

GCI Today

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA
SUMMER 2014-15

What Beethoven
taught me about
the Bible

Rethinking
MISSION

God with us –
good news, joy for all

Managing
STRESS

WELCOME



John McLean

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

THE NUMEROUS SLAVES, heads down, quietly scurried about the palatial grounds, careful not to disturb their masters. Water splashed in the elegant garden fountains. Perched high on the hill, the huge mansion looked down on the bustling city of Rome. Stunning mosaics covered the floor, and vivid friezes with bright colours caught the eye around the walls. Here the decisions were made that changed the world; decisions that impacted on the lives of everyone throughout the vast Empire. Here was the seat of great power, gathered in the person of the Emperor.

At the same time, away in the far flung reaches of the empire in Judea, on the edge of Asia, a pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph arrive in Bethlehem after an arduous journey from Nazareth. The imperial power has demanded they register for a census. They are turned away from the inn, and the only shelter the couple can find is an animal stall.

Here Mary's child is born. A child who will make all things new. One who was "in very nature God" (Philippians 2:6, NIV). The Only Begotten Son of the Father, the Eternal Word who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14); the one whose entry into our world could not be more humble.

Out in the fields, shepherds were watching over their flocks of sheep. Being a shepherd was a hard life. And one without much remuneration, and even less respect – shepherds were often considered social outcasts. Suddenly angels appear, announcing the birth of the baby in the stable. Not in Rome, not to the Emperor. Not to the Roman Governor in Judea, nor to the High Priest, nor even near the temple Herod was busy building in an attempt to assuage the Jews politically (and enhance his own prestige).

The angels appear to – shepherds. Jesus' first visitors were those low on the social scale, without any power or prestige. They were followed by wise men from a far away country to the East. But mostly the world continued on, ignoring the events in Bethlehem. No one in Rome seemed to notice.

The King of Kings, the Saviour – God incarnate – had entered the world with very little fanfare. In Christ, God gives himself to all humanity. To you and me. To all of us, regardless of rank, wealth, gender or race. In Christ we see what grace is – nothing less than God himself. God came to us in a totally unexpected way, and identified himself with us, as human beings. In the most unlikely of circumstances, to the most unlikely of people, God became human to reconcile all peoples to himself (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). In this helpless baby, we see power redefined. We see divinity in the ordinary. We find hope. We find new life.

Whatever your year has been like – whatever pain, loss, suffering, and whatever joy, delight and blessings you have experienced – we celebrate this amazing grace of our giving God this Christmas. May you be embraced by the love and grace of God, and share it as God makes possible, this Christmas season.

John McLean is Mission and National Director, Australia

CONTENTS

01 Stressed? – managing it can be good for you

04 God with us – good news of joy for all

06 From admonition to mission – making the method the message

08 Pastoral ordinations – Fiji and PNG members celebrate

09 Mission to Namibia – a desert welcome for Jasmine

10 How Beethoven helped me understand the Bible – beyond our favourite parts

11 Tribute to John Halford – an exceptional gift to our fellowship

12 Exploring the Word – God and his people in the Prophets

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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**

Stressed?

*MANAGING IT MAY BE GOOD
FOR YOU ...*

*This year **GCI Today** has looked at the issues of wellbeing (Autumn) and healthy family communication (Spring). A common challenge to both of these desirable experiences is stress.*

STRESS IS CITED as the cause of more than 20 million days of workplace absenteeism each year, according to research by Medicare. The economic cost of these stress-related absences exceeds \$14 billion. But that's just the tip of the iceberg, with a further \$25 billion being attributed to the loss of productivity resulting from those present at work but affected by stress.

Lifeline has been conducting a National Stress Poll since 2009. They

have identified five key sources of stress:

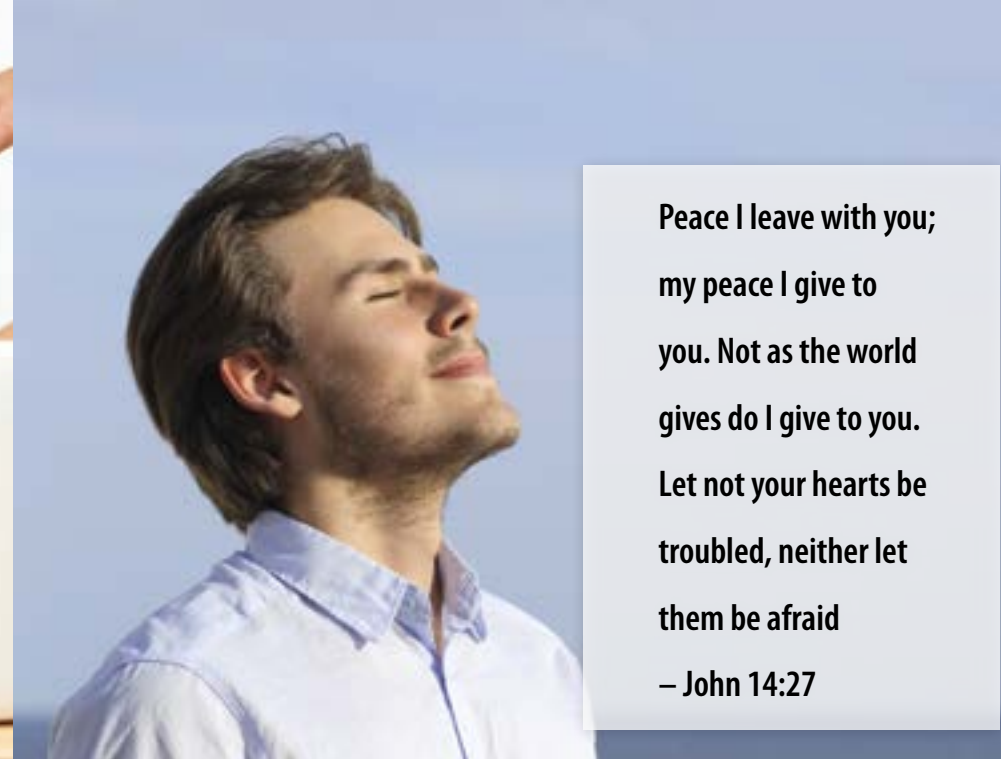
1. Work
2. Finances
3. Thoughts about the future
4. Health
5. Personal relationships

Work is the most common source of stress (78%) followed by thoughts about the future (77%), finances (72%) and health (63%). Roughly 50% of people reported "some" stress in each of these areas, with about 25% reporting "a lot" of stress. Consistent with their previous surveys, the Lifeline study found that personal relationships were the least likely source of stress compared to the other four (35% said they cause a little stress; only 8% said a lot).

There's little argument that contemporary life is stressful. The pace of change and the speed at which we are required to work and live can create stressful experiences as we struggle to keep up and often compromise our physical, mental and emotional health.

So, what is stress?

Stress is usually described as the physical, emotional and mental response to pressure. Stress is not simply an external event or circumstance but how we experience the event and react to it. And while sometimes the stressors are outside us (situations that generate a stress response), sometimes stress experiences originate from within our own minds (thoughts, beliefs, feelings or perspectives that generate



Peace I leave with you;
my peace I give to
you. Not as the world
gives do I give to you.
Let not your hearts be
troubled, neither let
them be afraid
– John 14:27

The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another – William James

a stress response). Two people can respond to the same event, circumstance or idea in completely different ways. Their responses may be influenced by things like personality, experience, culture, social circumstances, and support networks.

The Mayo Clinic describes two typical types of stress. Acute stress is an unexpected event that typically initiates an instinctive “fight or flight” response to a perceived threat or danger – things like a frightening encounter, being called upon to speak in front of a group or realising we’ve lost something important. This type of distress usually passes without too much longer-term damage. Chronic stress, on the other hand, is the longer-term experience of unresolved issues; for example, health problems; sustained work demands; constant uncertainty, persistent doubt or fear; or an oppressive environment.

Symptoms of stress can include fatigue, anxiety, illness, moodiness, frustration, trouble sleeping, poor eating habits, excessive alcohol use, poor concentration, increased headaches.

Good stress?

The stress response is an important part of life. The chemical reactions we experience to stressful situations are the body’s “warning system”. Stress gets our attention, tells us something is not right and demands a response to a situation or thought. So it’s

actually great that we experience stress, because we probably wouldn’t survive long without it.

Stress can be good for us when we are able to respond positively. For example, learning a new skill typically generates some level of stress as a result of initial feelings of uncertainty and inability. What that can do is heighten our concentration for the task. “Eustress” is the “good stress” that contrasts with negative stress or what we typically call “distress”.

Without some experience of the stress that new situations and challenges provide it’s easy for us to become bored (and boring). Short-term bursts of the stress hormone prime the brain for increased performance. Positive stress is a motivator to dealing with challenges – for example, the pressure of a looming deadline. And in order to achieve a state of “flow” in performance we need situations that challenge and expand our current skills and abilities.

These positive, short-term experiences of stress help to build resilience in the face of challenges so that we are better equipped to deal with future challenges.

Managing stress

One of the most commonly recommended defences against the potential damage stress can cause is to **maintain a positive mindset**. Which is great advice ... and terribly hard to do when you’re badly stressed!

It’s a preventative mechanism. So, just as it’s important to **monitor diet, exercise and relaxation** to maintain a healthy physical, emotional and mental life, it’s also important to monitor your thoughts and feelings and refocus when you find yourself caught in a downward spiral, or even just the “blahs”. One way to improve our mental state is by maintaining physical activity, eating well and taking regular time to relax – being “always on” is a sure-fire way for most of us to burn out (and potentially burn others out as well).

Maintaining a positive mindset is not about denying the challenging or even distressing things we are facing, it’s about maintaining a healthy, realistic perspective about where and how those things fit in the broader context of our lives. And managing stress requires that we take that important first step of acknowledging that we are experiencing stress. It’s normal to experience stress. It’s healthy to know you’re experiencing it. It’s normal and healthy to have negative thoughts but it’s not healthy to allow those thoughts to have you. **Acknowledging your stress** means you can begin to respond positively to it.

“Effective stress management starts with identifying your sources of stress and developing strategies to manage them,” advises the Mayo Clinic. Once again, there’s a challenge with this sound advice: thinking clearly is harder when we are stressed. **A simple practice to help regain some focus and the sense of composure we need is to breathe**. It sounds obvious, but we can easily recall

how a stressful or demanding situation has caused us to quicken and shorten our breathing – which increases the oxygen in our blood but also creates other physical changes in our bodies such as increased heart rate, higher blood pressure and increased muscle tension. While these things may help us react physically, they don’t help us think clearly.

Dr Russ Harris, in *The Happiness Trap*, advises that “No matter how bad the situation you’re in, no matter how much pain you may be suffering, start by taking a few deep breaths. If you’re breathing, you know you’re alive. And as long as you’re alive,

health without **professional support and an honest conversation with a well-informed health professional** can be a valuable investment in understanding and responding effectively to what you are experiencing physically, mentally and emotionally.

Talking with trusted friends and family is also important. One of the keys to wellbeing (see our Autumn cover story) is **healthy relationships**. Sharing experiences and feelings with others is integral to the human experience. We are designed for relationship – and designed to both give and receive the nurture that relationships and community provide.

Christians know – from Scripture and from personal experience – that as human beings we also share a **divine relationship of grace and acceptance**. We may experience this through personal reading of the Scriptures, through prayer and meditation, through fellowship with other people of faith, and through our daily expression and experience of God’s grace and love in our families, our work, our communities, and our relationships. All of these embrace the principles of healthy mindset and trusting relationships that give us **hope, confidence and faith** – and that invite us to share those things with others.

Part of our experience of healthy relationships is also the **fun and laughter that we can share**. Laughter is indeed one of life’s best natural medicines. The Mayo Clinic advises that when we laugh we enhance our intake of oxygen-rich air, stimulating our organs and increasing our endorphins; we soothe the tension in

Tension is who you think you should be. Relaxation is who you are – Chinese Proverb

there’s hope. Taking a few deep breaths in the midst of a crisis gives you valuable time to get present, to notice what’s happening and how you’re responding and to think about what effective action you can take. Sometimes there is no immediate action to take. In this case, being present and accepting what you are feeling is the most effective action”. Controlled breathing is a key tool in what is known as “**mindfulness**”, which is about consciously being aware of ourselves and our thoughts in the moment so we can choose sound responses rather than react in unsound ways.

Of course, there are times when we are unable to reset our mental or physical

our bodies through improved blood circulation and muscle relaxation. Longer-term, laughter improves our immune system through neuropeptides that help fight stress and potentially other illnesses. Laughter also connects us positively to other people in shared experiences that can put anxieties in context.

Identifying and **making time for activities that allow us to experience relaxation** is vital to a healthy life. Even people who love their day-to-day responsibilities need “downtime” to recharge and refresh. It may be time to read, watch a movie, go for a walk, sit and think – or just sit – whatever it is, it’s important to ensure there’s time and space in your life for you, not just your responsibilities.

Stress is an inevitable, necessary, and essential part of a healthy life. At times we will experience acute distress. Sometimes we may find ourselves wrestling with chronic distress. And hopefully our lives will be peppered with stimulating experiences of the positive stress that keeps us alert, active and learning – and that builds our resilience.

Stress is the body’s alert and warning system, so it’s important that we pay attention to it and respond appropriately. We will have stress but we don’t want it to have us. There’s something wonderful about this process, too, that reminds us that just as we experience different stressors and have differing responses to stress, we are made to nurture, support and encourage one another in relationship and community through life’s stresses. Which is another reminder that stress is by no means all bad. ☺

The following sources were among those used for this article and may provide valuable additional reading around this topic:

- Lifeline’s Stress Down Day resource <http://www.stressdown.org.au/>
- The Mayo Clinic <http://mayoclinic.org>
- *The Happiness Trap*, by Dr Russ Harris (2010, Exisle Publishing). <http://thehappinesstrap.com/>



*I bring you good news of
great joy that will be for all
the people*

God With Us

by John McLean

PHOTO: © GETTY IMAGES/STUDIO AMIKA

Joy to the world!

PHILIP YANCEY TELLS the story of a young boy with artistic talent who lived in a Spanish village. On the wall of his house hung a painting of Jesus, who stood looking out of the frame with a very formal, severe, other-worldly expression on his tight face. A halo surrounded his head. He held a large staff in his hand, and a sheep lay benignly at his feet.

One day, while his father was in the fields, the boy took the painting off the wall and made some alterations to the picture. He turned the halo into a straw hat, he changed the tight-lipped stare into a friendly smile, enlarged the eyes, made the staff into a country walking stick and transformed the sheep into an energetic, frolicking puppy.

When the father returned home he was horrified. The boy was beaten for his sacrilege. Then he was shamed by being forced to march through the village with his desecrated painting while people looked on, their pious judgments and shocked condemnations tut-tutting the air.

The Jesus of the young boy's painting was altogether too normal, too common, too approachable, too joyful a human being for the religious perceptions of the day.

Human beings have often wrestled with similar conceptions in thinking about God – all down through history. Surely God is entirely Other. Certainly not one of us. And ... well, not common, and every day. And yet the Gospels present us with an entirely different picture of Jesus.

God as one of us

Celebrating the Christmas festival is designed to enlighten and inspire us through the most amazing miracle and mystery imaginable. God actually does become one of us! He takes on flesh and blood. He meets us where we are. He chooses to enter our world of time and space, of hunger, tiredness, and pain, of joy and sorrow. And he does so in the form of a tiny baby!

This is a most amazing thing for us to contemplate. The One by whom all things were created, the One who "is before all things,

and in (whom) all things hold together" (Colossians 1: 15-17), the One who sustains it all, the source of life, chose to be dependent in many ways on a young woman. He chose to fully enter our world – and not at the seat of imperial grandeur and power, but at the outpost of empire, on the edge of Asia, to a family who knew what it was like to be refugees, in the most humble and human of circumstances. Born in a manger, because there was no room at the inn.

This is why theologian Karl Barth can write of **"the obscene secularity" of the gospel**. In Jesus, divinity was clothed with humanity. He was one of us – with all the messiness and commonality that entails. In Jesus, two things that don't otherwise go together now are united – divinity and humanity. In becoming one of us, Jesus unites himself with us forever. This union with Christ is beyond our limited ability to adequately explain in the limitations of language, yet in the person of Jesus we get a glimpse. The good news is that it is real. There is no longer the separation of the physical (the secular) and the sacred (and religiously pious). In Jesus, the barriers have come down. "In Christ", everything finds its meaning and purpose. All of life, not just the religious bits, is "in Christ".

This is both intimately individual and personal, and entirely cosmological in its reach (see Ephesians 1 and Colossians 1). Jesus was "Immanuel – which means **God with us**" (Matthew 1:23). He gave visible expression to the invisible God. He came to show us the face of the Father. "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). **In Jesus, the Communion of Father, Son and Spirit is "earthed" among us.**

Jesus came to show God not as an abstract principle or a remote theological idea. He was a person, a human being. One of us. With us, he identifies with our humanity – with our suffering, our hardship, our common, every day realities. He feels our loneliness, grief, sorrow, loss, hurt, rejection and pain. He feels and understands our joy, happiness, thrill and elation. He fully identifies with our lives, and does so in a way that shows us who and what God is really like. He does so in ways which give us, and all hu-

manity, hope. He didn't come into the world to condemn it, but to save it (John 3:17).

The wonderful exchange

In love, God took the initiative and enters our world and takes us into himself. He does not deal with us at arm's length, but up close and personal – with us, as one of us. In Jesus, God's power is shown in the limitless nature of his self-giving, self-emptying love. In the process, he redeems our humanity, makes us his brothers and sisters, children of the Father, and includes us in the life of the Triune God. The one who "being in very nature God" (Philippians 2:6, NIV), "didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he took on the status of a slave, became *human*! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless obedient death – and the worst kind of death – that of crucifixion." (Philippians 2:6-8, *The Message*).

Here is the wonderful exchange that Christmas contemplates, that God became like us that we might become like God. Christ places himself at the hands of sinful humanity and accepts death that we might be offered life; the source of life assumes temporal humanity to redeem the creation from futility.

After his death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to be with us. Not just alongside us, but within us. Jesus' promise was that in him, we would be one – "I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you" (John 14:20). This is the promise of Christmas – to share the life and love of God, made possible by God first coming among us and giving himself to us. That's worth celebrating.

And that's why the arrival of Jesus as a baby was announced by an angelic chorus. And why the angel said, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10).

God is with us. God is for us. Joy to the world, indeed. ☺



*“Living and sharing the gospel.” That’s our mission statement. And it’s a good one, capturing both the content and the approach to mission. The method and the message. And the method is vitally important. In fact not only should the method match the message, in many ways the method **is** the message.*

FROM ADMONITION TO Mission

by John McLean

Re-thinking mission

Leaders from churches, charities, para-church organisations and Christian Schools were included to “rethink” approaches to sharing the gospel – to mission – in our pluralistic societies. It was an incredibly stimulating and encouraging experience. I want to tell you how exciting it was to hear others from different streams of Christianity very much sharing similar perspectives that our journey, in the grace of God, has led us to when it comes to mission.

There was a time when the Christian church automatically had a say in the public debate. When, by and large, the churches were heard with respect and some degree of honour. Not anymore! That horse has long gone. Now, as Dr Keith Farmer put it at our GCI national

conference, we have gone from a post-Christian culture to an anti-Christian culture. Christians are often dismissed as “boring, judgmental and hypocritical”. Or, as Richard Dawkins famously put it, “mad, bad and dangerous”.

We can spend a great deal of energy considering how things have got to this state. (And there should be some serious reflection and soul searching.) Yet the challenge remains, what do we do now?

The good news is that the answer is really quite simple. As individuals, and together as a fellowship, we need to keep doing what we are already doing. We need to continue to “live and share” the gospel. We can’t share it if we are not living it, and we can’t live it if we are not sharing it. We start with an incredible

gratitude for who God is – who he has revealed himself to be in Christ. And this is entirely good news. God is for us, not against us. He sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:17).

Our fundamental response to this is gratitude. And this thankfulness overflows into every aspect of life, into all we do and say. It underpins our approach to mission.

The Golden Rule

Now, we can talk about this – and we should. More vitally, we can live this. We can take seriously Jesus words to “do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7: 12). This is not a matter of compromising our beliefs. Indeed, it is just the opposite. This “Golden Rule” isn’t a peripheral part of Christianity – it’s the centre, the substance of the revelation of God in Christ. As C. S. Lewis noted, it crosses all cultures, belief systems and philosophical frameworks. And you don’t need a degree or complex explanations to understand it. Paul, the ex-Pharisee, put it this way, “For everything about God’s word is summed up in a single sentence: love others as you love yourself” (Galatians 5:13, *The Message*). And it’s about what we do as much (or more) than what we say.

We are not Old Testament prophets, calling people back to a national covenant with God. (Although justice and mercy for the oppressed and marginalised remain important as expressions of this love of God). Nor are we frustrated pastors, demanding backsliding, lapsed Christians stop being slack and get serious about religion. (Although we invite people to share our communion with God and one another.) We are sent into the world as the Father sent the Son in the Spirit, to demonstrate the love of God in the world. Right here, right now. To whomever we come in contact with.

It’s not so much about admonishing people to believe this or that, to do more, to try harder, so much as it is about being Christ to others. This isn’t a matter of grand strategy, expensive programs, guilt-fuelled exhortations. It’s a matter of sharing kindness, compassion and care with every human being we meet. A smile, a word of encouragement. Not condemnation, but grace. Not judgment, but acceptance and love. Asking questions more than having all



This “Golden Rule” isn’t a peripheral part of Christianity – it’s the centre, the substance of the revelation of God in Christ

the answers; listening more than talking.

It’s about always speaking graciously (Colossians 4:6; Ephesians 4:29; 1 Peter 3:15). By all means, be prepared to give an answer – but always with kindness and patience, gentleness, respect and grace. (And notice Peter’s observation that the questions are about the “hope” that you have, the “good news” of the gospel – not doctrinal minutiae.) It’s about treating everyone we come in contact with as a child of God, of value and significance. It is doing unto all others what you would have them do to you. And remembering that it’s the Holy Spirit who converts, not us.

From admonition to mission

Moving from admonition to mission involves understanding that “mission” is not just a part of life, it is all of life. Mission is not a sub-set of Christianity, it is living the good news every day in every circumstance. Sometimes an emphasis on missional terminology can actually be unhelpful if it makes out that mission is something complex or different from every day Christianity.

Tim Costello finished the conference by saying it is very much a matter of tone. How do we go about everything we do or say? With harsh judgment, hectoring others, or with grace and sensitivity. Guided by the Golden Rule, or the desire to win the argument? It’s sharing by living, connecting,

contributing – not just telling (and much less shouting).

I really want to thank the office staff, all our pastors and our congregations for the marvellous way we have all moved into this space from admonition (a message of telling others what they should be doing, and offering judgment and correction) to active mission. This mission is personal, local, congregational, national and international. It starts with the person in front of us (often our family) and extends to everyone we meet, or God provides connections with.

This is the trend the conference concluded we needed to see in the Christian community in this country (and others). It’s a trend already well underway in our fellowship as God in his mercy and grace has guided and led us.

It’s a trend reflecting the words of God’s revelation to us in Jesus: “By this shall all men know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). All others. It’s the operation of Golden Rule – the substance, not the peripherals of the Christian faith – to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. As we participate in the love of the Father, Son and Spirit, we learn to love as Christ loves us. And as we do, we also participate in the Son’s mission from the Father to the world – to live and share the good news, to create and build communion. ☺



Main photo: Fijian members with Mission Director Rod Matthews and wife Ruth; Right: Jope Nalequa Uqueuqe



FIJI AND PNG

Celebrate ordinations



Ben Gelwa and Richard Kindi

GCI members in Fiji and Papua New Guinea have recently celebrated three pastoral ordinations.

DURING THEIR AUGUST visit to PNG, PNG pastoral coordinator Mark Latham and Sydney, NSW, pastor Rod Dean ordained Ben Gelwa and Richard Kindi during a special celebration service at Mt Wilhelm, located 6,000 feet up the country's highest mountain.

"This was the most anticipated event in the history of our PNG church," Rod said.

"The Mt Wilhelm congregation had been preparing for weeks for this occasion. A grand *mumu* (feast) would feed all the visitors. On the day over 300 people came with pastors from at least seven different denominations. Catholics had contributed generously to the *mumu* and were strong in attendance. Chairman of the village court, doctors, administrators of the health clinic, councillors, local women's group representatives also came. The local MP (Member of Parliament) sent his apologies. Our church is well respected by all."

"The service was held outside and was led by our young people, who ran the PA, provided the music with the girls leading by dignified dancing with tambourines," Rod said. "The women's ministry provided a wonderful drama about Jesus calling disciples to be fishers of men. This was followed by a song on John 15. I spoke on servant leadership emphasising that the Kingdom of God is unlike worldly kingdoms in which people climb up to be important. In it, people come down to serve. After the ordination, gifts were given by each section of the church to the newly ordained elders. One could feel the warmth and emotion towards the pastors."

In Fiji, the Christian Camp at Pacific Harbour again hosted the annual celebra-

tion of our Fijian family's life together in Christ during the local school holidays. The theme of "Celebrating God's Amazing Grace" permeated the messages and activities. Most members from all over the islands were able to stay on site, in dorms, shared and motel rooms. Meals were cooked by three rotating crews consisting of all the members staying on site, and eaten together in the dining hall.

But this year was special in that long-time Suva member, Jope Nalequa Uqueuqe, was ordained an elder, reflecting his existing service to the church there and the need for ministerial assistance for pastor, Isei Colati. To add to the celebration there was the baptism of Jason Raki and the blessing of a little child, Azariah Jesse James.

"The youth of the church provided special items of worship music on most days, and the choir sang the Hallelujah Chorus a cappella in the most magnificent harmony on the last day," said Mission Director Rod Matthews. "If you haven't heard a choir of Fijians sing harmony without accompaniment, then you have missed one of the most stirring of experiences! As usual, the flower arrangements were a supreme work of art, refreshed daily and highlighting the extravaganza of tropical creations with which God has blessed Fiji." ☺

PHOTOS: COURTESY ROD MATTHEWS AND MARK LATHAM



Snapshots from
Namibia



Mission to Namibia

Jasmine Wilson undertook a mission trip from Australia to Namibia earlier this year. She was joined by South African National Director Tim Maquire and Johannes Maree, also from South Africa.

TIM, WHO ORGANISED the trip into Namibia to help the villages of our members there with sustainable agriculture and the provision of chickens for ongoing farming, wrote the following:

"It was really great having Jasmine with us. She obviously has a heart for mission (especially kids) and was a pleasure to have about. Her veterinary knowledge also helped us out with sick dogs in the villages as well as with making sure we bought healthy chickens. Jasmine didn't mind getting her hands dirty and always participated fully. Thanks so much for the support and allowing her to come along with us."

Jasmine's story

Here is an excerpt from Jasmine's own account of her trip:

Namibia is a desert country a lot like central Australia with its arid landscape. The animals are very different though:

elephants, rhino, lions and giraffes to name a few. We were to be based in the north a two hour drive away from the remote village of Singalamwe. We had a lot of kilometres to cover daily and the days were long. To get to northern Namibia from Johannesburg, South Africa, we drove through Botswana. We visited with the pastor and his family overnight and they were most hospitable and introduced me to their local dishes.

Our project was to plant an orchard of citrus and other fruit trees, supplying seeds to grow vegetables, fertilizer and a coop of chickens to a newly established church there. Our aim was to help the church become self-sufficient and eventually generate an income for the village. We also looked into obtaining a motorbike for the local pastor to visit his congregations as they are spread over a vast terrain. A previous project in the area was to teach the villagers to make compost and how to plant a vegetable garden. This garden was doing well when we visited and the villagers were teaching others how to improve the ground to grow crops to feed their families.

Another accomplishment of this trip was visiting with some of the surrounding communities and talking with them about Jesus and his love. Some of the villagers decided to give their lives to Christ during our visit and others were eagerly requesting their own Bibles.

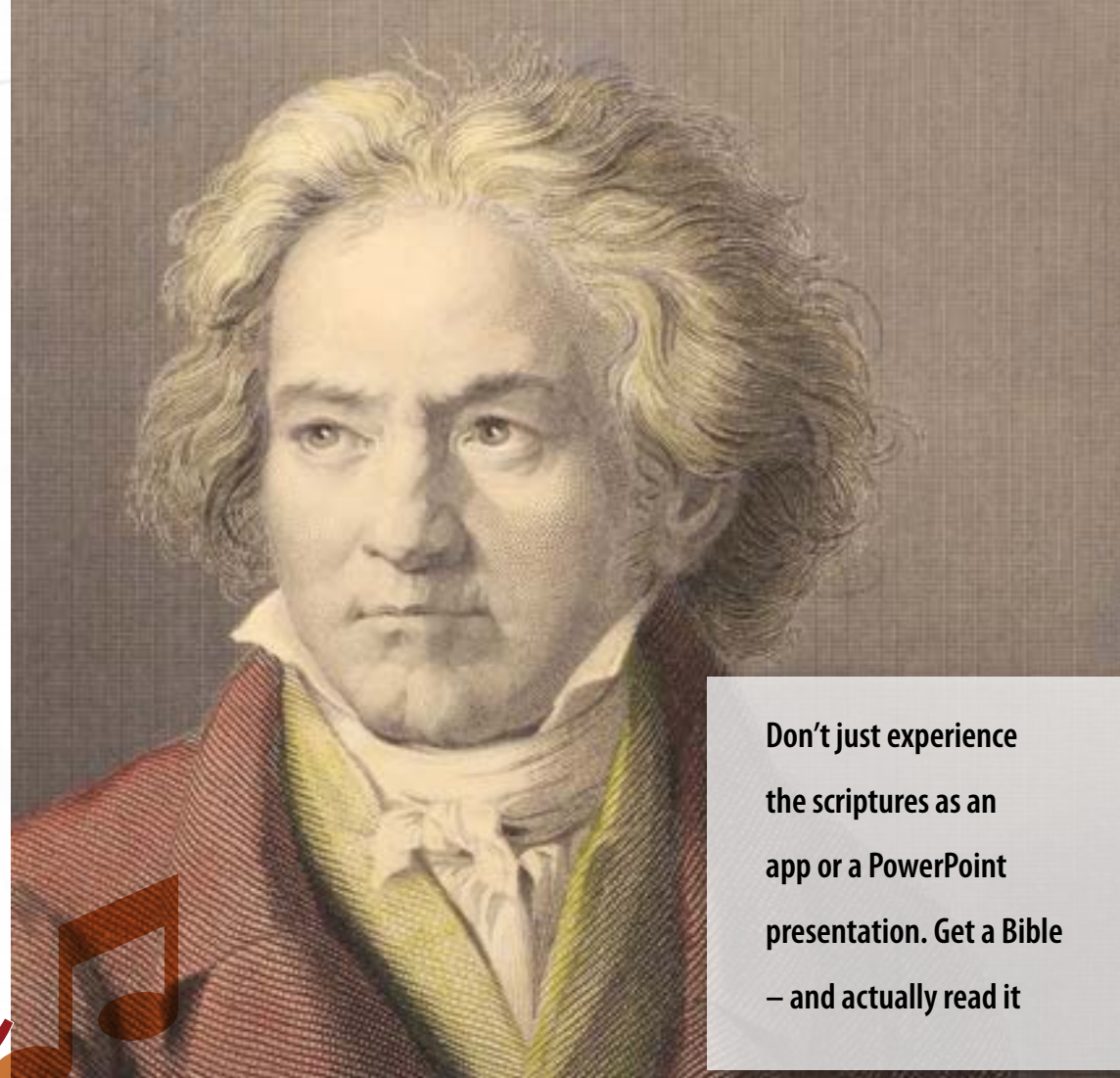
On our return we travelled through Zimbabwe via Victoria Falls, which is an amazing place of beauty and wonder of God's creation. The landscape in Zimbabwe is more woodland scrub than that of Namibia, which is one of the many ways Africa is a country of contrasts. Poor and rich, deserts and forests, cities and vast plains all knitted together in a quilt to form this large diverse land. On our way through back to Johannesburg we attended church held by Pastor Caleb Makhda, of the Limpopo region. The congregation were joyously energetic in their worship, singing, dancing and it was definitely one of the highlights of the trip. I felt like a celebrity after the service with all the young people wanting a picture with the girl from Australia!

I even managed to steal time to catch up with a couple from GCI in Madagascar that now live in Johannesburg, whom I know from my time spent at an orphanage in their country in 2004. I feel truly blessed to be part of such a big international church family. It's true what they say, "Once the African dirt gets in your skin you can never get it off it gives you an itch to go back again". I'm looking forward to the next adventure God has in store for me as on my return I will be starting a new career in dentistry in Alice Springs and surrounding remote communities. ☺



HOW BEETHOVEN
HELPED ME
UNDERSTAND
THE

Bible



Don't just experience
the scriptures as an
app or a PowerPoint
presentation. Get a Bible
— and actually read it

by John Halford

Like most people, I enjoy Beethoven's symphonies. Or to be strictly honest, like most people I enjoy parts of Beethoven's symphonies. Like the opening movement of his Fifth, sections of the Sixth and of course the famous chorale movement of the Ninth. But again, being strictly honest, I find much of the rest rather boring.

I FIND MYSELF WANTING to fast-forward through the parts I don't really understand to get to the familiar themes I enjoy. Once, on a long plane flight, which had all nine symphonies on the music channel, I thought about making a play list of just the 'good' bits—a sort of Beethoven's Greatest Hits. Then I felt guilty, thinking that would be short-changing the great composer. I knew there was more to Beethoven than had met my ear.

All that changed when my Audio Book Club offered me a course on Beethoven's Symphonies at a price I could not refuse. The instructor was a brilliant teacher. Instead of just playing musical tidbits, he guided me through all nine symphonies, movement by movement. He explained how these composi-

tions were the media two hundred years ago, and the great composers were the Andrew Lloyd Webbers and Steven Spielbergs of their day. At each stage he explained what Beethoven was doing and why his music was so revolutionary at the time. I learned how Beethoven could entertain, shock, inspire and even tease his audiences.

That course has revolutionised my appreciation of Beethoven's music and whetted my appetite to learn more. I realised I was just sipping Beethoven. I now understand the music beyond the 'that sounds nice' stage. I know what is happening even during the 'dull' parts, which has greatly increased my appreciation of the more well-known themes.

For many of us the Bible is like Beethoven's music. We have our favourite verses and perhaps a favourite book, but that is as far as it goes. Today you can download a Bible app onto your i-something and make your own play list of the Bible's Greatest Hits. Many of us no longer take a Bible to church—why should we when the scriptures are projected on the screen behind the preacher?

This is progress. No one wants to go back to the days of heavy, brass-bound Bibles or scrolls. But there is a potential problem if we only experience the Bible through the fragmented images of a PowerPoint presentation. We will get to know some parables and the basic stories from the life of Jesus. We will become familiar with Paul's teachings on law and grace. We may hear about Noah's Ark, the Exodus and Daniel in the lion's den. But do we know how it all fits together?

OK—much of the Bible does seem rather boring and irrelevant, as I once judged Beethoven's symphonies to be. It is tempting to fast-forward and get to the parts that inspire, encourage and inform. After all, the Bible's core message is about love, grace and truth. Those are the parts

we need, aren't they? Do we really need to know about all that other stuff?

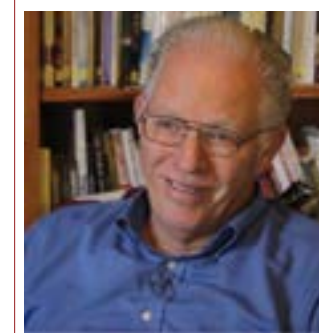
Notice what Paul wrote to his young protégé, Timothy: "There's nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us" (2 Timothy 3:14-17, *The Message*). Paul said this about what we call the Old Testament—the New had not been written yet!

Take a good look at your Bible. No—not the app—the book. Do you really know what is in it? What about those books with odd names: Leviticus, Nehemiah, Obadiah? If "every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another," there is something in them worth knowing. The Old Testament shows us how the rags to riches to ruin story of Ancient Israel laid the foundation for the ministry of Jesus. When you understand that story, the Gospels come to life in a way you never expected.

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PHOTO: COURTESY ODYSSEY MAGAZINE

Tribute to John Halford



JOHN HALFORD PASSED away on October 21, 2014 after a battle with cancer. He was 73.

John served our fellowship in a range of capacities, including as a writer, editor, producer and director across numerous publications and other media channels; pastor (including in Australia); regional church director in the UK; and teacher at Ambassador University. His most recent post was a special assistant to the GCI President in the USA.

"John is known for the many insightful, thought-provoking articles he's written for our publications over the years," said GCI President and Pastor General Joseph Tkach. "He's also known for finding stories in places no one else would even look. John served as editor and/or adviser for many of our international publications and his expertise will be greatly missed. John's impact on our denomination was vast."

"John has, I expect, simply by being himself, generated more goodwill and had more positive impact on the widest range of people than any other single person in the annals of WCG/GCI," said recently retired GCI Vice-President Mike Feazell. "He is much loved and will be sorely missed. A mentor, a colleague and a friend."

"He was one of God's exceptional gifts to our fellowship, and his legacy resides in thousands of lives around the world, mine especially," said Rod Matthews, Mission Developer for Asia and the South Pacific. "I so much enjoyed his capacity to bring down the high, and lift up the poor. John had a brilliant, unshackled and exploring mind, coupled with unmatched skills in communicating with common men and women, a remarkable capacity to utilize repartee and humour to highlight truth and reality in the midst of swirling mists of ideas, facts and personal agendas. He excelled at cross-cultural relationships, always upholding those in need of support, seeing potential and opportunities with uncanny accuracy."

One person shared how a single encounter with John changed him. He and John were walking in a park when they came upon a clearly drunk man. John's companion referred to the man as "scum," to which John replied, "And a child of God!"

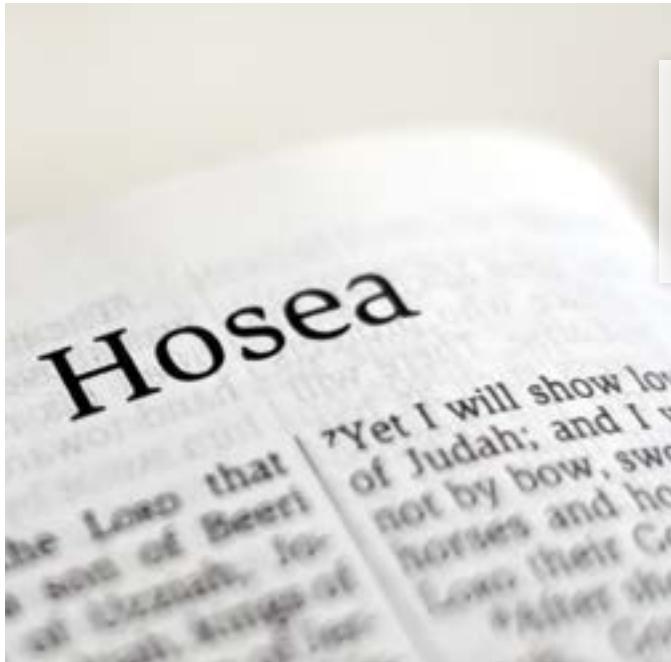
"John was like that," Joseph Tkach noted. "He looked on each person as valuable and worthy of respect and investment. We praise God that John invested in so many."

There is a video and audio recording from 2010 of John sharing some of his life and experiences at www.gci.org/gcit/halford

So let me ask you—are you just sipping the Bible as I did Beethoven's music? Why short-change yourself? Don't just experience the scriptures as an app or a PowerPoint presentation. Get a modern easy-to-read version of the scriptures—ideally one with explanatory notes—and

actually read it. (Some suggestions include the Good News Bible, The Message, Contemporary English Version or New Century Version). As you do, you'll see those favourite stories and scriptures in context. You'll discover there is so much more to them than meets the eye. ☺

God's relationship with his people in the Prophets



When God says, "You are my people," he (like Ruth) is stressing relationship more than ownership

In ancient tribal societies, if a man wanted to adopt a child, the ceremony was simple: "I will be to him a father, and he will become my son."

THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY was similar: "She is my wife, and I am her husband." In front of witnesses, they stated the relationship they had with each other, and those words made it official.

Like a family

When God wanted to state his relationship with ancient Israel, he sometimes used similar words. "I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son" (Jeremiah 31:9). He is stating the terms of the relationship: like parent and child.

God also uses marriage as a description of the relationship: "Your Maker is your husband ... as if you were a wife" (Isaiah 54:5-6). "I will betroth you to me forever" (Hosea 2:19).

More often, the relationship is phrased in this way: "You are my people, and I am your God." In ancient Israel, "people" was a relationship word. When Ruth told Naomi, "Your people will be my people" (Ruth 1:16), she was promising a new and permanent relationship. This was where she belonged.

Reassurance in time of doubt

When God says, "You are my people," he (like Ruth) is stressing relationship more than ownership. "I am bonded to you; you are like family to me." God says this more often in the prophets than in all the previous writings put together.

Why is it stated so often? Because the relationship was threatened by Israel's lack of loyalty. Israel had ignored their covenant with God and worshipped other gods. So God had allowed the northern tribes to be conquered by Assyria and the people taken away. Most of the Old Testament prophets lived shortly before or

after the nation of Judah was conquered by Babylon and taken away as slaves.

The people wondered, Is it all over? Has God abandoned us? The prophets respond with repeated assurances: No, God has not abandoned us. We are still his people, and he is still our God. The prophets predicted a national restoration: the people would return to the land and, most importantly, return to God. The future tense is often used: "They will be my people, and I will be their God." God has not abandoned them—he will restore the relationship. He will bring it about and make it better than before.

Isaiah tells the story

"I reared children and brought them up," God says through Isaiah. "But they have rebelled against me.... They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him" (Isaiah 1:2, 4). As a result, the people were sent into captivity. "My people will go into exile for lack of understanding" (Isaiah 5:13).

It looked like the relationship had come to an end. "You have abandoned your people," Isaiah says in 2:6. But it was not permanent. "My people who live in Zion, do not be afraid.... Very soon my anger against you will end" (10:24-25). "I will not forget you" (44:21). "The Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones" (49:13).

The prophets spoke of a huge regathering: "The Lord will have compassion on Jacob; once again he will choose Israel and will settle them in their own land" (14:1). "I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth" (43:6).

"My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest" (32:18). "The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces.... In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us'" (25:8-9). And God says to them, "You are my people" (51:16). "Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me" (63:8).

This is good news, not just for Israel, but for everyone: "Foreigners will join them and unite with the descendants of Jacob" (14:1). "Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people'" (56:3). "The Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples" (25:6). They will say, "This is our God ... let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation" (25:9).

Jeremiah tells the story

Jeremiah combines the family metaphors: "How gladly would

I treat you like my children and give you a pleasant land.... I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away.... But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me" (Jeremiah 3:19-20). "They broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them" (31:32).

Jeremiah initially prophesies that the relationship is over: "These people do not belong to the Lord. The people of Israel and the people of Judah have been utterly unfaithful to me" (5:10-11). "I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries" (3:8). But this is not a permanent rejection. "Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight?... My heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him" (31:20). "How long will you wander, unfaithful Daughter Israel?" (31:22).

He promises to restore them: "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them" (23:3). "I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity" (30:3). "I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth" (31:8). "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (31:34). "Israel and Judah have not been forsaken by their God" (51:5).

Most importantly, God will change them so they will be faithful: "Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding" (3:22). "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord" (24:7). "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (31:33). "I will give them singleness of heart and action.... I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me" (32:39-40).

God promises a renewal of their relationship, which is the equivalent to making a new covenant with them: "They will be my people, and I will be their God" (24:7; 30:22; 31:33; 32:38). "I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people" (31:1). "I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah" (31:31). "I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them" (32:40).

Jeremiah saw that the Gentiles would be included, too: "As for all my wicked neighbours who seize the inheritance I gave my people Israel, I will uproot them from their lands.... And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by my name ... then they will be established among my people" (12:14-16).

Ezekiel tells a similar story

Ezekiel also describes God's relationship with Israel as a marriage: "When I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine" (Ezekiel 16:8).

In another analogy, God describes himself as a shepherd: "As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all

the places where they were scattered" (34:12-13). He modifies the relationship formula to suit the analogy: "You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God" (34:31).

He predicts that the people will return from exile and God will change their hearts: "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God" (11:19-20).

The relationship is also described as a covenant: "I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you" (16:60). He will also live among them: "My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people" (37:27). "This is where I will live among the Israelites forever. The people of Israel will never again defile my holy name" (43:7).

The minor prophets

Hosea also described a break in the relationship: "You are not my people, and I am not your God" (Hosea 1:9). Instead of giving the words of a wedding, he states the words of a divorce: "She is not my wife, and I am not her husband" (2:2). But as with Isaiah and Jeremiah, this was an exaggeration. Hosea quickly adds that the relationship is not over: "In that day," declares the Lord, "you will call me 'my husband' ... I will betroth you to me forever" (2:16, 19).

"I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.' I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God'" (2:23). "I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them" (14:4).

Joel has similar words: "The Lord was jealous for his land and took pity on his people" (Joel 2:18). "Never again will my people be shamed" (2:26).

Amos also says, "I will bring my people Israel back from exile" (Amos 9:14).

"You do not stay angry forever," says **Micah**. "You will be faithful to Jacob, and show love to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago" (Micah 7:20).

Zechariah gives a good summary: "Shout and be glad, Daughter Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you," declares the Lord" (Zechariah 2:10). "I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God" (8:7-8).

Finally, **Malachi** says: "On the day when I act," God says, "they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him" (Malachi 3:17). ☺

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

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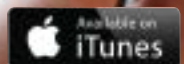
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