

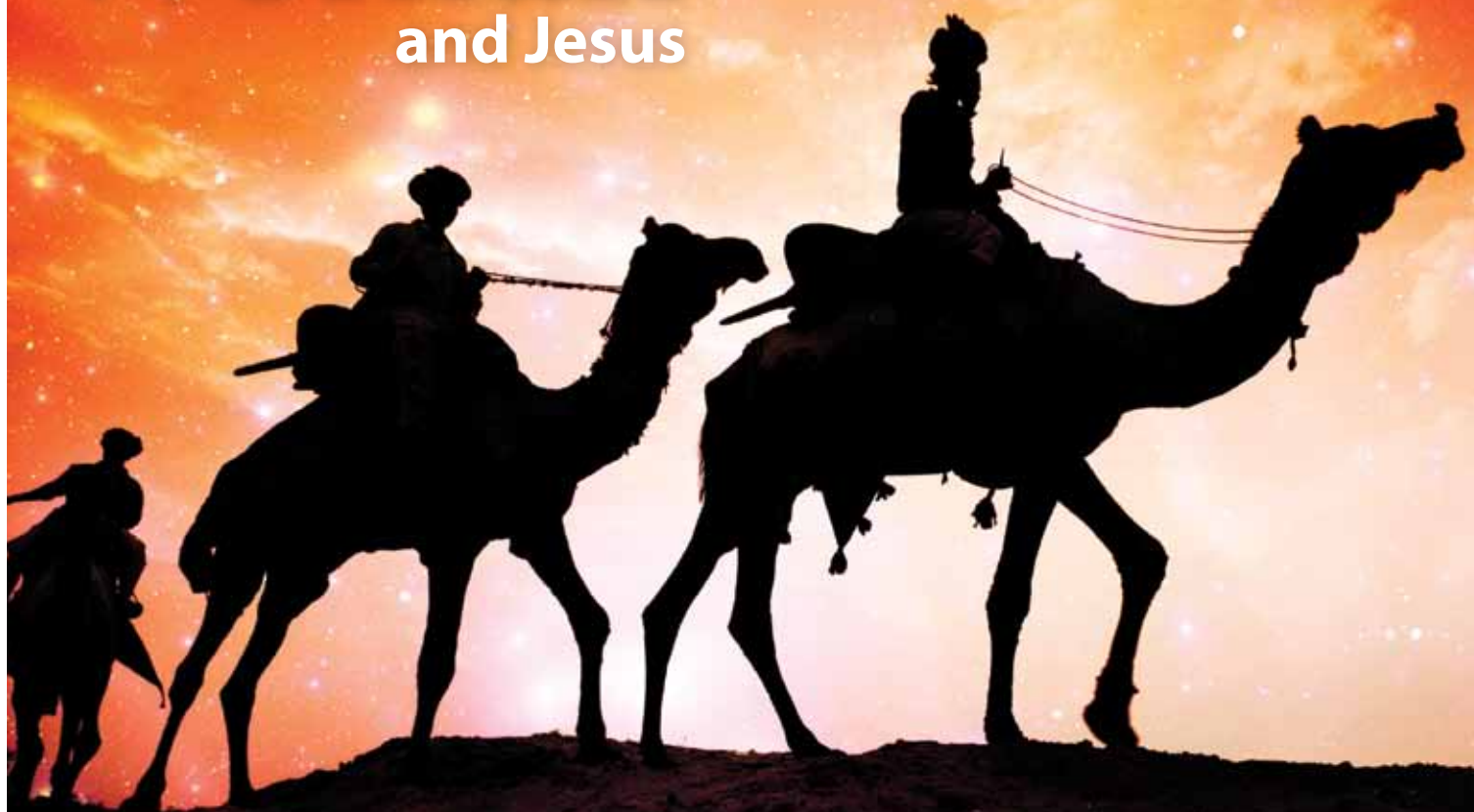
T^{GCI}oday

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

DECEMBER 2011 – FEBRUARY 2012



Portrait of a **Woman** and Jesus



dreaming of a **Quantum**

Christmas

thanksgiving
& **CELEBRATION**

MOZAMBIQUE
ADVENTURE



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About GCI Today

MISSION STATEMENT

GCI Today is published by Grace Communion International to celebrate and share the good news of God's love in ways that express practical help, hope and encouragement

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Thanksgiving

As we come to the end of another year in the shared journey of our life together in our fellowship, it is appropriate for us to end the year with gratitude, thanksgiving and celebration.

First and last we give thanks to God for his “indescribable gift” to us in Jesus Christ. Existence itself, and everything we have, share and do comes from God. “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Together we celebrate the kindness and grace of our Father expressed to us in Jesus and experienced in the Spirit. We thank God for his abiding presence, that he never leaves or forsakes us, as he has led us on our remarkable journey of transformation together. In that journey from legalism into grace, often called a “modern miracle”, we can only be grateful for and celebrate God’s kindness, patience and love to us all.

This kindness and grace not only brings us salvation but a renewed way of living and fellowshiping together, and a new approach to mission and sharing the gospel. In faith (not our own faith, but the faith of Christ (Galatians 2:20)), we participate and share in the Son’s loving communion with the Father through the Spirit. Because we have this communion with God, we also share communion with one another, and in Christ with all humanity. Sharing the unequivocal good news of this relationship becomes the focus of outreach and evangelism.

We share the joy and celebration with Paul as he wrote, “How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He’s the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son...It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for.” (Ephesians 1, *The Message*).

Entering this “celebration of his lavish-gift giving”, how could we not be thankful and grateful. Thanksgiving then, rather than duty, becomes the key characteristic of our Christian life, and of our lives together. It is at the heart of our response to the grace of God expressed to us in Jesus. (“Gratitude” comes from the same core word as “grace”.) Little wonder Paul wrote to the church that it is God’s will for us in Christ to “Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). “This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.”

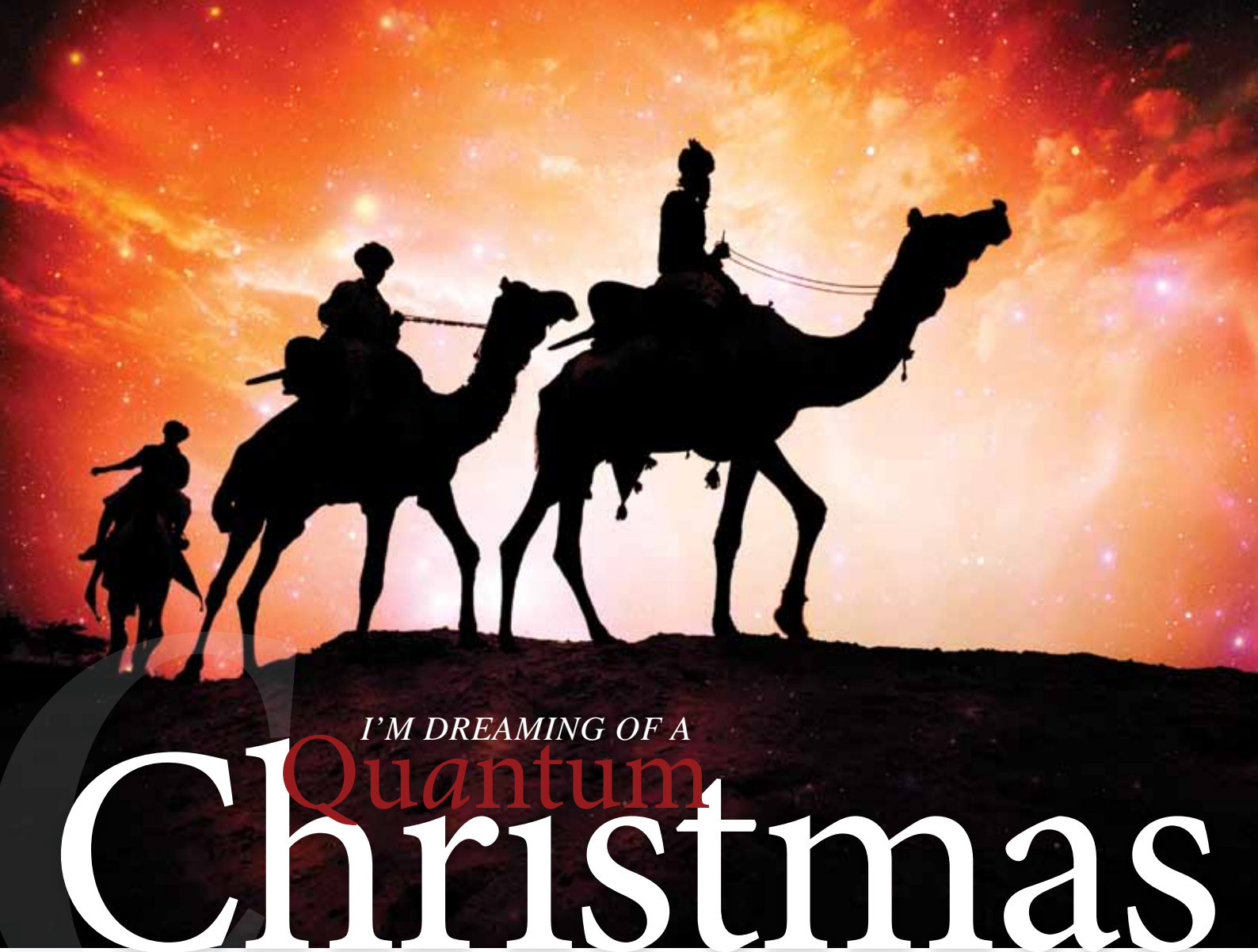
This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer could write that we enter this common life together not as demanders, but as grateful recipients. Rather than complain about what we don’t have, we rather thank God



for what we do have. And what we do have is life together in Christ – participation in the life and love of God. We have one another, our brothers and sisters, who share our journey, and our celebrations.

As we end the year and enjoy Advent celebrations, we are filled with gratitude for what God has done for us in Christ. Our lives become filled to overflowing with thanksgiving for the amazing grace of Jesus Christ.

John McLean
Mission and National Director,
Australia



I'M DREAMING OF A Quantum Christmas

by John Halford

The wise men who came from the East to worship the infant Jesus were the scientists of their day. Known as Magi, they studied the heavens and the earth, seeking to understand the natural world, and make sense of the supernatural.

WHEN THEY OBSERVED a mysterious sign in the sky, they knew it was significant. Exactly what they saw is not known. Was it a comet? A conjunction of planets? A unique special creation? Whatever it was, it guided these Magi to Jerusalem, and eventually to a house in Bethlehem where the infant Jesus was staying. There they worshipped him and gave him gifts.

The heavens have always been a source of inspiration to those who seek to understand the meaning of existence. A thousand years before the Magi, King David wrote:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? (Psalm 8:3-4).

David could have seen with the naked eye between 5,000 and 6,000 stars, and maybe five of the planets. He could not have known that some of those “stars” were galaxies, composed of millions of stars.

Today we know that those few thousand visible stars are just a handful of the estimated two to three hundred billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy. And our galaxy is just one of at least 100 billion galaxies. I’m being conservative; new data from the

Hubble telescope suggests there could be as many as 500 billion galaxies “out there,” each with maybe 300 billion stars of its own.

We will likely never know for certain how many stars there are. Even if we did, old stars burn out and new stars come into existence every day. Astronomers have estimated that in each galaxy, one star dies and one is born at the rate of about one a year. Assuming a conservative 100 billion galaxies in the observable universe, there are about 100 billion stars being born and dying each year. That means an average of about 275 million per day. In the time it is taking you to read this paragraph, maybe a million stars have collapsed and another million have burst into life.

There is far more going on out there than we have even begun to observe or measure. For example, about 70 percent of the universe seems to consist of what scientists call “dark energy.” By “dark” they mean it is beyond the range of our ability

to measure and observe. Of the remaining 30 percent, 26 percent seems to be made of “dark matter.” Only four percent of the universe consists of material that we can measure, or even describe. And the more we learn about that four percent, the more mysterious it becomes.

As the English astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington put it, “Not only is the universe stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we can imagine.”

Is God necessary?

Even with the limited understanding of his time, David could write confidently, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1).

Well, not to everyone. In a recently published book, *The Grand Design*, physicists Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow argue that a belief in God is not needed to explain the origins of the universe. They claim that the theory of quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity help us understand how universes could have formed out of nothing. They argue that the Big Bang is a consequence of the laws of physics alone. Hawking has said, “One can’t prove that God doesn’t exist, but science makes God unnecessary.”

That is a bold claim, but is it right? Physicist and science writer Paul Davies doesn’t think so. While accepting that cosmology can probably now explain how our universe began, he says “A much tougher problem now looms, however. What is the source of those ingenious laws that enable a universe to pop into being from nothing? ... There is no compelling need for a supernatural being or prime mover to start the universe off. But when it comes to the laws that explain the big bang, we are in murkier waters.”

Missing something big

Murkier waters indeed. Even if the origins of the universe can be described entirely by laws of physics, as Hawking asserts, the question remains as to how can we explain the origin of those laws? In a remarkably frank book about the state of research today, physicist Lee Smolin admitted that physics has come to an impasse. “The one thing that everyone who cares about fundamental physics seems to agree on is that new ideas are needed. From the most skeptical critics to the most strenuous advocates of string theory, you hear

the same thing: We are missing something big” (Lee Smolin, *The Trouble with Physics*, p. 308).

So today, our astounding investigations into the incomprehensibly vast expanse of the known universe and the equally incomprehensibly miniscule world of subatomic particles have not, in fact, made God unnecessary. The unfathomable night sky still reflects the glory of God and the mysterious quarks join it in proclaiming the work of his hands.

In another recently published book, *New Proofs for the Existence of God*, Robert J. Spitzer argues that far from doing away with the need for God, cutting edge scientific discoveries have shown ever more clearly that faith is a rational response to the state of our knowledge. If the scientific evidence we have today is taken seriously, Spitzer writes, “...they cannot help but transform our view of the universe, transcendence, our destiny and the meaning of life” (*New Proofs for the Existence of God*, pp. 10–11).

Twenty years ago, Astronomer Robert Jastrow anticipated this situation when he wrote, “For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance, he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries” (Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers*, p. 107).

Reading that, it is tempting for religious people to offer a smug “We told you so.” But let’s be careful. Far from Jastrow’s picture of theologians sitting on the highest peak, theologians have more often preferred to squat complacently on the lowest slopes of scientific discovery, stubbornly clutching old ideas and resisting—sometimes viciously opposing—anything new and ground-breaking. Let’s not forget Copernicus and Galileo, whom the church attempted to silence because of their discoveries that the earth was not the center of the universe.

Theologians, just as much as scientists, need to ask whether we are missing something big, starting with the common perception among religious people that God is a rather remote, stern Judge “out there” somewhere, who is difficult to please and preoccupied with sinful behavior. But is that the God that Jesus

Even if the origins of the universe can be described entirely by laws of physics, the question remains—how can we explain the origin of those laws?

came to reveal? Has our understanding of God been too narrow?

The Magi followed the star to worship Jesus because they knew his birth was in some way significant. They could not have known just how significant. They thought he was the new king of the Jews, the long-awaited Messiah. How could they know that he was, in fact, far more than that—the loving and faithful Creator of all they had studied, come to earth as a human being to heal and transform humanity into a new creation in himself?

As his life and ministry unfolded, Jesus showed us what God is *really* like, and he and his apostles told us of the purpose of the universe and human life. The Creator became one of us, not only forgiving all our sins by taking them on himself, but also giving us his own righteousness by becoming one with us. He died for us, rose from the dead for us and lives eternally for us, drawing us relentlessly into his new creation, into the love relationship he shares eternally with the Father and the Spirit.

As the carols remind us, “Long lay the world in sin and error pining ‘til he appeared, and the soul felt its worth,” and “Man will live forevermore because of Christmas Day.”

The brilliant lights of science, which are no more than human discoveries of what God has created, and the ancient glow of the gospel, which is nothing less than God’s revelation of his unfathomable love for all human beings, both lead us to Jesus. Through him alone we come face to face with the Creator who not only loves us more than we have imagined, but more than we *can* imagine. 🌐



He ain't heavy

by Steve Schantz

Having the right piece of plastic has surely changed our lives in the past quarter century. These lightweight, individualized, magnetically charged tokens are almost too conveniently linked to our identity and visibly associated with our social and economic status. No wonder we are reluctant to “leave home without them.”

BUT WHAT IF our money were harder to carry around and exchange? What if our money consisted of really heavy, hard to handle tokens of worth? Would this help change our out-of-control personal and national spending habits?

There have been times in history where carrying money required a small wheelbarrow. Citizens of the Han dynasty in China carried four-pound pieces of bronze around with them. They were called Pu, and resembled giant, badly formed tuning forks. You'd need to really want to buy something before you left home with a Pu.

Not all ancient money was so cumbersome. At the same time the Han Chinese were hauling their Pu around, Jesus turned tables on the money changers in the temple in Jerusalem. Any coins that scattered could be grasped in the palm of your hand.

It isn't the size or weight of the money that messes with our minds, is it? It is how we view money, wealth, and financial security in general. More important than “What's in your wallet?” should be our answer to the question, “How important is your wallet?”

The heaviest yoke many are burdened with daily is worry over their economic affairs. Fear of economic failure squeezes the life out of marriages and households and robs wage earners of the joy they should get from productive employment. To make matters worse, misguided televangelists plead with you to “Call now—don't wait! The longer you wait to plant your seed money, the longer God waits to bless you with a harvest!” That is the formula for an ungodly guilt trip, and worse, a distorted understanding of God and the gospel.

Isn't there a better, purer, *lighter* view of giving than trying to manipulate God into releasing what you need or resigning yourself

to poverty and misfortune? Jesus said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). Let's savor these words for a moment with respect to personal giving and Christian stewardship.

I don't think the widow who dropped her mite into the collection boxes as Jesus watched then ran from the temple shouting, “Look out world! It's beggar-to-billionaire day! Go claim your blessing now! If you put it in, God has to pay it out! My ship is comin' in!” I don't think that widow saw God as a winning lottery ticket in the sky. Neither do I see her moping along down the streets of Jerusalem with head hung in shame because her bank account doesn't measure up to her neighbors.

Giving to God is a privilege and a joy. It isn't a get-rich quick scheme, or a premium on heavenly insurance. Both of these views get really heavy—really fast. Let's lighten up.

God loves the cheerful giver! How heavy is your wallet? ☺

Correction

In the last issue of *GCI Today* the interview with Dr Dennis Gordon in the article “Understanding Genesis for all it's worth” contained two editorial errors which created confusing statements.

The question (p8) “What is the city” should have read “What is the setting?” (related to the historical or cultural context). There was also a misspelling that created a statement about “a people [Israel] who were formally in bondage to slavery”. What Dr Gordon in fact said was that they were “formerly in bondage to slavery”. We apologise to readers and to Dr Gordon for these mistakes.

Bronze Pu, from the Han dynasty. Don't leave home without it.

*It isn't the size
or weight of the
money that messes
with our minds, it's
our worry over
economic affairs.*

Making sense of the Bible

WHAT'S THE BIBLE about? How do we make sense of it?

How do we know we understand what we are reading?

After all, it's the world's number one bestselling book of all time. And many people claim it as the source for all sorts of ideas, beliefs and instruction (even if many of these are often contradictory).

"You diligently study the Scriptures," Jesus told the Pharisees, "because you think that by them you possess eternal life." Absolutely right! They diligently pored over words, expressions, sentences; they counted individual letters to make sure the copies they made were accurate, they debated meanings and interpretations. Because they believed they had in their hands nothing less than the words of life. A common saying was "More Torah, more life". So it was to be handled carefully, diligently, as befitted this wonderful treasure.

Then Jesus dropped the bombshell. The shocker. The cognitive crunch, the surprising intellectual slap.

"These are the Scriptures that testify about me," he said. What? Preposterous! Impossible! Unheard of! Not tradition! Scripture was about a multitude of things. So many items, so much to debate, so much history, law, story, poetry, song. How could it be about a person? Let alone a carpenter's son!

And he wasn't finished – "yet you refuse to come to me to have life."¹ The Scriptures were about him? And to have life, you have to come to him? Life – eternal life – was connected with a person,

with coming into connection with that person?

The Scriptures were about someone? Preposterous! Impossible! Unheard of! Not tradition!

One can understand the confusion, distress, and indeed anger and conflict experienced by the original audience as Jesus said this. Just as well it's been cleared up for Christians, then. Or not, as a quick check of the Christian landscape might reveal.

Let's hear it again from Eugene Peterson's *"The Message"*: "You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you'll find eternal life there. But you miss the forest for the trees. These Scriptures are all about me! And here I am, standing right before you, and you aren't willing to receive from me the life you say you want."

Hhhmm. Reading the Bible is a good thing. Studying it diligently is to be encouraged. Yet...Yet according to Jesus, it is possible to read it, study it, and miss the point. And the point is...him. It's all about him. He's the centre of it all, the fulfilment of it all, the reason and meaning of it all. If we don't read it all through him, we are very likely to misread it. If we replace him as the centre of it all – even if we replace him with something valuable and important – we will definitely get off-centre (eccentric) and risk misconstruing and misusing the text. And, sadly, there are many examples of argument, division, hatred and even killing in the name of a misused text.

Jesus is not just another voice among all the other

voices. He is not just one more point of view. He is the voice through which we make sense of all the other voices, accounts, stories, and perspectives. His birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension are the focus through which we understand all of the other material.

In the context of this statement by Jesus, he has just healed an invalid at the pool of Bethesda, which happens to be surrounded by five covered colonnades. The response to this? Appreciation, support, gratitude? No. The response is that people want to kill him – because the healing took place on the Sabbath. Then things get worse. Jesus tells them that "My Father is always at his works to this very day, and I, too, am working." The audience didn't miss what he was saying. Impossible! Unheard of! "Not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father making himself equal with God", the writer John tells us.²

Jesus was challenging them, telling them that they were not to judge him by the Sabbath, but that they were to judge the Sabbath by him. But, even more shocking and astonishing, and they got the message loud and clear – he was calling God his personal Father!³ He was saying that in him, the divine had come to

earth. Now that was just too much to contemplate.

And so he then goes on to tell them, as we have seen, that the Scriptures are about him, and that life is only found in relationship, fellowship, communion with him. Instead of responding to that invitation of fellowship, they killed him.

We read the Bible, and study it. However we don't worship the Bible, we worship the one whom the Bible is about – Jesus Christ. In coming into fellowship with him, he takes us into fellowship with the Father, which is life and love. We read the Bible as God intended it to be read – in and through Jesus Christ. 🌐

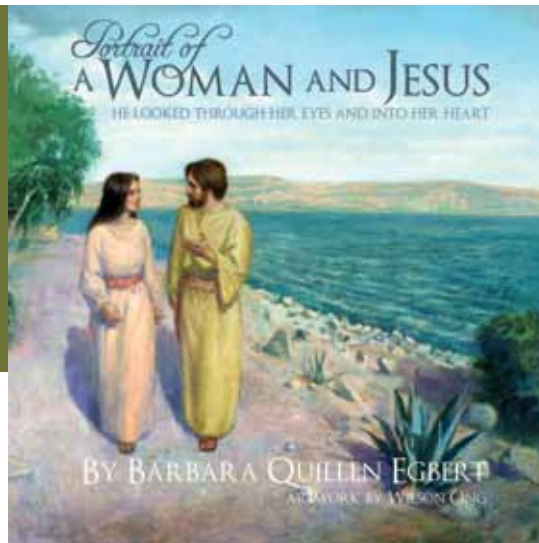
Endnotes

- 1 John 5: 39-40. See also Luke 24:25-27 and Hebrews 1:1-4
- 2 John 5:16-18
- 3 John 10:30. See also John 14:9, John 1:17-18, and Matthew 11:27

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.

Portrait of a woman and Jesus

Christian Odyssey interviews Barbara Quillen Egbert, who recently published *Portrait of a Woman and Jesus*.



About the artist: Wilson Jay Ong grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and received a BFA from Brigham Young University and afterward attended the Art Students' League. In addition to being a professional artist and illustrator since 1983, Wilson has taught art, presented workshops and exhibited his work nationally. He and his family currently live in Corning, New York.

Christian Odyssey: Why did you write *Portrait of a Woman and Jesus*?

Barbara Egbert: Over a decade ago, I had a vivid dream of a personal encounter with Jesus. During this period of my life, I was seeking a more intimate relationship with Jesus and began to explore the stories of his interaction with women. It occurred to me that the way my dream played out provided a unique structure for a book. I began to visualize the various encounters with Jesus by imagining how the scene was set up and what a painting that captured what the moment might look like when the eyes of the woman and Jesus met. Thus, the vision for the book was born and I began to write out of pure excitement.

CO: Many books have been written about women and Jesus. What's different about your work?

BE: It's the combination of artwork and text that draws readers into the stories of Jesus' encounters with women in an open, down-to-earth way. My goal was to present the reality of the lives of these biblical women as they dealt with the same issues that we deal with today—failing health, grief, shame, insignificance, loss, guilt and insecurity. By capturing visually what it might have looked like when “real” women with “real” issues met the “real” Son of God, I prayed that readers would relate to Scripture with a renewed perspective.

CO: You added what you call a “journeybook” to go with the main book. Tell us about that.

BE: My initial vision of the project was a book that highlights stories about women's encounters with Jesus. So *Portrait* demonstrates visually and through the text how “He looked through *her* eyes and into *her* heart.” But as I became acquainted with each biblical woman, there were many thoughts that surfaced in relation to how I personally identified with them. So I envisioned a companion book (a journeybook) that would help a reader deepen her relationship with Jesus by showing her that “He looks through *your* eyes and into *your* heart.”

Jesus desires restoration and wholeness in *all* areas of our lives, and the journeybook is a way of helping readers know him as their “all in all”—as Savior, Provider, Comforter, Redeemer, Forgiver and Friend.

CO: At US\$29.95 retail, some might feel the book is a bit expensive. Most “Bible help” type books are paperback, while *Portrait of a Woman and Jesus* is a quality coffee-table book. Why did you choose that format?

BE: It has always been my vision for the book to be a hardbound, coffee-table book that showcases full-color, high-quality artwork on glossy paper. The visual impact of the beautiful scenes of Jesus interacting with women underscores the scriptural account and text, impacting the reader in a fresh way. It gives me great joy to watch a reader open the book, smell the print, feel the glossy paper and “ooh and ahh” while leafing from page to page of artwork. “Wow! It's so beautiful!” is the most com-

mon response I hear.

CO: The illustrations are outstanding. What is the story behind that art?

BE: I didn't have a clue where to find an artist who could capture the visions in my head. But God knew! After the text was written, he led me to Wilson Ong, a gifted artist who identified with the life of Christ. It was important that the artwork convey the strength *and* kindness of Jesus, who was a Jewish carpenter and a teacher, and portray him as realistically as possible within the context of the time of the scriptural accounts.

It was so exciting to see the first round of pencil sketches of the scenes. My vision for the artwork was actually coming to life! After many months, the individual paintings were finally completed, surpassing my expectations. I love how the artist has captured Jesus present and engaged with each woman, looking at her with tenderness and compassion.

CO: How does one get a copy of *Portrait of a Woman and Jesus* and the journeybook?

BE: There are currently a couple ways to order the book and journeybook:

1. Amazon.com
2. through my publisher, New Voice Publications at nvpub.net

I would also like to invite *Odyssey* readers to visit my website, www.portraitofawoman.com, which provides contact information should they have any questions. ☺



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Mary's expression of devotion;
the deliverance of a crippled woman; a widow's two
small coins.



Whose hope What future?

by John Halford

THEY CALL IT “going viral.” Almost overnight a video, a news item, or perhaps a piece of music rockets from relative obscurity to universal recognition. It happened with Pachelbel’s *Canon in D Major*. He wrote it about 1680, but it lay forgotten for three centuries. Then, in about 1980, it began appearing everywhere—advertisements, background music to movies and TV series, and as an entrance march at weddings.

Scriptures can be like that, too. Like this one:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

You’ll find it buried in the writings of the Old Testament Prophet Jeremiah. In chapter 29, verse 11, to be precise.

I probably have read that verse many times since I began studying the Bible. But it never really stuck out. Then I began to see it everywhere. Christian ministries that focused on “health and wealth” loved it. It seemed to say exactly what they were offering—a gospel that promised the good life now. Never mind that it was from the Old Testament; it delivered the good news that God wanted to bless us and prosper us, and it was his plan to do so. No wonder the verse has become so popular.

The problem is, health and wealth now is not what this verse is about. To

read that into it is to wrench it out of context. I am not suggesting that it is not God’s ultimate will to prosper us and give us a bright future—that is a topic well worth exploring. But to use this verse to buttress that argument is to miss its real point, the one that really needs to be made today. Especially as our traditional Christianity is in decline, and many of our congregations are made up mainly of older people, clinging desperately to keep the faith alive.

So let’s let Jeremiah make his point. To do that, we first need to get the context.

The context

This verse is part of a letter that Jeremiah wrote about 2,500 years ago. Jeremiah, you remember, was a prophet that God sent to the people of ancient Judah to urge them to mend their ways and turn back to him to avoid national ruin.

It was a thankless task. Jeremiah was ignored, ridiculed and put in prison. Then the wheels came off. The Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah, executed most of the royal family and took the elite of the nation—its priests, nobility, scholars and other leaders—into exile in Babylon. The nation was stripped of talent and leadership.

Jeremiah, because he had foretold the Babylonian victory, was well

treated by the invaders and allowed to stay in Jerusalem. He continued to minister to his people—not by crowing, “I told you so,” but with messages of comfort and compassion.

Meanwhile, the exiles in Babylon were restless. After the initial shock of deportation, it seems they lived in relative freedom. But like all exiles, they yearned to return to their homeland. Some of the exiled priests took advantage of the situation and began preaching that the exile would soon be over and the captives would soon be repatriated.

However, a quick return to the homeland was not what God had in mind. He inspired Jeremiah to write to the exiles and explain to them the reality of their situation. That letter is preserved in the Bible:

“This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.’

“Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty,

ope?

Even in captivity the Israelites had work to do. A foundation had to be laid on which the future generations of the chosen people could rebuild.

the God of Israel, says: 'Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,' declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 29:4-9).

This was not what the exiles wanted to hear. God was telling them, through this prophet they had repudiated, but whose warnings had been validated, that they should not expect an early return home.

How long would this state of affairs last? "This is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.'"

And then comes the oft-misapplied verse:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you" (verses 10-12).

God was not abandoning his people. Everything he had promised would eventually happen.

"I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile" (verse 14).

But not just yet. The generation that had been taken captive was not going home any time soon. It would not happen until their grandchildren were mature adults. So they needed to face facts, settle down, make Babylon their home, reestablish their

families, start businesses and work for—not against—the best interests of their captors.

It seems as though the captives listened to Jeremiah this time. Some, such as Daniel and his three famous friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, rose to positions of great influence in the Babylonian government and became trusted advisors to Nebuchadnezzar. And when the 70 years were fulfilled, some leading Jews were allowed to return to reestablish their nation—the nation to which the Messiah would eventually come.

With that as a background, let's look at this verse again.

Hope deferred

God was not promising the exiles in Babylon immediate relief from their circumstances. He was telling them that he had not forgotten them. They were still the "chosen people," and their nation did indeed have a hope and a future. And even though the vast majority of them would not see that hope fulfilled in their lifetimes, they had a responsibility toward it.

Many people reading this article are older. Perhaps we have been Christians for decades, working, praying and contributing to the life of the church. We have lived with the expectation that our work would be crowned with success. Our congregations would thrive and our influence would grow. Many of us have lived with the very real hope that we were the "end time" generation who would see the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. That expectation provided an impetus that motivated us to make extraordinary sacrifices. We wanted to



be ready. But as the years have gone by and our understanding has grown, we have accepted the strong likelihood that we are not that generation. So what do we do now?

We are a people not used to delaying gratification. We buy now and pay later. Advertising tell us "we deserve" it and "owe it to ourselves" to get what we want, do what we want and be what we want, when we want it. So when we read that God wants us to have "hope and a future," we want it now. And if it looks like that won't happen, it is tempting to lose interest and let the world and its needs pass us by.

Yes, the economy is in trouble, the environment needs attention, the spiritual state of our nations is decaying, our congregations are dwindling and religion, as we have known it, is on the ropes. Well, all that will probably not change in your lifetime. Maybe you should just sit it out.

It is just as well the captives in Babylon did not think like that. They did as Jeremiah instructed. Those captives had no mandate to give up and drop out. The dream was not over—they had work to do. A foundation had to be laid on which the future

generations of chosen people could be established. They listened, and out of what seemed like a hopeless situation, the nation was eventually restored. Then, “when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son” (Galatians 4:4).

Jeremiah’s letter, put in its proper context, should resonate with us. Things have not worked out quite as we expected, but God still has expectations of us, just as he did those ancient captives in Babylon. They were a part of the story—the epic saga of how God was redeeming the world in his Son, Jesus Christ.

We are a part of that same story. As Jesus explained to his disciples,

“others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor” (John 4:38). There are times when the activity is intense and “the harvest is plentiful” (Matthew 9:37). At other times it may look as if not much is happening, and we must remember “how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains” (James 5:7).

“So let’s not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don’t give up, or quit” (Galatians 6:9). 🌐

The problem is, health and wealth now is not what this verse is about. To read that into it is to wrench it out of context.

The abundant life

by Barbara Dahlgren

CHRIST CAME SO we might have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). Some modern preachers want us to believe this refers to wealth and prosperity, so they urge people to go boldly before God and claim this promised abundance. To them, faith is measured by how much God blesses us materially.

However, the God revealed in the Bible is not some big “sugar daddy” in the sky, ready to give us everything we want. We may prayerfully sing, “Oh Lord, won’t you give me a Mercedes Benz?” and we might get it, but that doesn’t mean God gave it to us.

Jesus said that a man’s life does not consist of the abundance of the things he might possess (Luke 12:15). He said we should seek first the kingdom of God, and told us not to be greatly concerned about material possessions (Matthew 6:31-33).

Now don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying the abundant life Jesus calls us to precludes riches or worldly success, but it does not depend on them, either.

Paul knew this better than anyone. He knew how to be abased or exalted, have a full tummy or an empty one, to abound or suffer—and through it all be content and give thanks (see Philippians 4:11-13 and Ephesians 5:20). In other words, we can experience the abundant life even if we are poor as church mice and struggling through all the trials life can throw at us.

John 10:10 tells us the reason Jesus came was so we could have life, referring to “eternal” life, or the life of the age to come. The phrase “more abundantly” is the Greek word *perissos*, meaning “beyond, more, and above measure.” It refers back to the word

“life.” Not only does Jesus promise a future abundant life, but he also gives it to us now—he lives his life within us right now. His very presence in us adds something immeasurable to our existence. He is what makes our life worth living in spite of how much money we have or don’t have in the bank.

If we read the whole passage of John 10, we see it’s about Jesus being our shepherd, we sheep hearing his voice, and Jesus being our open door. The context refers to having a positive relationship with God. And that, my friend, is what the more abundant life is all about. Not only do we get eternal life but as an added bonus we have the opportunity to build a relationship with Jesus Christ—the very one who makes it all possible.

Man views abundance in terms of physical possessions. God has a different perspective.

Man views abundance in terms of physical possessions. God has a different perspective. His abundant life is filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, self-control, compassion, humility, character, wisdom, enthusiasm, dignity, optimism, confidence, honesty, and a relationship with him. In other words, the more abundant life is full of all the things money can’t buy. No matter how much money you have, you cannot buy more patience, wisdom, hope, self-control, or salvation!

Money cannot buy us a “more abundant” life, but God gives it to us if we let him. The more we open our hearts to God, the more abundant our lives will be. 🌐

Mozambique

by Tim Maguire

ADVENTURE



*I expected
our trip to
Mozambique to
be challenging.
What I didn't
expect was that
my assistant
would be
arrested before
we had hardly
started!*

I HAD ASKED A friend, pastor Daniel Fernandes from Lisbon, Portugal, to accompany me as translator in Portuguese-speaking Mozambique. Daniel had arrived in Johannesburg that morning, and we left immediately, full of excitement, expectation and hope. But the moment we crossed from South Africa into Zimbabwe on our way to Mozambique, the Zimbabwean border police arrested him. It was not a promising start.

But I am getting ahead of my story. Why were we going to Mozambique?

Domingos Rede

Mozambique is a former Portuguese colony, situated on the eastern coast of southern Africa. It is one of the poorest countries in the world. About 10 years ago, Domingos Rede, a teacher in Mozambique, felt God calling him to preach to the people of Mozambique. He left his profession and enrolled in a theological college. He built a small church out of mud bricks and grass in his home town and started evangelizing even before finishing his formal studies. He called his fellowship "Maranatha Action Church" (M.A.C.).



hungry. Wherever he went, many responded to his message. After seven years M.A.C. had 54 congregations in the central and northern Mozambique provinces of Manica, Sofala, Tete and Zambesia.

In 2007, Domingos attended a non-denominational conference in South Africa where he met one of our GCI pastors, Caleb Makhela. They exchanged telephone numbers but did not keep in touch. About two years later in October 2009, Domingos felt moved to travel to Cape Town, South Africa, and preach there. He could give no logical explanation as to why, and he had no money to make the nearly 3000-kilometer journey. He sold his mobile phone for bus fare and set out. After traveling through Zimbabwe and into South Africa, he arrived in a little town called Louis Trichardt. He remembered that Caleb lived close to Louis Trichardt, and he still had his phone number. So he gave him a call, asking if Caleb could put him up for the night.

As pastors do, Caleb and Domingos started chatting theology. Caleb gave Domingos our booklets titled *Statement of Beliefs, Transformed by Truth*, and *An Introduction to Trinitarian Theology*. Domingos stayed up all night reading. The following day he explained to Caleb that he and his church board had been praying that God lead them to a fellowship with a sound theology that would be willing to affiliate with them and provide them guidance, structure, governance and accountability. Until he read GCI's literature, he had not found a fellowship whose theology he fully agreed with. He told Caleb that he wanted to meet with the GCI leadership in South Africa. and discuss the possibility of affiliating with us.

Looking for a spiritual home

When I met with Domingos, I was at first skeptical. So often in Africa, churches want to affiliate with larger organizations for financial gain. I told Domingos that if he was looking for money, he had come knocking on the wrong door. In fact, if he affiliated with us, he would fall under our financial model and would probably have to pay a portion of Mozambique's income to our National Office. (At that stage I had not fully realized just how poor Mozambique really was). He never blinked, just insisting that all he was looking for was training, governance and accountability. He didn't want his church to go the way of so many others in Africa, where the leader introduced his own thoughts on theology and led his flock astray, or where it became focused on the leader rather than God.

I also explained to Domingos that affiliation was not something that we rushed into. We would go through an "engagement" period to see if we were compatible and if both groups got along. I suggested that he go back and explain the situation to his board, and that I would do the same. Then I would travel to Mozambique and visit his churches personally.

In February 2010, Caleb Makhela and I went to Mozambique to meet Domingos on his home ground. We traveled the country with him, visiting and speaking in 44 churches over 10 days. The welcome we received at each congregation was truly heart-warming, and the spiritual unity was overwhelming.

It was only then that the poverty of the country really hit home to me. All the members are subsistence farmers, growing maize, which when ground and boiled makes up their staple diet. This is



Domingos was an evangelist in the truest sense. He and his family would move into a village where he hoped to plant a church. They would build themselves a small hut from branches, mud and thatch, and live and work among the villagers, telling them through action and word of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Three or four months later, he would move on, leaving behind a small church, cared for by an appointed deacon and served by one of his regional pastors. He had no means of income, but God always provided, even though they did at times go to bed



Water was collected from a river several kilometers away. Providing enough was a continual challenge, as was feeding the group.

their breakfast and dinner, cooked without salt or any other spice or sauce. Lunch is unheard of. Their only drink is water, drawn from a local river or one of the boreholes the government has installed in certain regions. Perhaps once a fortnight they slaughter a chicken, which provides a little protein to their diet. On one occasion we were presented with “tea,” which was simply boiled water with a teaspoon of sugar added. But these people were sincere and genuine and they did want to be associated with us.

We decided that we would formalize our association in August 2010, when Domingos was to have attended a pastoral training session in South Africa. The day before I left to attend the international GCI conference, in July, in the USA, I phoned him to check that he had received the funds that I had wired to cover his travel expenses. He wished me a safe trip, and told me that he and the members in Mozambique would be praying for a successful conference.

Shocking news

When I arrived in Orlando, I was shocked and saddened to learn that Domingos had passed away, probably due to a malaria relapse. Not only had I lost a good friend, but I had lost our channel of communication with Mozambique, since the primary language there is Portuguese. Domingos was the only member in Mozambique who spoke any English.

Thanks to 21st-century technology, however, I was able to use Blackberry and Google translation programs to reply to the frantic messages from those Domingos left behind in Mozambique. I reassured them that our relationship would continue and that I would see them again as soon as it could be arranged. I was able to return to Mozambique in September 2010, when with the advice and approval of their church board, I appointed Pastor Mariano Binzi as their new leader. Even though the affiliation process had not yet been formalized, they already considered themselves fully GCI.

One thing I realized on my first visit was the importance of training the pastors in basic theology. Some of the Mozambican pastors did not even have Bibles when I first met them. Since then, we have provided them with Bibles, and with the generous help of our Canadian churches, we have been able to plan a pastoral training program. We have also been able to bring in a leader and translator from our small congregation in Portugal. Enter Daniel Fernandes, who is originally from Mozambique, although he left as a young child.

Arrested

I picked up Daniel from the Johannesburg airport at 6 a.m. on the Wednesday before Easter and left immediately for Louis Trichardt, where we picked up Caleb Makhela. The three of us then set out for Mutare in Zimbabwe, where we could spend the night at the home of one of our Zimbabwean pastors, Emmerson Gova.

At the Beitbridge border-post, we stood in queues for about five hours. As we were finally cleared to drive into Zimbabwe, Daniel was greeted with his first African sunset. He took out his camera and snapped two pictures of trees with the sun setting behind them.

Unfortunately, we were still in a restricted area where cameras were not allowed, and the Zimbabwe CID pounced, arresting him

on the spot. They took him into a back room, confiscated his passport and camera, and told him he would have to appear before a magistrate the next day.

I realized what the border officials were really after when they started rubbing thumb and forefinger together! I told them we were pastors and were unwilling to pay any sort of bribe. I also threatened to phone the Portuguese embassy. This was more trouble than they wanted, so they made Daniel delete the pictures, and we were on our way again. We arrived at Pastor Gova's home some time after midnight, waking him by throwing stones onto his roof!

Overflow

We left Mutare early the next morning, traveling through into Mozambique and eventually arriving in Morrumbala, in northern Mozambique, just before midnight on Thursday. Most of the conference attendees had already arrived and were dancing the night away in praise and worship. After a warm and touching welcome, we crept off to our hut to sleep. The music and dancing continued into the early hours of the morning. African Christians know a lot about the joy of salvation.

The next day we found that instead of the 54 delegates we were expecting, more than 350 had arrived! They had brought their reed mats with them and most were sleeping under the stars, without even blankets to keep them warm. What a humbling experience to see this thirst and sacrifice for understanding.

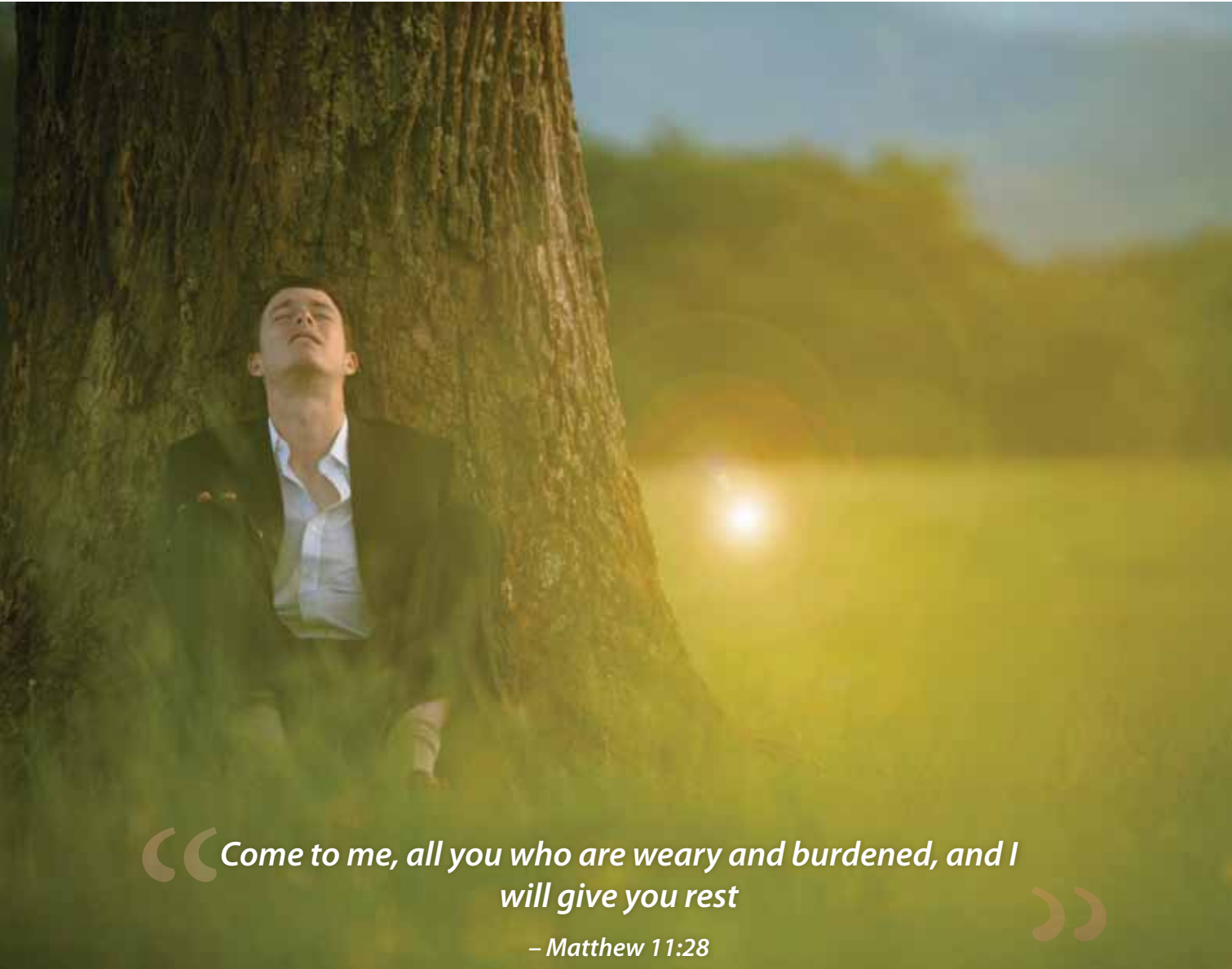
We also discovered that since my last visit in September 2010, an additional 33 churches had been planted, bringing the total to 87 congregations. Even without Domingos, the spreading of the gospel in Mozambique was continuing.

We spent the next four days in fellowship, song, praise and teaching. The Mozambican leaders hungrily drank in and accepted all we had to say. On Sunday, in a deeply moving ceremony, we formalized the affiliation and welcomed our brothers and sisters from Mozambique into the GCI fellowship. We took communion with them, which was a first-time experience for most.

Prayer

Please remember to pray for our brothers and sisters in Mozambique. The challenges they face are many. There is little or no formal transport system, making it very difficult for our leaders there to visit churches and members. Bicycles are often used to travel hundreds of kilometers over rugged terrain. Disease is rife. The average life expectancy is at least 20 years below the world average. It is one of the poorest countries in the world. We now have about 2500 members there, not one of whom are employed or have any means of income. They are all subsistence farmers and live day-to-day, hand-to-mouth, scratching a living out of the harsh African soil.

The Bibles we give them are their most valued possessions, and they are hungry for more knowledge and understanding. I continually find their joy and love a source of great inspiration, and a radiant reminder of what our faith is all about. Their hearts and prayers are with all their new brothers and sisters around the world, as I know yours are with them! ☺



“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest

– Matthew 11:28

Hmmm ...

A person's mind stretched to a new idea never goes back to its original dimensions.
– Oliver Wendell Holmes

All language about the future, as any economist or politician will tell you, is simply a set of signposts pointing into a fog.
– N.T. Wright

Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self: you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, etc.) thinks you are. How would my life change if I truly believed the Bible's astounding words about God's love for me, if I looked in the mirror and saw what God sees?
– Philip Yancey

Love does not dominate; it cultivates.
– Johan Wolfgang von Goethe

In teaching the study of political science, you rarely come across persons who believe that they know what political science is. Students generally understand that when they walk into the political science classroom, they are going to study a subject about which they know very little. The same is true for many other academic disciplines. However, when it comes to religion, part of the process of learning means unlearning those things that are either misguided or wrong.... When you are forced to look at your faith seriously, you begin to know who you really are. In more academic terms, challenges to your faith help you form identity.

– Michael Joseph Brown, *What They Don't Tell You: A Survivor's Guide to Biblical Studies*

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