father's presence? How does the Son love the Father? Is there hidden agendas, envy, malice? Does the Father for one second doubt the total faithfulness and overwhelming affection of the Son? Of course not! Here there is the ultimate self-sacrificial service, mutual indwelling and love.

That's the relationship he graciously desires for us to enter. That's why Paul can say “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). Being “in Christ” is being in spiritual fellowship with him and the Father through the Spirit. All our lives are now lived “in Christ” – in him and out of a relationship with him. There's nothing about us that is outside of Christ.

This Spirit, who is the “Spirit of adoption” enables us to cry out from our innermost being “Abba, Father” – to call the Father by the same intimate term Jesus used (Romans 8:15-17). It's not just a matter of mental assent, a quick nod in the direction of theological thought, and then back to life as “normal” without anything being

Being “in Christ” means we are so intimately united with his life that every aspect of our living is laid hold of, sanctified, and redeemed by him

different. It's not something we have to achieve; it's something he has already prepared for us, and included us in. And it changes everything.

Accepting our Acceptance

Jesus wants us to share the same relationship with the Father that he enjoys. This Spirit, who is also called “the Spirit of his Son”, is the spirit of fellowship, relationship – joy in communion with the Father, Son and one another. The Father, Son and Spirit are not boring old religious types. They're certainly not a Committee of Cosmic Grumps, just waiting to zap you if you make a mistake, step out of line, don't measure up. No harsh, judgmental, flinty-eyed disapproval here – just life, love, joy, creativity, happiness, contentment, rest, delight, friendship, accomplishment, peace and fun. We experience this freedom, this acceptance, mercy and love, through believing. It's a fact whether we believe it or not – unbelieving simply prevents us from experiencing this relationship personally and subjectively.

Put another way, it's not so much our acceptance of an otherwise absent Jesus into our lives; it's Jesus' acceptance of us into his life, into his eternal relationship with the Father in the Spirit. It's not our hold on Christ that counts; it's Christ's hold on us. In the Spirit, we are more and more able to accept our acceptance, and live in and out of it. It's not something we have to work hard at to achieve; it's something we have already been included in.

In Christ, this finds expression in our daily lives. Paul writes, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me; and the life I live in the flesh I live by faith, the faithfulness of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians



2:20, translation by Thomas F. Torrance). As Torrance says, this “**I, yet not I but Christ**” describes and informs all our human responses to God. Our repentance, belief, faith, prayer, service, devotion, our whole lives, are all “not I but Christ in me”.

Our faith is not in the quality of our own faith, or belief, or obedience, but in Christ's faith, belief and obedience in our place. Our salvation lies in Christ, not in us.

Being “in Christ” means we are so intimately united with his life that every aspect of our living is laid hold of, sanctified, and redeemed by him. Our prayer is participation in his prayer within and for us; our faith is his faith on our behalf; our living is participating in his living in

complete love and harmony with the Father. In this way our lives share with his the mutual indwelling with the Father, experiencing the Father's unconditional love lavished on us in his grace through the Spirit.

The Father has always loved you, and always will. The Son wants you to share the same “Abba, Father” relationship he has; he wants to share with us his communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit, and for us to share that communion with one another. As the beauty and love of that relationship finds expression in our own lives, we are living and sharing the life of God. Jesus died for us, yes. This Easter, we celebrate that he lives for us too. And that's always good news. ☉



The Parable of the *Ugly* cat

By John Halford

*Jesus drew lessons from lilies, trees, sparrows and fish and even has some complimentary things to say about dogs. I can see that about dogs. They are loyal, unselfish and seem to be able to show unconditional love. However, he did not say anything about cats. In fact, **cats are the only domestic animals that are not mentioned in the Bible**. Maybe it's because the ancient Egyptians worshipped them.*

UNLIKE THE ANCIENT Egyptians, I am not particularly fond of cats. For one thing, I am allergic to them. I also find them greedy and self-centered compared to the unquestioning devotion of dogs. I am quite willing to share the planet with them, providing it is not the same part of the planet. I

certainly don't want one as a pet. So I was not particularly happy when Ugly Cat limped into my life.

I first saw her on a dark, cold evening just after Christmas last year. It might even have been the Feast of Stephen, although the moon wasn't shining brightly and the snow didn't lie round

about deep and crisp and even. But there was enough snow for me to clear it from the driveway. That's when I first met Ugly Cat, standing at the edge of the pool of light from the open garage door. She meowed piteously but kept her distance. I saw that she had been badly wounded. She was dragging her right back leg, and one eye was just a bloody pulp. She looked like she had been in a fight or perhaps hit by a car. I didn't want to leave her to suffer, but she would not let me get close. After a minute or so, she stumbled off into the darkness, leaving a trail of blood in the snow.

"Poor critter," I thought. "She won't last long out there." There was nothing I could do for her. By morning, the snow had covered her tracks, and after a day

or two I forgot about her. But she had not forgotten me.

One morning, several months later, we met again. She was standing by the edge of our garden pond, looking at me cautiously, wondering whether to take her eyes—er—eye—off me to risk a drink.

"It's OK," I said. "Help yourself." I noticed that her wounded eye had healed. The eye was gone, but the socket looked clean and not infected. I noticed also that, although she still limped, she was moving better. "How on earth did you survive the winter?" I wondered. This little animal was a survivor, and at least she deserved respect. "You're welcome to have a drink from the pond whenever you want," I told her. (You shouldn't give feral cats milk.) But I really didn't want her to become too friendly.

That did not seem to be a problem—the cat wasn't interested in being too friendly either. She could look after herself. I left some scraps of food out for her, but she ignored them. She was not as hungry as she looked.

Later I found out why. When she wasn't drinking from my pond, she would help herself to the local dogs' food while they watched in frustration. You didn't mess with this cat. Nobody owned her, and she didn't seem to want to belong.

More mouths to feed

Ugly Cat hung around the neighborhood all through the spring. I began calling her "that Ugly Cat," and the name stuck. She would disappear for days but would always show up again, looking for a handout. But she didn't grovel—if nothing was forthcoming she would, so to speak, shrug her shoulders and limp away. She obviously wasn't starving. In fact, she seemed to be putting on weight.

One day in early summer, I noticed a change. She came around meowing as usual. However, this time there was a different tone to it—more insistent and demanding. I got the impression that if a cat could tug at your trouser leg, she would have done it. It was as if she was saying, "I want some food, and I want it NOW!"

She also seemed to be staying around our house more. One morning I discovered why. While watering the flowerbeds, I found two kittens under a bush. Ugly Cat soon ran up and stood guard. One of the kittens looked like her. The other was the same color as a local fat cat, who spends all day lying around the house but obviously gets out at night. I understood now why Ugly Cat needed food. She had extra mouths to feed. I gave in and bought several cans of cat food, much to the amusement of my wife, who told everyone, "He's just a big softie."

As is the way with cats, Ugly Cat had brought her kittens close to our house because she thought they would be safe. "You know," I told her, "this really isn't such a good place to bring your children." Their shelter was only a few feet from the highway. It normally isn't too busy, but a bridge over the river was under repair, and so a steady stream of traffic went by our house. I thought it was only a matter of time before I would be scraping the kittens off the road. However, they had inherited their mother's ability to survive.

My sister, who knows about cats, told us we shouldn't leave the kittens with their mother longer than necessary. They learn fast, and if you leave them too long, they will never become domesticated. Yeah, right, but what were we going to do with them? I didn't want one cat, let alone three.

My daughter thought she could find homes for the kittens but was not able to pick them up for a few days. She suggested I take them from their mother as soon as they could feed themselves. When they could, they were ready to leave the nest. But moving them was easier said than done. The two kittens were cute from a distance, but when I tried to pick them up they hissed, spat, and tried to scratch me with their tiny claws. These were wild animals. Eventually I extracted them and put them in a large box in the garage. Ugly Cat didn't seem to care. She probably wanted to be rid of them so she could resume her vagabond lifestyle.

My daughter and granddaughters eventually came to pick up the kittens.

"Be careful," I warned them. "They may look adorable, but they are lethal." Sure enough, the little spitfires resisted my granddaughters' attentions at first. But within half an hour, both were purring contentedly as they rode off to their new homes.

The cat comes back

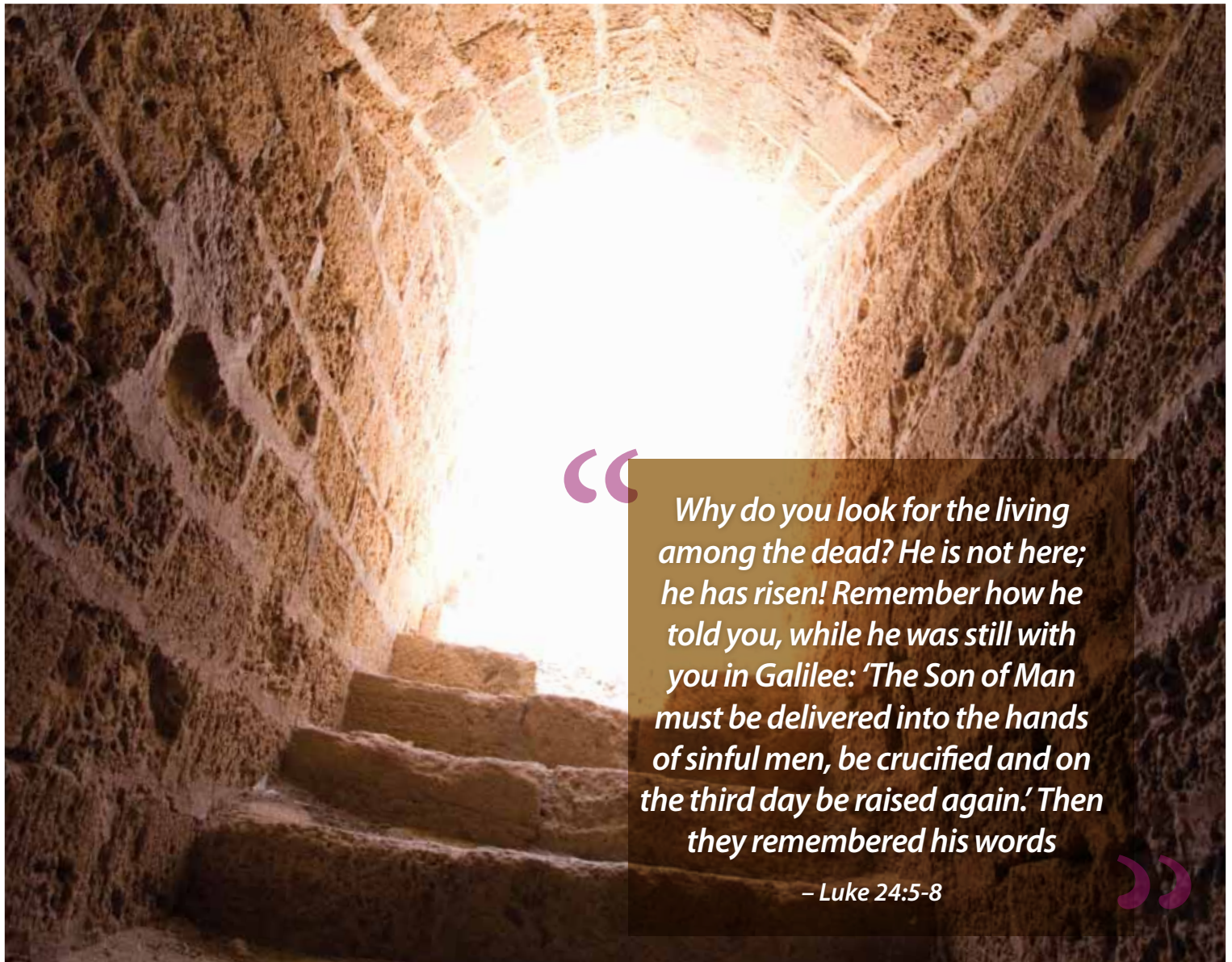
Two down—one to go. Except Ugly Cat won't go. She disappears for days but always comes back expecting a handout. We now keep several cans of cat food on hand. Against my better judgment, I find myself becoming rather fond of Ugly Cat. I have a feeling that she may be around for a while, never quite belonging but knowing where to come when she does need help. I have even given her a new name, because "Ugly Cat" began to sound unkind. It so happens that there is a Jamaican fruit called an "Ugli." It is a hybrid variety—a cross between grapefruit (which I am also allergic to) and oranges (her color). Perfect—Ugli it is!

I have made an effort to reform Ugli, but she only listens long enough to eat. Then she is off on her wanderings. It looks like she is pregnant again (sigh!). I told her sternly not to expect us to find homes for the kittens this time, but we probably will. (Update: We did – five this time. If this goes on, a visit to the vet is in Ugli's future.)

This tough little cat reminds me of many people I have known in my years as a minister. Wild, independent, tough survivors—living on the edge of a church community but never joining. Life has not been kind to them, and for all sorts of reasons, they are reluctant to make a commitment. But they know where to come when they need help. They can be annoying, and it is tempting to want to push them away. But we must not do that. They may not have accepted God's grace, but they have not rejected it either. My friend, Professor Eddie Gibbs, has a saying "Treat everyone as if they were Christians until they find out that they are not."

Because you just never know. ☯

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“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ Then they remembered his words

– Luke 24:5-8

Hmmm ... *Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.*
– Edmund Burke

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

Every Christian has to decide whether he or she has a “stingy God” or a “generous God.” The God that I read about in the Bible is an overwhelmingly generous Creator and Redeemer. I worry a lot about how evangelicals sometimes try to turn him into

a stingy God. We try to contain him within our favorite theological systems and to limit his faithfulness to our favourite projects and causes. He will not be restricted in that manner. “His ways are not our ways.”
– Richard Mouw

Christianity is not primarily a moral code but a grace-laden mystery; it is not essentially a philosophy of love but a love affair; it is not keeping rules with clenched fists but receiving a gift with open hands.
– Brennan Manning

A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue but the parent of all other virtues.
– Cicero

We can’t help everyone, but everyone can help someone.
– Ronald Reagan