

T^{GCI}oday

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

SEPTEMBER – NOVEMBER 2011



Understanding
Genesis
for all it's worth

Lifelong
learning

**Safe
houses**

combat human trafficking

**Greek, Hebrew
and the middle-aged man**





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MISSION STATEMENT

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Lifelong learning

An 80-year-old man helped his son-in-law repair his “bomb” of a vehicle. “That was tricky,” the elderly man said. “It almost had me beat. But you learn something new every day.”

The 80-year-old had been a qualified mechanic for 60 years, and had repaired motor vehicle engines all his working life. He didn’t think he knew everything there was to know about mechanics; rather, he still had the humility and openness to learn something every day. And he clearly enjoyed the satisfaction and accomplishment of doing so. He is what is referred to these days as a “lifelong learner”. Whether he knew it or not, his approach reflects the age-old notions of wisdom – humility, openness, and the desire and joy of learning.

A friend of mine puts the following quote at the end of his emails to remind him of this, and the fact that such an approach has never been more important: *The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn* (David Stark).

Possibly the real challenge in this statement has to do with unlearning and relearning. What we are convinced we “know” can stand in the way of learning something new. As an ancient philosopher put it, “It is impossible for a man to learn something he thinks he already knows”. The natural inclination is to filter every new piece of information through our current perceptive

framework – that is, through our current “knowledge” held tacitly, without us even necessarily being aware of it.

Human beings used to think the earth was the centre of the universe. Many thought it must be flat. We might laugh at these ideas now, but there was a time when fierce controversy raged around them.

Around 500 BC Deomcritus postulated the existence of the atom – the smallest indivisible particle of matter. He did this through philosophical thought rather than scientific experiment. Scientists did indeed eventually discover the atom. Although we still use the word, we now know it is not the smallest indivisible particle. There was a time when we thought the smallest particles were protons, neutrons and electrons – now school children are taught about quarks and neutrinos.

The more we discover about the universe – whether down into the world of sub-atomic particles, or out into the sheer size and magnitude of the universe we inhabit – the more we run out of words, language and ideas to describe it. In the time it took you to have your breakfast this morning, thousands of new stars came into being.

If this is true of the natural universe, how much more is it so when we come to speak of God. There will always be a mystery about God that we can never reduce to our rational explanations, however much we crave the certainty of doing so.



For, if we could, what we would be describing would not be God, but our own limited creation.

What we do know of God is what he has chosen to reveal to us in his Son, Jesus. And what he reveals, not just as someone talking about God but coming directly from the inner life of God himself, is from first to last love, grace, service and joy. These we can never exhaust; these we can never cease to learn about.

If we hoist our flag, dig the moat, and put barbed wire and machine gun posts around our cherished positions, no matter how strongly we may feel about them, or how important they may seem to us at the time, we may feel an inner glow of comfort and even righteousness. But it is highly unlikely we will be doing the cause of the gospel any good. If we choose to make our positions a test of fellowship, or a test of Christianity, we run the risk of simply joining the clamour of raised voices and shaken fists that add to the conflict and hate in the world.

A life of learning about God, revealed in Jesus, is wisdom, peace, joy and fellowship.

John McLean
Mission and National Director,
Australia



*God's work is not always glamorous,
but he can be seen in little acts of
humble service*

Blessed are the dung beetles

by John Halford

KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, South Africa: Like all visitors to this world-famous wildlife reserve, my friends and I hoped to see the “big five” – lions, leopards, cape buffalo, rhinoceros and elephants. Well, we didn't see any elephants, but we did see where they had been.

Elephants need to eat three or four hundred pounds of vegetation a day, and they have a “throughput” to match. That is a lot of manure, and it presents quite a cleanup problem.

That's where the dung beetles come in. We noticed that some of the piles of dung along the roads were swarming with beetles. These little creatures, about one inch long, specialize in disposal. After the elephants have finished their part of the operation (I am trying to be discreet here), news gets around, and the dung beetles arrive. Some have travelled several hundred yards to start work on a fresh deposit. Once on site, they use their forelegs to roll the dung into a ball about as big as themselves.

Then they push, pull and maneuver their prize back home, where they eat some of it, give some to their young, and bury the rest. Then they go back for more. It isn't much of a life, but the little beetles seemed happy enough. Dung disposal is their only trick, but it is a useful one. And we found it fascinating to watch.

After looking around carefully to make sure none of the big five were around, we got out of the truck for a better look. I dropped to my knees to get a close-up photo – something you do with due care and attention by a large pile of elephant dung – and suddenly realized that perhaps that was an appropriate position.

We are naturally awed at the majesty and beauty of the big five, and the other spectacular examples of creation. One cannot be in the company of lions, buffalo, rhinoceros, herds of impala, grazing giraffes, basking hippos and the other stars of Africa's awesome wildlife without that verse in Romans coming to mind. “For since

the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...” (Romans 1:20).

But there are lessons to be learned also from the smaller, humbler creatures. Dung beetles are never going to make the big five. But as they go about their humble task, they do teach us something of God's “eternal power and divine nature.”

We tend to look for evidence of God's power to be demonstrated in whatever we might consider the spiritual big five – maybe healings and other miracles, big, growing churches, natural phenomena of biblical proportions, fulfilled prophecies, or powerful preaching to huge audiences. Well, maybe.

But sometimes God shows us his divine nature even more eloquently in smaller, less dramatic ways. This was the lesson the prophet Elijah had to learn. Perhaps you remember the story in the Old Testament book of 1 Kings.



Sometimes God shows his divine nature, with great eloquence, through the small things in his creation



Like those first disciples, we look to God to demonstrate his power in dramatic and decisive ways. But Jesus was showing us that is not how the kingdom comes. It will one day, when God is ready. But until then, Jesus expects us to do what we can, where we can, and take advantage of the opportunities to serve as they present themselves. God's work is not always glamorous or spectacular, but he can be seen and heard in the little acts of humble service, just as his eternal power and divine nature can be glimpsed in the labors of the dung beetles.

The noted British biologist J.B.S. Haldane, who was an avowed atheist, was once asked whether studying biology had taught him anything about the Creator: "I'm really not sure," he replied, somewhat tongue in cheek, "except that he must be inordinately fond of beetles, because he made so many of them."

I think Haldane was right on this point, in spite of himself. I think God looks on the labors of his dung beetles with great appreciation. And perhaps God wants us to learn something from them, too. 🌐

In chapter 18, God used Elijah powerfully in a showdown with the pagan priests. Outnumbered 400 to one, Elijah emerged spectacularly triumphant, but shortly afterward found himself fleeing for his life. Discouraged and exhausted, cowering in a cave, he no doubt hoped God would once again intervene in a dramatic way.

"I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty," he pleaded. "The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too" (1 Kings 19:10).

God told him to go outside and watch.

"Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord..." Ah, this was more like it. Except that "the Lord was not in the wind."

The display of what seemed to be an example of the "big five" continued. "After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake."

"After the earthquake came a fire." A tornado, an earthquake and a wildfire...surely God had a message for Elijah in all this. But no – "the Lord was not in the fire."

But then, "after the fire came a gentle whisper," and in that gentle whisper, Elijah heard the voice of God.

I thought of this story as I watched the dung beetles going about their humble task. An encounter with Kruger Park's big five does take your breath away. A few minutes earlier we had come across a rhinoceros, almost as big as our car, grazing by the roadside. It gazed at us impassively for a while as we oohed and aahed, before it lumbered off into the bush.

By contrast, the dung beetles evoked more of a chuckle. There is something comical about them as they scurry about, shoving the (comparatively) huge balls of elephant dung back home. But these lowly specimens of the animal kingdom were performing a very valuable service. As the poet John Milton, struggling to come to terms with his blindness, wrote, "They also serve who only stand and wait." Or push balls of dung around.

In the last week of Jesus' life, his disciples came to Jerusalem expecting big things from him. Surely the Master was about to show his true colors. A showdown with the Romans was imminent – the kingdom was coming, which would catapult them to fame and fortune. They were already arguing with each other about who would get what. But at the Last Supper, Jesus did the last thing they expected. He washed their feet. This was the task of the lowest slaves – the dung beetles of Roman society. The disciples were appalled, but Jesus knew what he was doing. "When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.

'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them. 'You call me "Teacher" and "Lord," and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them'" (John 13:12-17).



*The Salvation Army is continuing its effort to end modern-day **slavery** as it expands the services of its **safe-house** in Sydney and, as **Simone Worthing** reveals, raise awareness of the issue globally*

THE WRETCHED BUSINESS of slavery has reinvented itself through practices that many of us thought were abolished long ago.

According to the United Nations, \$US31.6 billion of profit is extracted from 12.3 million people in forced labour every year. Approximately two million of these people are the victims of human trafficking, with 80 per cent of them being women and children.

The UN reports that people are trafficked from 127 countries and are exploited in 137 nations around the world, including Australia.

People are trafficked here for the purpose of forced labour, slavery, and sexual servitude. Many are in debt bondage – forced to pay off debts their employers say they owe. These types of abuses can occur in workplaces, in private homes and through marriage.

The Salvation Army is a key international player in the global movement against slavery as it cares for victims, advocates for policy reform and raises awareness of how local communities can join the effort.

In Sydney, The Salvation Army's Safe-House for Trafficked Women opened its doors at the beginning of 2008 as a 10-bed refuge where victims could receive the support and services they needed to pursue their human rights. Since then, the service has expanded to include a growing number of non-residential clients – men, women and young people

who are supported as they rebuild their lives.

Jenny Stanger is the Supervisor of the safe-house. She explains that clients have complex legal and social needs throughout this process.

"Salvos Legal [a free legal service for people who cannot afford to pay] is our main partner and offers a comprehensive legal service that complements our social service," Jenny says.

"This includes criminal, migration and family matters that may need to be dealt with both in Australia and the client's home country. If we can succeed for clients legally, including getting victim compensation, back wages or other civil remedies, it can give them a good footing for the future."

Jenny believes that slavery in Australia is more common than most people could imagine and is something that can happen to anyone who is vulnerable. She cites a case currently before the NSW courts alleging that an Anglo-Australian couple enslaved and assaulted two Anglo-Australian adults, a male and a female, in their home as domestic workers.

"We should be taking the broadest view possible so that our response catches people who would otherwise fall through the cracks," Jenny says.

"It's about reducing people's vulnerabilities and ensuring their basic human rights are protected."

Agriculture, construction, hospitality,

mining, maritime services, manufacturing, health care, restaurants, domestic services, sex services, forced and slave-like marriages are just some of the contexts where serious exploitation has been uncovered.

Community support

The Salvation Army Safe-House is almost entirely funded by the Red Shield Appeal. The safe-house also receives critical donations and assistance from individuals and community groups.

The Zonta District 24 is sponsoring mental health needs of clients, the Rotary Club of Campsie has constructed a beautiful roof-top garden at the safe-house, and other clubs have donated quality clothing. Individuals have also donated goods in-kind and raised money through community events.

Jenny emphasises the need for cash donations and gift cards so clients can choose and purchase items for themselves, as well as for the safe-house.

"It's really about the community stepping up and taking action to help," she explains. "Ultimately, I'd like for community members and companies to sponsor each of our 10 rooms on an annual basis."

Dedicated volunteers have mentored clients, and provided job-seeking assistance and avenues for skills development and socialising (see volunteer comments). This support is critical for the clients of the service. The vast major-

Safe-house

an open door to



Jenny Stanger with an artwork – a bird breaking free from its cage – created by a client at The Salvation Army's safe-house in Sydney. The work depicts the "freedom" people feel when the chains of human trafficking are broken.

ity of them just want safety and acceptance in the community and the opportunity to contribute to society.

"Practically speaking, our clients are all super-motivated to work," Jenny says. "If you own a business and employ people, contact us and see if we have someone who would meet your needs.

"Sponsor education or apprenticeships for our clients, give them work experience or become a mentor for them. They just want what we all want; an opportunity to take care of their families."

The safe-house staff also work with The Salvation Army in the countries of origin of their clients. "There may be safety issues for the families left behind, with traffickers or agents returning and making threats," Jenny explains.

"So we tap into the strength of The

Salvation Army worldwide to help client families stay safe and well. That is part of being holistic in our view of the person we are working with. Our work has always been simultaneously local, national and international."

It is easy for the average person to feel overwhelmed by the breadth and complexity of the millions of people caught up in the web of slavery and human trafficking around the world today.

"Twelve million people [in forced labour] and \$30 billion [profits from slavery] are minuscule numbers relative to the global population and the global economy," Jenny says.

"We know much more now than we did when I started this journey 13 years ago. I don't let the statistics deter me. I'm just going to keep on working."

This article is taken from the June 2011

edition of Pipeline, a magazine of The Salvation Army's Australia Eastern Territory and is reprinted by permission. 🌐

As we were preparing this story for publication, Jenny told us "We are trying to raise \$8,000 to reunite one of our clients with her three children who are in a vulnerable situation in their home country. We have many other client needs that we are also seeking support for such as medical, mental health and legal costs that cannot be obtained through free services." You can make a donation online at: <http://salvos.org.au/justiceunit/shop/product/supporting-victims-of-trafficking/>

combat human trafficking

Food for thought



I AM THE BREAD of Life," (John 6:35, 48). He continued: "the bread I will give is my flesh". Then, even more startlingly, he told them that unless they ate his flesh and drank his blood they had no life in them.

The author of the story, John, lets us in on the reaction of those who heard. Some people could only think in terms of a literal interpretation of what he said. "We know him, he's the carpenter's son. How could he give us his flesh to eat?" they muttered. In effect they concluded, "This is crazy; it makes no sense".

There's a great irony here of course that John is letting us, the readers, in on as Jesus uses dramatic, unforgettable images to make his point.

Jesus did this often – so often, in fact, it is the unmistakably authentic voice of Jesus that echoes throughout the Gospels. Seven times in the book of John he uses the "I am" motif. For example, he also tells us he is the "light", the "gate", the "good shep-

herd". He uses these vivid figures of speech to convey the multiple levels of meaning about the central questions of who he is and what he is doing. They all give us a better picture of the divine union of man and God found in his incarnation.

Jesus continually spoke using metaphors, figurative sayings, similes, similitudes, graphic illustrations, stories, and parables. This was certainly not new. It is, as we have seen in previous articles, how language works. In the Old Testament, God is called a Rock, a Fortress, a High Tower. (We don't read this to mean that God is literally a rock, which would indeed make nonsense of the meaning.)

It was so much a part of Jesus' teaching that Mark can tell us that Jesus always spoke in parables. As Robert Capon says in *Kingdom, Grace and Judgment*, "Jesus spoke in strange, bizarre, disturbing ways".

His figures of speech

often have quite a shock value, reversing expectations, fundamental assumptions, and closely cherished beliefs of the listeners (or readers). Speaking of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Capon says, "Far from being an illustration that shines an understanding they already have on something they haven't yet figured out, it is one that is guaranteed to pop every circuit breaker in their minds".

The point of the story is not to ask what the names of the Pharisee and tax collector were, where they lived, or how old they were. The point is to look for the meaning of the story. Here, the living Word, the One full of grace and truth, tells a story of grace

and justification that absolutely stands the religious notions and expectations of his hearers on their heads.

Capon continues, "From Jesus' point of view, the sooner their misguided minds had the props knocked out from under them, the better. After all their yammer about how God should or shouldn't run his own operation, getting them just to stand there with their eyes popped and their mouths shut would be a giant step forward.

We, of course, after two thousand years' exposure to Scripture might be tempted to think of ourselves as less likely to need such hard-nosed tutelage. But Jesus still gives it to us".

In a sense, Jesus' whole life was a parable. He completely reversed the expectations of who and what a Messiah should be. He challenged all the religious preconceptions and opinion of the time. He continues to do so today.

In the fullness of God's power, he came as the self-emptying revelation of the Father to his creation, the divine union of God and man to take away the sins of the world.

He came as a humble servant. The carpenter's son came to lift us up into the shared life of communion with God. With mouths open (and if necessary eyes popped), we continually come to feed on the Bread of Life. ☉

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



UNDERSTANDING *Genesis* FOR ALL IT'S WORTH

I've always, ever since a child, been interested in nature. There's something about the living environment that is beautiful and interesting and attractive, and it just draws you in.

SO I WENT to university and I eventually majored in zoology, and then I focused narrowly again into marine zoology. I did my doctorate looking at the anatomy and aging process in a marine fouling invertebrate.

Faith and evolution

You can't study fossils for very long without having to consider the very hard questions. We don't have the luxury of ignoring the difficult questions. So I had to confront the issue, what is the fossil record telling me? I began gradually to see that the evidence for evolution was really quite compelling and indisputable. It didn't affect my faith at all. My faith has grown over the years because in the end my faith is in Jesus Christ, and one's faith and commitment to Jesus is a consequence of the action of the Holy Spirit in one's life.

Genesis 1

In approaching Genesis, one has to ask the question, is there more than one way of reading the book? There's nothing new about that concept – it's at least as old as Augustine, who said that we should be careful how we read the Bible lest we read into it, in fact, what is not there.

The Bible is a remarkable book written over more than a period of 1000 years by 40 different authors, and it constitutes many different forms of literature as well. We tend to read Genesis 1 superficially, unaware of the structure that's actually in the chapter. It really comes down to the whole issue of exegesis – the art of biblical interpretation.

Exegesis asks certain questions concerning the Bible. We want to know, for example, why a particular passage

We should be careful how we read the Bible lest we read into it what is not there



Michael Feazell interviews Christian Minister and Marine Biologist **Dr Dennis Gordon**

There's a definite structure ... a scientific description is not at all the point of it



was written. What was the historical or cultural context? What was the city? What were the issues? Who was the writer? Who was the audience? Why was it written?

Right context

If we really want to understand Genesis 1 or indeed the whole book of Genesis, we have to read it in the light of the Exodus. That's the context. We take Moses as the traditional author of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible ... He's writing this at the time when a people who were formally in bondage to slavery are now in the process of being redeemed and on their way to salvation and the promised land.

God, through Moses, is giving them a future in relation to their present. *He's also giving them a past.* How do they come to be where they are? Moses is connecting Israel with a past as well as giving them a future. So what is the context of Genesis in relation to their past?

Genesis is divided into two major parts. The first 11 chapters deal with what we might call primeval history, largely based on oral traditions and things that Moses may have learned when he was taught in Egypt in an academic way, traditions that may have been communicated through the patriarchs.

So Moses connects Israel with the ultimate origins – that the God whom they worship, the God of the Hebrews, is the God who is the Creator.

In Egypt, there were gods of the sun and gods of darkness and gods for animals and vegetation and rivers and so on.

Well, the God of the Hebrews is the God who created all the things that the pagans worship. The chief point of Genesis 1 is to show that there is one God, not many.

Carefully crafted

Genesis 1 is a superb piece of literature. It is very carefully crafted. The pagan creation stories are very complex and convoluted. Genesis 1 uses some of the language of the pagan cosmogonies, drawing upon a common tale that people were familiar with, but recasting it to tell a proper theology about the God of Israel.

What was created on days one through six is the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:2 is very interesting, because it says, "And the earth was without form and void," and this is in the old King James Version of the Bible. Formless and empty – that's the starting condition. It says, "And darkness was on the face of the deep." Even before you have the creation of the six days, you have something that already exists, maybe a watery surface, and the Spirit of God is brooding over that. That's your starting point.

It says specifically that it was "formless and empty." Why is Moses writing that? He's writing that because Moses wants to show that the God of the Hebrews, God of Israel, is able to structure [to solve the problem of being formless] the cosmos and then populate [to solve the problem of being empty] the cosmos. The first three days have to do with structuring.

On day one, God separates the light from the dark. On day two, he separates the waters above from the waters below, and on day three he separates

the land from the waters. So we have the structuring. So what was formless (in Hebrew, *tohu vav bohu*, void and empty) is now formed.

What God does in the second set of three days is solve the second problem, of emptiness – God populates each of the realms that he structured on the first three days. So on the first day we have the separation of day from night, and what do we populate that realm with, if not the sun and the moon and the stars? Then on day two we separate the waters above from the waters below, and what do we see populating those realms, but the birds in the upper atmosphere and the fish in the sea? Then on day six, the land animals and human beings populating the realm that was formed on day three, and that solves the problem of emptiness.

The one true God

Moses is taking elements that the pagans **worship** and showing that things that the pagans worship were, in fact, **creations** of the one true God. There's a definite structure in there. A scientific description is not at all the point of it. The issue is polytheism, many gods, versus monotheism or one God. 🌐

To view or listen to all three interviews with Dennis Gordon, visit Dimensions in Ministry at www.gci.org/media. The interviews can be streamed or downloaded in video or audio format. A downloadable transcript is also available.

Greek, Hebrew and the Middle-aged man

by Mark Tracy Porter

What on earth was I thinking of?

TO PARAPHRASE THE comedian Steve Martin, the problem with foreign languages is that they have a different word for everything. But I wanted to understand the Bible better, so knowing that Greek and Hebrew have a different word for everything, this middle-aged man embarked on a mission to learn the biblical languages.

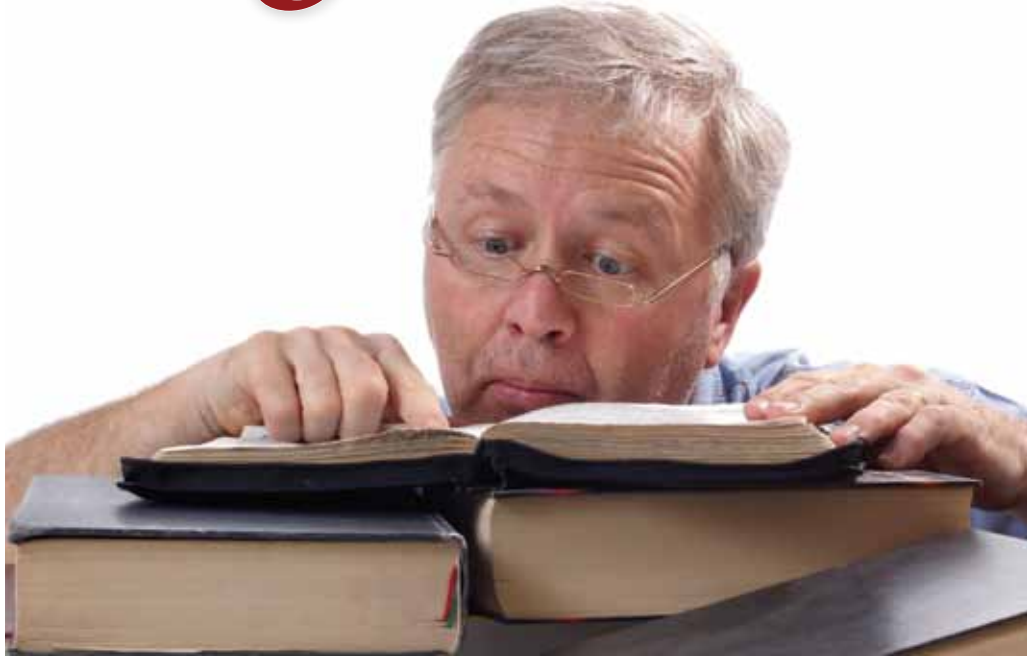
Learning new languages at my age can be a daunting task, so I began with an introductory class in Biblical Hebrew at a local seminary to be sure this was a path I really wanted to pursue. I discovered that I had a smidgen of aptitude for language, and I ended up with three years of Hebrew training. Then I did the same thing with Biblical Greek. I have been asked, “was it worth it?” My answer is “absolutely yes.”

As we were assigned to translate multiple biblical passages from Hebrew and/or Greek into English, I learned three important lessons: 1) Slow down; 2) There may be more than one right answer; 3) Let the passage drive your understanding. Let me show you what I mean.

Slowing down

In a microwave world, where the ability to multi-task is a prized skill, speed is king. Of course, accuracy is expected also, but the overall goal is to get more done in less time.

Translating turns this on its head. It forces you to slow down and to consider the meaning of each word or phrase, how it relates to the words around it, and how it may have been used in other places within the same document. Consistent with recent studies showing that cursive writing improves comprehension, I found it helpful to write out the translation by hand. Maybe that is why newly crowned kings in ancient



Israel were to write a copy with their own hand of what we call the book of Deuteronomy. This would force them to slow down and to consider each word (see Deuteronomy 17:18-19).

Writing out a passage in longhand is a good Bible study tool. You might have read a passage many times over the years, but the act of writing it down might allow you to see things you have never noticed before.

More than one correct answer

In the discipline of mathematics, we are trained to find the one correct answer to a problem. Mathematics can be attractive to people who don't like ambiguity. But language often presents us with more than one answer, any of which may be correct. For example, most students of the Scriptures know the 23rd Psalm, perhaps even by memory. But have we missed something in the English translations?

Here is a verse from the familiar King James Version:

Psalm 23:6: “Surely goodness and mercy shall *follow* me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

That sounds right, doesn't it? But how about this, from the New English Translation:

Psalm 23:6: “Surely your goodness and faithfulness will *pursue* me all my days, and I will live in the Lord's house for the rest of my life.”

Notice in the King James version, “... goodness and mercy shall follow me ...”, compared to the NET version, “... goodness and faithfulness will pursue me ...”. Is one more right than the other? The word “follow” gives a more passive tone, while “pursue” is more active. The Hebrew word conveys this more active sense of pursuit with intent and purpose. So although “follow” is not wrong, understanding the original word gave me a deeper understanding.

Stopping with just the first right answer can lead to incomplete understanding. Exploring the full range of a semantic meaning may reveal more fully what the text is telling us.

Let the passage drive our understanding

Each of us brings our own life experience to any text that we read. A word or a phrase might spark a memory of an

experience which can then shade our understanding of what the text says. What about facing storms in life? Let's look at an example in Mark 4:35-41.

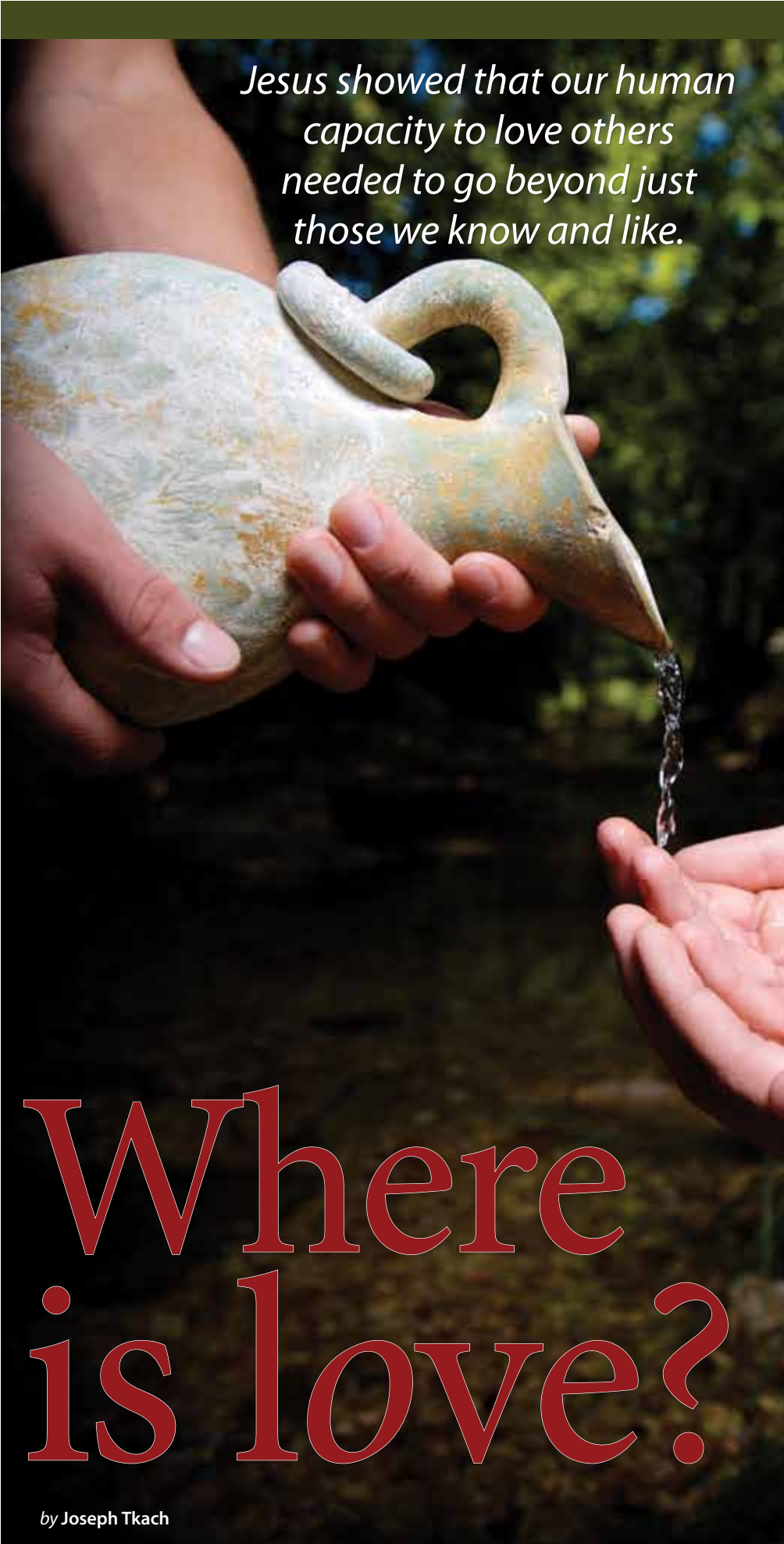
This is the story of Jesus and the disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee and encountering a storm. Often sermons based on this passage take it simply as an encouraging message that Jesus is with us in the midst of the storms of life and that he will calm the winds and the seas. Well, that's true, of course, but it isn't exactly the primary point of this particular passage. This passage is about the identity of Jesus.

We see that as a human he became tired and went to sleep. Upon being awakened, without any appeal to the Father, he commanded the wind and the seas to be calm, and they obeyed him. Then comes the disciples' question, "Who is this?" This passage is about the person Jesus, fully man and fully God, displaying the two natures in one person.

While we certainly take hope in the fact that he can calm the winds and the seas, we also know that he doesn't always calm them in every situation in our lives. Sometimes we have to ride out the storm.

No regrets

While it is true that foreign languages, especially biblical ones, have a different word for everything, by slowing down and letting the text speak, we can come closer to understanding the text as originally intended. While learning Greek and Hebrew was not easy, it has helped me to be a more skillful and clearer teacher. I have no regrets, except perhaps that I wish I had started a bit earlier in life. 🌐

A photograph of a person's hands pouring water from a light-colored, textured ceramic jug into another person's open palm. The background is a blurred green, suggesting an outdoor setting. The text is overlaid on the top right of the image.

Jesus showed that our human capacity to love others needed to go beyond just those we know and like.

Where is love?

by Joseph Tkach

As pastor general of Grace Communion International, I hear about many inspiring outreach projects that our congregations are engaged in around the world.

SOME ARE SIMPLE acts of kindness and service to those in need. Others are quite extensive, with several congregations, sometimes across two or three countries, working together in such projects as providing education for disadvantaged children, vocational training for young adults, or employment support for poor but hardworking families. This is one of the great blessings of our being a relatively small, yet very interconnected worldwide denomination.

All of our service and outreach in Christ's name is motivated by God's love, which fills us, and which the Holy Spirit prompts us to share with others. But have you ever wondered about the many examples of genuine and generous love by people who are not Christian, some of whom might not even believe in God? Where does such love come from?

"Let us love one another, for love comes from God," 1 John 4:7 says. In the very next verse, we're told, "God is love." "Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them," verse 16 continues.

Do you see the implication? Because the Creator is love, love is "hardwired" into the creation, and into every human. That means that wherever and whenever we see love expressed in the world, regardless of the source, we are seeing God's love, because there is no other kind of love but God's love. "We love because he first loved us," verse 19 says.

So what is so special about what we call "Christian love"?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?" Parents who love their children would never do that. Human beings, in spite of our many inadequacies and imperfections, want the best for our children. Jesus continued, "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:9-10).

Jesus was pointing to a love that goes deeper than just loving those who love us, those who are good to us, those we naturally care about. He was talking about a love that extends even to those whom we don't like, even to those who despise or hate us, who mistreat us, who might be our enemies. That's how God loves us – Christ died for us while we were still God's enemies, Paul tells us in Romans 5:8.

During Jesus' ministry, he often upset the religious establishment of the day by extending love to people considered "unlovable." He forgave a woman caught in the act of adultery. He treated a prostitute with dignity and respect. He made friends with the much-despised tax collectors and others considered beyond the pale of polite society. He touched and healed lepers – the ultimate outcasts of the day. His closest friends were common working people.

Jesus showed that our human capacity to love others

needed to go beyond just those we know and like. He told his followers to pay special attention to those whom society has rejected. In his parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46), he identified with the suffering of the sick, the loneliness of the prisoner and the plight of the poor. He told us to help them, saying in verse 40, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

That kind of love is contagious. It often brings out the best in anyone who either receives it or witnesses it. Those who followed Jesus after his resurrection were soon called "Christians," and it was not long before their unusual way of life began to be noticed. In hard economic times, Christians were generous. When plagues struck, Christians nursed the sick. When widows and orphans were left to fend for themselves, Christians cared for them.

Even though Christians were often despised and persecuted, their lives of love also tended to prick the consciences of those who knew about them, causing many to join them in their labors of love.

When Christians help the poor and the outcasts, we let them know that they do matter and that they are included in God's love, no matter who they are or what they have done. There is no in crowd and out crowd. *Everyone* matters, and everyone has been included in God's love. There is redemption for every person; all they have to do is believe it and embrace it.

Our example of love and service in Christ is a key part of the way God leads people to do that. As we all work together, our collective work in Christ can reach even further and have an even greater impact than we have daily as individuals.

Thank you for your faithfulness! As the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58)! ☺

When Christians help others, we let them know that they matter and that they are included in God's love, no matter who they are.

Our Bulgarian connection

During the Communist era, Bulgaria was one of the regimes hostile toward Christianity. In spite of constant harassment and persecution, some believers found ways to keep their light shining.



NIKOLAY NIKOLOV, GCI's representative in Bulgaria, talked to *Christian Odyssey* about his life and work.

Christian Odyssey: How did you become a Christian?

Nikolay Nikolov: I was born into a Christian family. I am very thankful toward God and my parents. Every day they found time to read with us in the Bible. Jesus was the center of our family.

CO: What was it like to be a Christian during the Communist era?

NN: To the Communists, every Christian was an enemy. Christians were given the worst jobs and were continually watched by their neighbors and the secret police. If you didn't join the political demonstrations and party meetings, you were penalized. This could mean you would receive only half a salary. If your boss was in the leadership of the party, you could lose your job. We were forced to accept any kind of work – no matter what kind of job – to be able to feed our family and survive.

In school, the children of Christians were also seen as enemies of the state. The required identity cards had

a special mark to indicate that you were a Christian. You couldn't climb the ladder of success or go to university. If a university did allow you to study, they would put great pressure on you to be far better than all the others.

The police had the right to search through your house and they could take all your Christian literature and even fine or penalize you.

Our church building in Jambol was destroyed five times. The Communists would wait until the church was rebuilt, and then they would destroy it again. They kept telling us that they were going to build a Kindergarten or a school on what had been church grounds. The goal of the Communists was to weaken Christians financially, to humble them and to show them who was in charge.

Toward the end of the Communist era, things eased up just a little. The Adventist, Methodist, Protestant, and Pentecostal churches were consolidated into one group. All church services had to be held in a place designated by the government and the pastor was appointed by the state. The goal was to give the appearance of free-

dom of religion, but to stay in control.

Christians who were active in spreading the good news at the workplace or among neighbors lost their jobs or were forced to leave the city. Most Christians were resettled in agricultural areas where there was no industry and very few jobs. The state often replaced the pastors or they were thrown into prison without a proper trial or conviction. Lots of families were destroyed in this way. But God always sent us pastors with the adequate character.

CO: Tell us about your clandestine printing press.

NN: During the reign of the Communists, only the Orthodox Church was allowed to print Christian literature, and only a very limited amount. It was forbidden to own a private printing press. But my brother told me he had seen an old printing machine in a junkyard in a neighboring city. The machine – a Rotaprint Din A3 – was in awful condition. Several of us decided we would each buy and repair one piece of the machine. Then we put it all together. We decided to print a magazine in the Bulgarian language with this old machine. We

didn't have any printing paper. Only old packaging paper was available.

So each of us bought packets of 20 sheets until we had enough to print the magazine.

We had to buy ink and printing plates from the state-owned printing companies. That meant we were always watched. The house where we had the printing machine was searched a few times and we were occasionally arrested. But we hadn't broken any laws, and we never printed any political or anti-government material, so they let us go. The worst thing was that the printed magazines were confiscated and destroyed.

CO: How did you come into contact with our denomination?

NN: On a visit to the city of Zwickau, in the former DDR (East Germany), I received a magazine that contained a card to order the church maga-

zine *Klar & Wahr*. So I ordered the magazine. Later on I translated a few articles and published them. Some of these articles were used as German lessons in the secondary schools. Then the German teachers asked me if I would contact the church headquarters to see if we were allowed to translate the entire magazine.

That's how I got into contact with Santiago Lange (GCI's National Director in Germany). He and the churches in Germany and the Netherlands have been great supporters. They provided us with a printing machine, articles, paper and, later, with another folding and printing machine. I am very thankful to God, and to Santiago Lange, Frans Danenberg and our sisters and brothers in Germany and the Netherlands! They also continue to support some orphanages and other charitable projects in Bulgaria.

CO: Do you still publish your magazines and other literature in Russian and Bulgarian?

NN: Sadly, no. The last issues were printed and circulated in September 2010. The problem now is not persecution, but a shortage of finances. We are not currently able to buy the paper, ink and the necessary parts for our printing press. I am praying that we will be able to reach more people. There are a number of minority groups such as Turks, Gypsies, Jews, and Armenians who are also living in my country.

What we need most in Bulgaria is not bread, not health, not money, but Christ. One can have many things in life, but in the end one still feels empty. There is nothing that can replace God. Our mission is to bring to the people what we have personally experienced with Jesus – his truth, his righteousness, and his love. ☉

SEP
JANUARY
2012



It's on again!

Where: Morisset, NSW
When: 2-13 January 2012
More info: Online at www.gci.org.au/SEP2012
Please direct any questions to sep@gci.org.au

I will never forget arriving at camp for my first time and having instant acceptance. It was amazing, something I'd never experienced before and I will never forget it. SEP gives you the best friends you will ever meet.

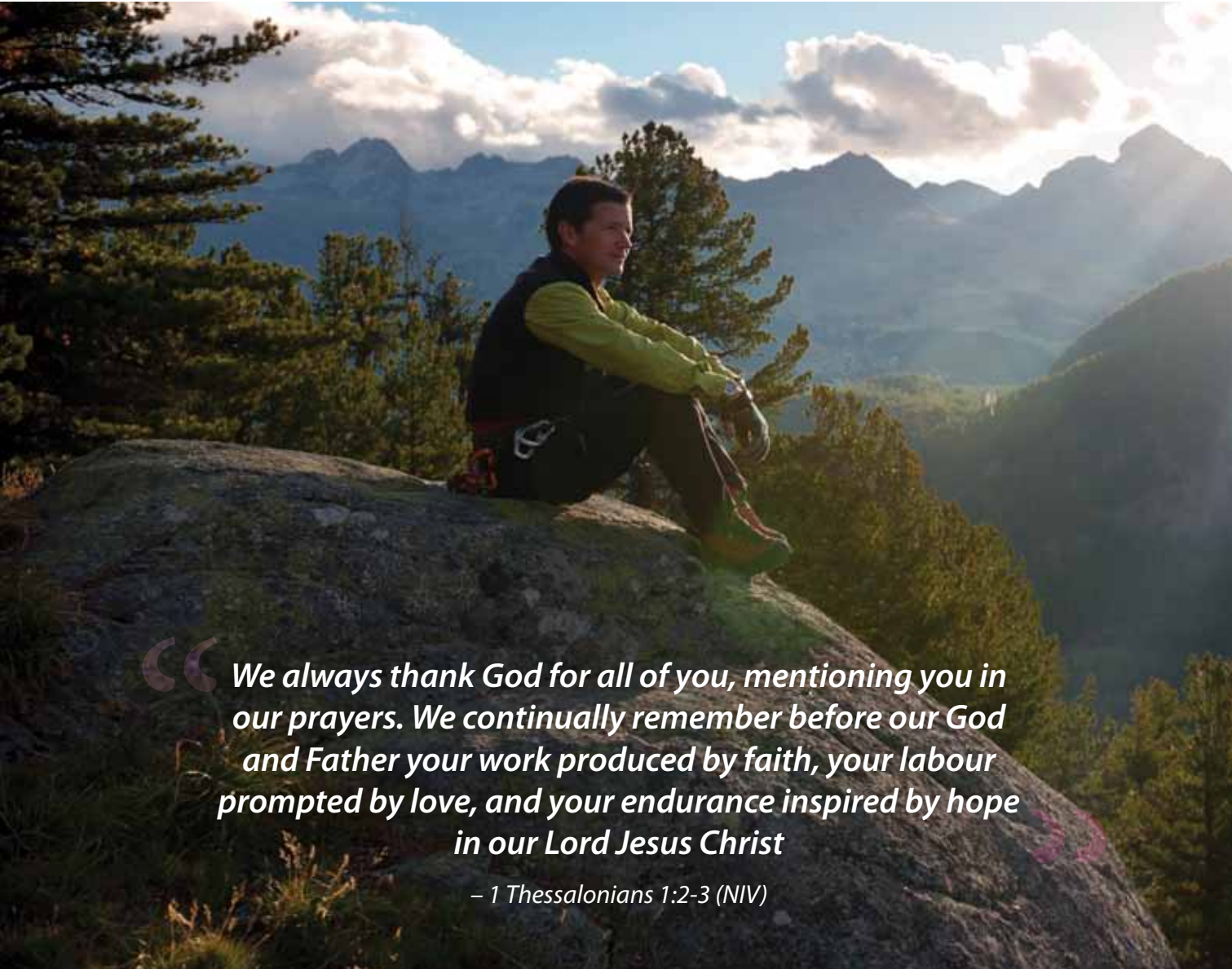
I really love the friendly atmosphere of SEP, and the fact that those friends become a massive part of your life through a shared understanding of God. SEP helps us see that we all have a 'mutual friend' in God.

What is there not to love about SEP? I think the people are what really make it special, everyone is so accepting and welcoming.

GCI's national youth camp will be held in NSW next January. SEP is **twelve days of fun, friends and faith** – an unforgettable experience. The camp mixes outdoor and adventure activities with discussions, dances and the opportunity for young people to develop friendships and grow together in Christ. SEP is a unique and incredible experience, and we'd love to see you there!



We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us – 1 Thess 2:8



“We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ

– 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 (NIV)

Hmmm ...

“The real voyage of discovery consists of not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.”

– Marcel Proust

“I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. Life is no brief candle for me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

– George Bernard Shaw

“Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.”

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”

– Abraham Lincoln

“To be happy, make other people happy.”

– W. Clement Stone