



Spiritual  
Formation  
on the Run

*Meditations to Grow  
the Busy Life*

*Alex Tang*





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Dedicated to  
my beloved  
wife and anamcara,  
*Agnes*



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# Foreword

**T**he busy life – “life in the fast lane” – is a reality for most Christians in Malaysia and Singapore. As I write this foreword, many are fearing the impact of the recent dramatic international financial failures on their standard of living and assets. They are wondering how to respond to the social and ethical issues which are getting significant airtime – euthanasia, the sale/purchase of human organs, and housing options for foreign labourers (we want them to work for us, but not live in our neighbourhood). How to develop and sustain relationships of quality poses ongoing challenges. Overall, life is much more complex than we can readily cope with, and is moving much faster than most of us can manage without some level of stress.

But is this inevitable? Inescapable? Those who claim the expansive resources of the living Jesus Christ should demonstrate how to “live life with a difference in the routines” (Robert Banks) by expressing a spirituality which is earthed in the realities of contemporary society and culture, and which mirrors a theology which has something significant to say in the various arenas of life – all because of the strength of connection with the Triune God.

For several years, I have been aware of Alex Tang’s passion to encourage Christians to appreciate and practise a relevant spirituality for the busy life, and so strengthen their connection with God. Through his articles, books, blogs, teaching and preaching, Alex

continually challenges simplistic and consumerist expressions of Christian spirituality, and exhorts Christians to draw on the wealth of their religious tradition as they seek to live with integrity in the present. *Spiritual Formation on the Run* is a further element in Alex's prodigious output.

As you read through the chapters of this book, you will come to appreciate how Alex himself struggles to "live life with a difference in the routines" in his own busy and multi-faceted life. This shows up explicitly in some of the chapters and less obviously in others. But as Alex shares his own journey with God chapter by chapter, allow this to be a mirror to highlight the focus of your life and your deepening spirituality. This is what lies at the heart of *lectio divina*.

The value of this book will come as you slowly read a chapter, mull over the idea(s) expressed, and allow God to inform your thinking and reform your values, attitudes and perspectives. If that happens, Alex may be justifiably satisfied that his effort in putting this book together has been worthwhile.

**Dr Allan Harkness**

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November 2008

# Preface

We are a people in a hurry. Having survived the dangerous rush of parents hurrying to pick up their children after school in Kuala Lumpur; the dangerous crush of Japanese salary-persons during peak hours in a Tokyo subway; and the dangerous dash of diners heading for a free buffet meal in Singapore, I can attest that many of us live our lives very much on the run. Is there a place in the midst of busyness for spiritual formation, a discipline often associated with monks in their mountain-top monasteries, free from the cares and rush of the world, devoting themselves to Bible reading, meditation and prayer? Is spiritual formation simply out of the question for the rest of us mortals? It is my conviction that we can be spiritually formed to the “image of Christ” in our busy, hurried lives. What we need are habits of spirituality.

One of these spiritual habits (also called spiritual disciplines) is *lectio divina*, which is Latin for “spiritual reading.” *Lectio divina* is not a practice that is thought to belong solely to the Roman Catholics or the Greek Orthodox churches. *Lectio divina* has been practised for 1500 years, way before the Church separated into its different traditions. This discipline, developed by the Desert Fathers and Mothers who lived from the early to the mid-fourth century as a means to pray and meditate on the Bible and other spiritual texts, is a part of our Christian heritage. The idea is to let the Holy Spirit speak to us through the texts.

*Lectio divina* opens us up to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It comprises four movements:

1. Reading/listening (*lectio*)
2. Meditating (*meditatio*)
3. Praying (*oratio*)
4. Contemplation (*contemplatio*)

The meditations and stories in this book are specifically written for the busy Christian to do *lectio divina* on the run. Though normally employed in the reading of the Bible, especially the Gospels, the practice of *lectio divina* may also be adopted for books like this one. Each chapter in this book is short and independent, and may be approached in any order. I suggest that the reader spend about four to five days on each chapter.

As you begin your *lectio divina*, read and enjoy the chapter. You may read it a few times. You may want to read it aloud; this will slow down your reading (so many of us are speed readers or scanners). Reading aloud also allows you to listen to the text.

Then you may want to meditate on the chapter. Meditation may sound scary, evoking images of a person with eyes closed, sitting in a lotus position and doing nothing in particular. Meditation actually involves thinking about a matter, looking at it from different angles, and being totally absorbed in it. When I think of meditating, I think of my dog eating a long bone. My dog loves the succulent marrow in the bone. To reach it, though, he has to patiently gnaw on the bone until it cracks. It is the same with meditation; you need to “chew” on the text. Ask yourself these questions as you meditate:

- What is the chapter saying?
- What spiritual truths may I get from this chapter?
- What are the different layers of meaning that this chapter offers?

Spend one or two days on the reading and meditation. You can reflect on the chapter when you are driving, working or waiting in queue in a bank. By the end of one or two days, you will remember most of what is in the chapter. Keep asking yourself the above questions; this is better than being preoccupied with iPhones and Blackberries.

When you think that you have extracted the treasures from the chapter, pray about them.

- Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal more truths.
- Talk to God about what you have discovered.  
You may want to thank Him or register a complaint.
- Ask God to help you use the spiritual truths you have discovered.

You can pray anywhere about anything. Though you should have specific times of prayer, imitate the Apostle Paul and pray continuously. Share with God what you have discovered. It is now socially acceptable to be seen talking to yourself; people will assume you have a hands-free phone on and are talking into it.

After reading, meditating and praying, contemplate. Contemplation may sound scary too, but it is nothing more than applying the spiritual truths to your life. Contemplation helps you to get closer to God. Ask yourself the following questions in your contemplation:

- How can I apply what I have learnt in my life today?
- What concrete steps should I take to make it work?
- How will doing so help me know God better?

Busyness is not an excuse to neglect the spiritual formation of your soul. In fact, the busier you are, the more you need spiritual formation. May you find this book helpful and edifying.

*Soli deo gloria* (Glory to God Alone)

**Alex Tang**

October 2008



CHOOSE  
TO  
GROW





# Come Away Before You Come Apart



Silence and solitude are important spiritual disciplines that we all must cultivate. Henri Nouwen observed that many of our ministries progress in a certain pattern. We start off in a new ministry with enthusiasm, but eventually face frustrations in our work. Then we ask certain people whom we think can help us to come to our aid but, in the process, problems are created. Following this we pray to God to help us solve these problems. Much of our lives is a vicious cycle of hustle and bustle.

Jesus, during his early ministry, took time out for silence and solitude. We, too, need these breaks because our bodies are not built for constant stress.

What are some benefits of a time of silence and solitude? First, we will develop a discerning spirit. We get to know the Holy Spirit better when we are silent and when we are alone, as there is no distraction. There is time to think and reflect. This will sharpen our spiritual discernment.

Second, our prayers will become more natural, unhurried and meaningful. Our prayers become a conversation rather than a shopping list. They become the second word, as we speak to God. The first word is when God speaks to us.

Third, silence and solitude make us more sensitive to people. After a time alone, we drop our social armours, masks and walls. We

discover that constant interactions with people can make us callous and insensitive. A time of silence and solitude can help us see our indifference.

Finally, silence and solitude help us to face our death. This may seem strange, but we all die alone. Silence and solitude help us to come to terms with ourselves and make us more aware of our own mortality.

It was said that Abba Agathon, a Desert Father, lived for three years with a stone in his mouth until he learnt to keep silent.

What one discovers in the virtue of silence (*hesychia*) is patience. It is in silence and stillness that we develop attentiveness and awareness. Through this we arrive at self-knowledge. The Desert Fathers and Mothers were very aware of the importance of silence.

Through the spiritual discipline of silence, we also learn to hear, be aware of, and be sensitive to what is happening around and within us. Silence is not the absence of sounds, of words, and of voices. It is the pause between sounds, between words, and between voices. It makes sense of what is spoken and what is unspoken. Silence is also the thread that holds our words and our actions. It is not an absence that makes silence, but the fullness of a presence.

We use words to justify ourselves, to defend our actions, to extend our influence, and to define our self-identity. Silence deconstructs us. Silence is a dying to self. Silence is a way of surrendering self in the hope of a resurrection.

Abba Alonius, another Desert Father, said, “If I had not destroyed myself completely, I would not have been able to rebuild and reshape myself again.”

Silence never comes easy. We are always impatient to speak. Have you even wondered why we need to speak? What motivates our speech?

Abba Poemen, yet another Desert Father, said, “Someone may seem to be silent, but if in the heart one is condemning others, then one is babbling ceaselessly. And there may be another who talks from morning till evening, and yet in the heart that person is truly silent. That person says nothing that is not profitable.”

It is said that the language of God is silence – the language we shall speak in heaven. Is that why we find it so difficult to speak it here on earth? Many of us associate silence and solitude with a retreat, but we can practise these disciplines without going on a retreat. Yes, a retreat will be an ideal place for prolonged silence and solitude, and all of us should aim to spend some time every year in a spiritual retreat. However, we can also have silence and solitude in our everyday life. It is possible to create a few minutes of silence and solitude in the midst of a busy and hectic day. Just find a place away from the noise and buzz, and reach into the silent place within us. Building such a silent place takes time, but with practice it is possible to find a Sabbath of peace and refreshing within the few minutes that we take off to centre ourselves. Take a long and solitary walk every day or as often as you can. Take a walk with a friend and agree not to say anything. You can also decide to spend a day of silence in your home or check yourself into a hotel. Lock yourself in the bathroom. There are many other ways to find silence and solitude even in a busy life. It is a matter of whether we want to do it or not.

# The Habit of Familiarity



It is said that when the Great Library of Alexandria burnt down, only one book survived the great fire. This book was a very ordinary one, with neither leather binding nor gold lettering. It was a plain paperback, dog-eared, and yellowed with age. When found among the ashes of the library, it was thought to have no value. It was sold for a pittance to a poor man who barely knew how to read. This plain book, however, was probably the most valuable book in the world. Towards the end of the book were a few sentences that pointed to the secret of immortality or eternal life.

That secret was a tiny pebble, which, if ingested, would give a person eternal life! The book declared that this precious pebble lay somewhere along the beaches of Desaru, facing the South China Sea in the southern tip of the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. This pebble lay among thousands of pebbles that were exactly like it, except for one thing. All the other pebbles were cold to the touch in the morning; this one felt warm, almost as if it were alive.

The man who bought the book discovered this secret of immortality and rejoiced at his good luck. He sold everything he had, borrowed a large sum of money, and travelled to the Far East. He found his way to Peninsular Malaysia, booked a room at a hotel in Desaru, and began his search for the priceless pebble. He worked out a search grid and systematically set about his task. Every morning, he

would go to an assigned search area. He would then pick up a pebble. If it was cold to the touch, he would not throw it back to the shoreline because if he did that, he might inadvertently examine the same pebble over and over again. Instead, he would throw it into the South China Sea. So, for hours each day, he would continue in this routine: pick up a pebble; if it felt cold, throw it into the sea; lift another... and so on, endlessly. He spent a week, a month, a year, doing this. The years wore on in his quest for eternal life. His money ran out and he had to borrow some more. He received a special discount from the hotel he stayed in for being a long-staying customer. On and on his search went: pick up a pebble, hold it, feel it, if cold, throw it into the sea, lift another. Hour after hour, day after day, week after week... still no pebble of immortality.

One evening, he picked up a pebble and it was warm to the touch – but through sheer force of habit, he threw it into the South China Sea!

How many of us, through sheer force of habit, accidentally throw away our precious pebbles of eternal life? I am referring to the Holy Scripture and how, through continual exposure to it daily, weekly, monthly, we become so familiar with it that all the precious words of wisdom and knowledge that can give us eternal life become as common as the pebbles on the beaches of Desaru. Hearing the Word of God read aloud during Sunday worship has become so familiar, so routine, that we no longer hear but wait for a reading to be over so that we can get on with our service. Hearing the Word of God preached from the pulpit whether as a sermon or a homily is another familiar routine. We listen for the jokes and the mistakes the preacher makes, and think of our next meal. We understand what the preacher is saying yet the pebble feels cold to the touch. Some of us even listen to sermons and talks on our MP3 players. Yet the listening has become

so familiar that we often miss a warm pebble because we are so used to throwing away cold pebbles. This also applies to our daily devotion or quiet time, the time we have decided to set aside to spend with God. After a period, this too becomes a familiar, routine habit. We begin to find that it is harder and harder to feel warm pebbles because there are so many cold pebbles. Could it be that we have been throwing away the warm pebbles? Let me suggest a way to avoid throwing away warm pebbles accidentally; we must ask ourselves three questions:

1. When is the most important time?
2. Who is the most important person?
3. What is the most important thing to do?

Pause now and write down the answers to these three questions.

The answers to these questions are found in the Bible. Yet, how often have we missed them because of our familiarity with them? The most important time is now. Though the Bible has a strong emphasis on continuity with the past and a strong eschatological component (the future), its emphasis has always been living in the present. What is important is our encounter with the living Christ in this present moment of our life. Now is important.

The answer to the second question is Jesus Christ. He is the most important person because He is the author and perfecter of our faith. Because we use the name “Jesus Christ” so often, we have turned it into a “common” word and do not attach much emotion or relevance to it. Ending our prayers “in Jesus’ name” has now become a formula. In becoming so familiar with the name of Jesus, we often forget that He is the most important person in our life.

The most important thing to do is to love. The Bible is a love story – between God and his people. Jesus came to show God’s love for



us. Paul taught us how to love one another in community. Yet, we have become so familiar with reading about love that we do not get out of our chair and love. Do we love our spouse, our children, our family, our co-workers, our church, our community, and our country? How have we shown it today? Love is in the doing, not in the talking.

# The Scourge of Disposables



Then Jesus told this parable, “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

“‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down’” (Luke 13:6-9).

We live in an age in which almost everything is disposable and readily replaceable. In the past, things were made to last. Houses had solid walls that would break a nail if you should try to hammer it in. Nowadays, pieces of the wall will probably fall out if you try to do the same thing. In Japan, I have seen disposable hand phones being used and discarded daily as a fashion statement. All one has to do is change the SIM card. We are all consumers in a throwaway age.

The scourge of disposables has infiltrated our culture and influenced the way we treat people. We see people as assets, commodities and investments. These are financial terms and underlie our perception of people as things that either add or take away value. Things are disposable and replaceable. People who do not meet sales targets are dismissed with disdain for their abilities. Students who do not do well in examinations are shunted to the “weaker” classes. Handouts

are given to the handicapped but rarely a job offer. And those who are over the retirement age are given a handshake, a watch, and shown the door (unless they own the company, of course!). People are judged by their abilities to achieve or pass examinations, and by their physical capabilities and the social perception of the frailties of age. Those who do not measure up are disposed of and replaced by others, who are expected to provide value.

The toxin of disposables has also permeated our churches and our spiritual life. Our spirituality has become one that demands fast results. Disciples of Jesus Christ are mass produced by completing the course requirements of classes in discipleship 101, 201, and 301. After an evangelistic rally, we “count decisions for Christ,” as if totalling sales after a trade exhibition. A well-known Christian leader has estimated that 80% of stress to a pastor comes from 20% of the congregation. He advised pastors to avoid these people, and associate with those who give them the least stress. No longer are Christian leaders advised to walk with those who do not show any “signs of growth.” If, after a short period together, they do not show any change, these leaders are advised to go to others who are more “receptive.” The early Church Fathers understood spiritual growth as a lifelong process of salvation. Modern church leaders, however, call for instant “conversion.” If there is not, send the people away and do not waste time on them. As the vineyard owner in the parable exclaimed, “Why should it use up the soil?”

The man who took care of the vineyard was not willing to give up on the fig tree yet. He knew that for the fig tree to bear fruit there must be certain essentials – the loosening of the soil, the application of fertiliser, and time. These ingredients are as essential in horticulture as in our spiritual life.

Much of our spiritual life is hidden below the surface of our everyday life, like the roots of a fig tree. Sometimes, because of bad

experiences and traumatic emotional issues, areas of our spiritual life are tightly packed, like the soil around the roots of some plants. These compact areas keep out oxygen, minerals and other nutrients that give life. These tightly packed areas make us feel safe because we do not have to face the demons in them. These demons – anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, self-righteousness – are out of sight, and hopefully out of mind. These compact areas are known as the hardness of our heart. Unfortunately, these compact areas exclude the love of Christ and stunt our spiritual growth. That is why the farmer has to dig around the roots and loosen the soil so that adequate aeration and nutrients may reach the roots. In our spiritual life, we too have to release and drive off the demons of anger, bitterness, unforgiveness and self-righteousness. The early Church Fathers called this the purgative stage of our spiritual growth. It is the loosening and shaking that prepares us for spiritual growth.

The farmer next added fertiliser to provide essential nutrients for growth. The nutrients of spiritual growth are the Word of God, the empowering of the Holy Spirit, and the Christian faith communities. The nutrition of the Word of God is not that we read, study or memorise the written text. It is the Word of God reading, studying and memorising us! It is immersion and assimilation. This, together with the empowering of the Holy Spirit, is illuminative, which is the next stage of spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is relational and occurs within a Trinitarian shalom, or peace, in a church community. The tree, the soil and the fertiliser become a holistic matrix of growth.

True growth takes time. It is important to recognise this. The man who took care of the vineyard understood this, and thus was willing to stake his reputation with the vineyard owner. In spiritual growth there is nothing disposable. Everything that takes place is precious and irreplaceable. We cannot take away anything because

everything that has happened to us, whether positive or negative, makes us who we are. Spiritual growth takes place when we redeem all our experiences by washing them with the blood of Christ. This transformative action takes time. The early Church Fathers recognised this stage as “unitive” in the sense that in our redemption, we unite with God.

Jesus Christ is the caretaker of the vineyard who has saved us from being marked for destruction by His saving work on the cross.

# A Fishing Story



**Jesus said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat...”**

**Y**es, Lord Jesus, that is good. By all means, throw the net on the right side of the boat. You know where the fish are. I am comfortable with that. Hey, I know someone in this church who can help you. He is big, strong and friendly. He will have no problem pulling in the net for you. I also know a sister in this church who is willing to go net casting with you. Me, nah! You know I am so busy with my work, my family and my life. I have no time for fishing. I am doing well in my work, and you know I have no gifting in throwing nets. I do not want to get a callus on my hand. And fishing is such sweaty work. So let me sit here in my air-conditioned life and watch you guys fish. Hey, you guys, Jesus said, the right side of the boat, not the left, the right.

**Jesus said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat...”**

You still want me to use my hands to throw the net? I hear you, Jesus, but I am not ready yet. Maybe in another 10 years when I have achieved my asset management target, when my children have graduated from

university, and when I am not so busy in my social life. What do you mean now? You are not listening. Hey, would you like a new net? I know a Mark 2, super-light monofilament net. Latest and best in the market for catching fish. I can buy one for you.

**Jesus said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat...”**

Yes, Lord Jesus. I hear you. “Throw the net...” I hear you well. You know, I always listen to you. Your Sermon on the Mount. You know, I think it is the greatest. I have it on MP3 and have been listening to it on my iPod. Awesome sermon, man. But I know you do not mean it, right? Blessing the meek and turning the other cheek. Hey, we have to protect ourselves. We have our rights, you know. You do not really expect us to follow everything you said, right? Some of the things you said are meant as an ideal for us to follow, right? Maybe the part about persistent asking and you will give, now that is real. I have been asking for a raise in my salary and good health without having to exercise. I know you will answer because you have promised you will answer persistent prayers. What, you meant you want us to obey everything you taught! Man, you are kidding, right?

**Jesus said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish (John 21:6).**

# A Burning Bush



If you are driving along the North South Highway and see a bush that is burning, yet is not consumed by the fire, what will you do?

1. Whip out your handphone and call the fire department;
2. Ignore it and drive by to your next appointment;
3. Slow down, get out of the car, join the rest of the crowd to see the spectacular free show;
4. Recognise the presence of God?

While knowing our civic duty to call the fire department, most of us will not do so. We do not want to get “involved.” Someone else will call, that is our justification. However, that may not stop us from calling our friends to tell them about the fire. Many of us will ignore the burning bush and just drive on. We are always in a hurry, and there is so much to do and so little time to do it. Some will get out to look at the burning bush. “How do they create this special effect?” — they may wonder. “Are they making a movie?” Very few will recognise the presence of God and even fewer will move close enough to hear the voice of God, as Moses did (Exodus 3:4).

What we choose to do is a reflection of our spirituality. Many of us have the “do not get involved” attitude. Let someone else do it. We



know we are to love our neighbours (Mark 12:31), but let us not get too involved. Many too suffer from the “hurry” syndrome. We spend our days rushing from one task to another, filling our lives with stressful hurry. We forget the one thing needful (Luke 10:41). There are also those among us who love the spectacular and like to be entertained. A burning bush. Wow. What a spectacular pyrotechnic show. Very few of us will notice the presence of God. Why? Because we are so attuned to the natural world, so centred on our own lives, that we are not open to the presence of God around us. What the mind does not think of, the eyes do not see. That is why Paul urged us to train our minds (Romans 12:2).

There is a story of two fish in an ocean. They set off on a quest to find water, which is said to have special qualities. Water gives life and can exist in three states: liquid, solid and vapour. The fish spent many years searching, yet they could not find this water. One day, they asked a wise fish, “Where can we find water?” The wise fish replied, “Water? It is everywhere. You are swimming in it!” Are we like these two fish? We are living in the presence of God, yet we are not aware of him. We see a burning bush and disregard it, not realising God wants to speak to us. Let us be mindful of the presence of God in our everyday lives and not miss “a burning bush.”



KNOW  
HIS  
LOVE





# The Night Before Christmas



**T**was the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse...

The house is quiet now. The family has retired to bed. I sit in the living room and watch the Christmas tree with its twinkling lights. I always find the lights mesmerising. I think of the days of making up a list of people to buy Christmas presents for; buying the different gifts for different people and wondering if they will like their gifts; madly struggling with other shoppers in the mall (in Singapore, you will kill for a parking space!); and wrapping the gifts. There they are now, snuggled under the twinkling Christmas tree until tomorrow. Tomorrow, gifts will be exchanged and exclaimed over.

Thoughts of Christmas being commercialised have crossed my mind a few times during the weeks. Yes, it is commercialised with the winter release of new products, advertisements, sales and Santa Claus. However, behind the gifts lies a question. Why do we buy and give gifts? For some of us, it is an obligation. For others, it is an act of love. Who can forget the joy on the face of a child as she unwraps a Christmas present to find the toy she has been praying for all year? Giving is an act of love.

For many decades, the Jewish people have been waiting for a Messiah. Someone who will not only lead them to God, but will also bring all the nations under this same God. There has been this strong desire for the presence of God to be with all people for all times.

Christmas is a reminder that, for many of us, this desire has been fulfilled.

In the appropriate time, God did come to us. What surprised us is that he chose to come in the form of a helpless human baby. Many Christmas sermons stop at that; God loves us and the only way he could save us was to come as a human baby.

This evening, as I watch the twinkling lights on my Christmas tree, I begin to feel the presence of the Lord. I know he loves me, and it is good to be reminded of his love. What shocks me is my new awareness of how great his love for us is.

I believe Amy Carmichael had this awareness when she wrote, “As my thoughts were thus occupied, I found myself on the shore of the sea. And I took a grain of sand from the miles of sand about me and I held it in my hand. Then I knew that my desire for the presence of the Lord was like a little grain for smallness in comparison with my Lord’s desire to come under my roof; for what was like the measure of the measureless sands. And my thoughts followed this great thought, Jesus answered and said to me, ‘With desire I have desired to come to you.’”

Such GREAT love! I can only concur with the psalmist, “May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” (Psalm 33:22)

# A Meditation on Rembrandt's Jeremiah



In 1630, Rembrandt painted *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem*. I was enthralled when I recently viewed the painting on display in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

The year 2006 marked the 400th anniversary of Rembrandt's birth. This oil painting is one of the finest works of Rembrandt's Leiden period. For many years, it has been incorrectly identified, but it certainly shows Jeremiah, who prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (Jeremiah 32-33), lamenting over the destruction of the city. In the distance on the left, a man at the top of some steps holds clenched fists to his eyes: this is the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, who was blinded by Nebuchadnezzar. The prominent burning domed building in the background is probably Solomon's Temple.

Jeremiah's pose, his head supported by his hand, is a traditional attitude of melancholy: his elbow rests on a large book, with "Bibel" inscribed on the edge of the pages, probably a much later addition to the painting. The book is presumably meant to be his own *Book of Jeremiah* or the *Book of Lamentations*. Rembrandt was a master of light in art. The lighting of the figure is particularly effective with the foreground and the right side of the prophet's face in shadow, and his robe outlined against a rock. Jeremiah's hands rest on a few pieces of gold and silver vessels that he must have salvaged from the burning temple.

The painting had a powerful effect on me. As I gazed at Jeremiah's face and hands, I felt the pain and disappointment of a man who served God but met with much opposition and ridicule. No one listened to him. Everyone did what seemed right in his or her own eyes. Jeremiah talked and scolded and cajoled, but all his words fell on deaf ears. And because of this, he had to watch as his beloved country was sacked, Jerusalem burnt, and the temple destroyed. He failed as a prophet of the Lord to convince his people. Though the fault was not his, the guilt must have weighed heavily on his mind. The guilt and the pain of a prophet are revealed in Rembrandt's masterpiece.

The painting also spoke to me of the many parents who have had to watch their children go astray. They have tried their best to teach their offspring right from wrong. However, that is no guarantee that the children will follow their teaching and make correct informed decisions. I am sure the pain in the hearts of these parents resonates with the lamentation in Jeremiah's heart. The guilt and the pain of these parents are reflected in this painting.

The painting also revealed to me the heart of God. How the heart of God must have been broken by the people he loved. He loved so much that he was willing to send his only Son to die for them. These people were fickle-minded and ungrateful. He gave them opportunity after opportunity to return to him, yet they continually spurned him. They chose to go after other gods who promised immediate gratification. The pain and sorrow in his heart was reflected by Jeremiah and the blind Zedekiah. The pain of a broken-hearted God is ingrained in this painting.

We often take for granted God's love for us. Looking at Rembrandt's painting is a graphic reminder of the danger of taking his love and God himself for granted.



# Condemnation and Forgiveness



**I**t was a hot, dusty afternoon, a woman stole away quietly to draw water from a well in a small city in Samaria, safe from the gossip and disdainful stares of other women in the city of Sychar.

A woman of Samaria who was just trying to survive, to have a roof over her head; being driven from one home after another would erode one's pride slowly but surely.

It was a hot, dusty afternoon, an afternoon like any other afternoon. A man asked a woman of Samaria for a drink, a Jew, whom she thought was teasing her – a lone woman at the well. She looked at him and he offered her living water, water that would form a spring in those who drank and they would never thirst again.

The woman considered the hours of back-breaking labour of carrying water and this man who offered water so easily: another nutcase. Humouring him, she compared him to Jacob and asked for his living water.

It was a hot, dusty afternoon, the Jew looked at her and told her her own secret social dilemma. A soft breeze stirred the hot dust.

This man is either a nutcase or a prophet; the woman thought and changed the topic. "Where do we worship God, Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim," she asked the Jew.

One day, he said, we shall worship anywhere, as long as we worship in spirit and in truth. The woman blinked and again changed

the topic: “We are waiting for a Messiah who will tell us of these things.”

It was a hot, dusty afternoon, the Jew said to the woman of Samaria, “I am the Messiah you are waiting for.” A gentle breeze cooled the hot dust. His followers came back and she ran away in fear. No harsh words were said, no condemnation. She blinked as she ran, could it be true that he was the Messiah, this stranger who knew of my secret life. She ran to the people in the city to tell them of this strange Jewish man.

It was a hot, dusty afternoon, the world was never the same again.

We are all sinners. To sin means to turn away from God, from his words and teachings. We sin by commission and omission. Being human, we are naturally attracted to riches, honour and pride. By themselves, these things are not sinful. They become sin when they displace God from being at the centre of our lives. We sin by not doing what we know we need to do. All of us sin. Paul described it so well in Romans 7 when he wrote about the two natures in us. It is like having two wolves living inside us, fighting for dominance. Sinning is natural for us, fallen mankind. As Martin Luther said, we are redeemed sinners, yet sinners still. What is important is the way we deal with our sins and how we relate to God concerning our sins. Many of us think of God as a vengeful father, hiding in the shadows and jumping out to catch us when we sin. Gotcha, there he goes. Hah! I caught her doing that. With such a “God,” we will be evasive when we pray to him. Like the Samaritan woman, we will change the topic of discussion when it begins to touch on our inner life.

Yes, there is a need to be aware of our capacity to sin, to confess our sins, and to ask for grace not to sin again. We must be aware that our God is a gracious God, willing to forgive us. Jesus said he came

not to condemn but to save (John 3:17). He also said he came for the sick. Jesus is the doctor, we are the patients and our sickness is sin (Mark 2:17). Jesus does not condemn us when we fail. This is a refreshing lesson for me to learn. A problem with some of us is that we feel we have a sin so big that Jesus cannot forgive us. What is actually happening is that it is we who cannot forgive, not Jesus. It is we who condemn ourselves, not God. But by doing so, we find ourselves distancing ourselves from God and from his people, the community of faith. Ultimately, we end up getting angry at God and at other people. Hence, instead of realising our own condemnation of ourselves, we feel that others are condemning us. Reacting to this, we begin to find fault with them. There is nothing so comforting than to “prove” that others are greater “sinners” than we are!

We need a realistic awareness of our sinfulness and to appreciate the generosity of God in his forgiveness of our sins. Once our particular sins are forgiven, we should move on. Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery, “Has no one condemned you?... Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:3-11). In our spiritual journey, we are not expected to drag along our baggage filled with our forgiven sins. These should be left behind as we continue our walk with the Lord. It is always good to travel light.

# The Centre



I imagine that I have walked into a desert place.  
I spend some time exploring the surroundings,  
then settle down to contemplate my life.

I see how frequently I rush outside myself  
to people, occupations, places, things  
in search of strength and peace and meaning,  
forgetting the source of all  
is here within my heart.  
It is here that I must search.

Each person carries thoughts  
that have the power to bring instant peace.  
I search for mine.

I also search for the thoughts  
that help me face life's challenges  
with fortitude and courage.

What are the thoughts that make me warm and gentle,  
that exorcise the hate and anger in my heart?  
What thoughts put meaning in my life?

produce contentment?  
 give joy?  
 propel me into service?

Before I leave the desert  
 I recall the existence of another source within  
 that does not need the aid of thoughts  
 to give me all I need.

I make an indirect attempt to reach it  
 by imagining a cave within my heart  
 suffused with light.

The light invades my body as I enter.  
 I can feel its rays create and energise  
 and warm and heal.

So I sit within the cave in silent adoration  
 as the light seeps in through every pore.

**H**ello, I have been waiting here for you for a long time,” Jesus says, as he gazes into my eyes. His gaze is long and loving, and I feel my soul enveloped by his warm, embracing love.

“I have waited here while you were running here and there looking for strength, and for comfort, and for peace,” he says.

“My heart was breaking too,” he continues with tears in his eyes, “as yours was. I feel your pain, your hurt, and your anger.”

“I also watched as you try to make yourself feel better,” he adds sadly, “by drinking yourself into a stupor, by ceaselessly watching movies and television, by lustful sexual encounters, by self-talk, and by the drugged abuse of your body for momentarily pleasure.”

“These escapes did not last long enough, did they?” he asks,

looking into my eyes. “When you are done, you still end up with yourself and your problems.”

“You want to talk about it?” he asks sincerely.

“Yes,” I say in a broken voice. “Yes, I do. Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned...”

# Omission and Commission



**T**he story of a young mother who inadvertently killed her child by giving him imitation formula milk (which she thought was original and the better food) instead of her own breast milk reminds me of Jeremiah 2:13:

“My people have committed two sins:  
They have forsaken me,  
the spring of living water,  
and have dug their own cisterns,  
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”

Israel had committed two sins. The first was one of omission: she had forsaken her God. Her second sin was one of commission: she had replaced her true God with false idols. Man’s heart, like nature, abhors a vacuum. Using imagery that those residing in Judah would understand, Jeremiah compared the nation’s actions to someone abandoning a spring of living (running) water for broken cisterns. The most reliable and refreshing sources of water in Israel were her natural springs. This water supply was dependable, and its clear, cool consistency was satisfying. In contrast, the most unreliable source of water was cisterns. Cisterns were large pits dug into rocks and covered with plaster. These pits were used to gather rainwater. This water was

brackish, and if the rains were less than normal, the water supply could run out. Worse yet, if a cistern cracked it would not hold any water. To turn from a dependable, pure stream of running water to a broken, brackish cistern was idiotic. Yet that was what Judah did when she turned from God to idols.

Our cisterns or idols:

- The Success Syndrome
- The Fame and Honour Syndrome
- The Youthfulness and Health Syndrome
- The Pleasing Family and People Syndrome

What are we going to do about them?



# Struggle and Hope



Let nothing disturb you.  
Let nothing make you afraid.  
All things are passing.  
God alone never changes.  
Patience gains all things.  
If you have God you will want for nothing.  
God alone suffices.

**T**he above poem was written by Teresa of Avila. Life is change. Sometimes we are given the luxury of making changes ourselves, but often changes are forced upon us: loss of jobs, loss of a loved one, cancer, heart attack, riots, ministry failure, or a stock market crash. Then we are forced to struggle with the changes in our lives.

Joan D. Chittister, executive director of Benetvision, a resource and research centre for contemporary spirituality in Erie, Pennsylvania, USA, shared on the spirituality of struggle in her recent book, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*. She skilfully wove the struggle of Jacob with a man in Peniel (Genesis 32:22-32) into her own struggles with her life-long ambition to study creative writing at Iowa State University.

Facing forced change, some people will be proactive and try to fight change. Others will be apathetic and try to endure it. Joan

suggested that we see forced change as an opportunity for spiritual growth. There are eight gifts that a struggle with forced change can offer our souls. The struggle of change will offer us conversion into a new phase of our lives. The struggle of isolation caused by forced change will offer us the gift of interdependence. The struggle of darkness will lead us to faith. The struggle with fear will infuse us with courage. The struggle with powerlessness will leave us the gift of surrender. The struggle with vulnerability will cause us to recognise our limitations. The struggle with exhaustion will give us endurance, and the struggle with scarring will offer us the gift of transformation. As we wrestle with changes in our lives, like Jacob, we are wrestling with God. Anthony de Mello wrote, “Change that is real is change that is not willed.” Forced change is always painful and causes scars. But there is always hope.

Joan wrote, “But if the struggle is the process of evolution from spiritual emptiness to spiritual wisdom, hope is a process as well. Hope, the response of the spiritual person to struggle, takes us from the risk of inner stagnation, of emotional despair, to a total transformation of life. Every stage of the process of struggle is a call to move from spiritual stupor to spiritual vitality. It is an invitation to live at an antinodal depth of soul, a higher level of meaning than the ordinary, the commonplace generally inspires. The spirituality of struggle gives birth to the spirituality of hope.”

May all our struggles lead to hope.

YIELD  
TO  
HIS RULE





# The Silence in the Noise



A legend has it that there was a temple built on an island which held a thousand bells, big and small, fashioned by the finest craftsmen in the world. Whenever the wind blew or a storm raged, all the bells would peal out in a symphony that send the heart of the hearer into raptures.

But over the centuries, the island sank into the sea, and with it, the temple bells. It is said that the bells continued to peal out ceaselessly, and could be heard by anyone who would listen. Inspired by this legend, a young man travelled thousands of miles, determined to hear those bells. He sat for days on the shore, facing the vanished island, and listened with all his might. But all he could hear was the sound of the sea. He made every effort to block it out. But to no avail, the sound of the sea seemed to flood his world.

He kept at his task for weeks. Each time he got disheartened he would listen to the village elders who spoke with passion of the mysterious legend. Then his heart will be aflame... only for him to be discouraged again when weeks of further effort yielded no results.

Finally, he decided to give up. Perhaps he was not destined to hear the bells. Perhaps the legend was not true. It was his final day, and he went to the shore to say goodbye to the sea, the sky, the wind, and the coconut trees. He lay on the sand, and for the first time listened to the sound of the sea. Soon he was so lost in the sound that he

was barely conscious of himself, so deep was the silence the sound produced.

In the depth of that silence, he heard it! The twinkle of a tiny bell followed by another, and another, and another... and soon every one of the thousand temple bells was pealing out in harmony, and his heart was rapt in joyous ecstasy.

This story teaches us two important lessons about listening and awareness. First, all of us have a desire to hear God's voice. We want to hear what he is saying to us. We want him to speak peace and comfort into our trials and tribulations. We have been taught early in our Christian life to set aside time for prayer and Bible reading. We call it the "quiet time." We are told that if we have our quiet time regularly, we will hear the voice of God. If not audibly, at least we know that he speaks to us in answered prayers or through the Bible passages we read.

Two things can happen with our quiet time. One is that we become too busy and do not have time to pray and read the Bible. Then we feel guilty, and we think we have lost the opportunity to hear God's voice. The other possibility is that we continue faithfully in our prayer and Bible reading, but we find it dry and boring after a while. We also find that we do not hear God speaking to us. We must be aware that God speaks to us in many ways. He speaks to us through his Word. He also speaks to us in our prayers, through other people, circumstances and dreams, and in our daily living.

For those of us who are too busy for prayer and Bible reading, be aware that God still speaks to us in our busy lives. For those who are disciplined in prayer and Bible reading, be careful that we do not try too hard. Like the young man on the beach who tried so hard to hear the bells by consciously shutting out the ocean sounds, we too may try too hard to hear God's voice. In the spiritual life, it is not

the effort that counts. Spiritual growth is not something we build, but who we become. Sometimes, we try too hard in our spiritual life. For example, we want to have faith. Now, faith is not something we can create. There is nothing we can do to make us have more faith. Faith is a gift, something that only God can give. The only thing we can do is ask God for it.

Many of us live hectic, busy and noisy lives. A recent scientific study showed that cities have a high level of ambience noise. This level of noise can be disruptive to our well-being if we are exposed to it for too long. The noise can also cause deafness. Yet it is in our hectic, busy and noisy lives that God speaks to us. Unfortunately, many of us are already deaf to him because we have not learnt to embrace the noise until we can hear the silence within. The noisy world is like a weather storm, a typhoon. There is always a centre called the “eye” of the storm. This “eye” is a calm, quiet and peaceful area within the raging storm. We must learn to be aware of the noise around us. We can embrace the noise of the world and move beyond it into the silence within. It is in this silence that we hear the voice of God.

How do we not try too hard, and enter into the silence of our busy and noisy lives? We begin by being aware that God is in our busy and noisy lives. God is not only just present in church on Sunday. We do not leave God behind when we leave the church building after a service. God is not only present in our daily lives, but he is also speaking to us all the time. Speaking to God is prayer and Paul has taught us to pray “unceasingly.” This means that it is possible to be speaking and listening to God 24/7. Since God is already with us, there is no need to try too hard to reach him. If possible, set aside some time for him alone; this is your quiet time. If not, listen for him in the happenings of your daily lives. Try to be aware of God’s presence and voice in the routine, mundane activities of your daily lives. Catch a glimpse of God

in a sunrise, a beautiful flower, a friendly smile, a loving touch, an opportunity to offer help, and an opportunity to receive help. When we become aware of God's presence in our lives, each encounter is dazzling, like a sudden burst of joy. Time seems to stand still. There is a deep, warm silence. And in the silence you will hear the voice of God who calls you his beloved. It is possible to hear the harmony of a thousand bells.



# Knowing God's Will

13

“How I wish God will tell me exactly what He wants me to do.” “I want to do His will, but how do I know what it is?” “I know I am supposed to see what God is doing and go along with Him, but how do I know what He is doing?” “How do I know if it is God’s will for me to change job/marry this girl/choose this career?” Do these questions sound familiar? They should because they are asked by millions of Christians every day as they seek to live their lives in obedience to God. Don’t you ever wish that God will speak out directly and tell you what He wants? Life would be so much easier.

There are times when I wish God would talk to me in an audible voice, “Alex, I want you to do this...” So much easier. No more doubts. No need for decision-making. No need to seek the counsel of friends and church leaders. No need to look for confirmation in the Bible. “Is that what you want me to do? Okay.” Of course, for many of us, when God calls, we are often not at home.

But God does not lead us that way. Often He will leave us to make decisions on our own. He provides the information for decision-making in His Word; in the wise counsel of friends and more mature Christians; in circumstances; and in the peace (shalom) of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Even as we make a decision and commit to it, we are never 100% sure that this is the correct decision. That this decision is God’s will. No matter how many years you have been a

Christian; how mature you are in Christ; and how skilled you are in discernment, there is always doubt. So be encouraged when you have doubts. You have lots of company. You just need to launch forth in faith, trusting that you have made the right decision and trusting that even if you have made the wrong one, God is with you and He will help you to correct your mistakes if you continue to seek to obey Him. It is obedience that He seeks. God is more interested in your attitude towards Him than in what you do.

As Hannah Hurnard wrote in her book, *Hinds' Feet on High Places*: "When you continue your journey there may be much mist and cloud. Perhaps it may even seem as though everything you have seen here of the high places was just a dream, or the work of your own imagination... But you have seen reality, and the mist which seems to swallow it up is the illusion. Believe steadfastly in what you have seen. Even if the way up to the high places appears to be obscured and you are led to doubt whether you are following the right path, remember the promise, 'Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand and when ye turn to the left.' Always go forward along the path of obedience as far as you know it until I intervene, even if it seems to be leading you where you fear I could never mean you to go."

So, my brothers and sisters, put your trust in the Lord. Make your decision in accordance to His Word, godly counsel, and circumstances. Then trust Him to look after you. God's purpose is greater and wider than we can appreciate. It is like a big river flowing to the sea. We are like a leaf that has fallen from a tree into the river. As we float on the water, we may be bobbing up and down, and the eddy current may carry us in the wrong direction for a short while, but in the end, the energy of the flowing water will carry us to the sea. Just trust that He will take care of all things. Make your decision and go forth in faith.

# *Que Sera Sera* (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)



**H**ong was a poor farmer in ancient China in the times of the Warring Kingdoms. During the ploughing season, he would work in the field, pulling his old wooden plough by himself. One day, a horse wandered into his field. The neighbours exclaimed, “How lucky you are, Hong! The heavens have smiled on you by giving you a horse.” Hong merely grunted and went on with his work, saying, “What will be, will be.”

The Lord has blessed us with many things. Some are intangible, like love and peace. Others are tangible, like wealth, health and safety. Sometimes He surprises us with unexpected blessings. As His children, we must learn to be grateful for His gifts. He has already given us the greatest gift of all, the gift of eternal life with Him. He has given us the Holy Spirit who is sealed with us until the time of His return. And He has commanded His angels to care for us. So let our gratitude overflow in prayers of thanksgiving and praises as we continue to worship Him as our God.

One of our greatest weaknesses is to take the gifts for granted and focus more on the gift than on the Giver. It is very easy to do this. One of our greatest sources of temptation is money. When the Lord blesses us with abundance and our bank accounts increase, we are grateful. But after a while, we begin to think that we have a right to the money because we have worked hard for it. And not only do we want

to exercise the right to use the money as we please, but we also want more of it. So we work and scheme to get more. Soon, increasing our wealth becomes the focus of our lives. We have less and less time for the Giver and instead concentrate more on the gift. Jesus has warned us of the danger of serving Money.

One day, while out riding, Hong's son fell off the horse and broke his leg in two places. The neighbours exclaimed, "How unlucky you are, Hong! The heavens must be punishing you with this horse." Hong merely grunted and went on with his work, saying, "What will be, will be."

How do we react when times are bad and we are poor again? Wealth, health and power are fragile and elusive. They can be taken away from us suddenly, and often without warning. The fruit of our hard work can vanish in the smoke or a tsunami or a hurricane. Or we may be dismissed from our jobs. One moment we have prestige and power; the next we are nobodies. Suddenly, all our "friends" disappear. Will we still be grateful to the Lord? Or does our gratitude vanish with our money, and we become resentful and angry with God? Do we still continue to pray with thanksgiving and praise, or do we begin to doubt the goodness of the Lord? In bad times, do we draw closer to the Lord or do we draw further away?

Then soldiers came, looking for new recruits for the army. All the young men in the village were taken, except Hong's son, who had a broken leg. The neighbours exclaimed, "How lucky you are, Hong! The heavens have smiled on you by making your son fall off the horse." Hong merely grunted and went on with his work, saying, "What will be, will be."

The teachings of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes can be summarised as "under the sun life is difficult and then you die." It seems to imply that we do not know what will happen in our lives, and we have no control

over what happens so we just have to bear it. But on careful reading of Ecclesiastes, we find that there is a second teacher (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 12:8-14) who used this teaching to instruct his son. The second teacher taught that “yes, under the sun life is difficult but what is important is that we must remember God and obey Him.” In good times and in bad times, God is still the Giver. As Hong’s story shows, we just do not have the eternal perspective to see how the incidents in our lives fit together. But we do know our God. He loves us and, even now, is working out His plan of redemption and salvation for us. So let us concentrate on the Giver rather than the gifts, and live our lives one moment at a time. Rumi, a Sufi master, wrote a poem entitled “The Guest House.”

This being human is a guest house  
Every morning a new arrival  
a joy, a depression, a meanness,  
Some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all  
even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture.

Still, treat each guest honourably,  
he may be cleaning you out for some delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

What will be, will be. It will be. That is not fatalism, but living under the sovereignty of God.

# Listen to Your Ass

15

## Balaam, an Angel and a Donkey (Numbers 22:1-35)

**B**alak, king of the Moabites, was worried. His spies had reported an invasion by a group of escaped slaves from Egypt called Israelites who had won spectacular victories over King Og and King Sihon. At that moment, they had set up camp beside the Jordan River, near Jericho. Balak was worried that the Israelites were eyeing his country. He also knew that he could not defeat them by his army alone. So with his advisers, he hatched a plot to defeat the invaders. If they could not be defeated by physical force, maybe they could be defeated by magic.

Balak knew of a powerful sorcerer and diviner named Balaam. This man was so powerful that those he blessed prospered and those he cursed self-destructed. Balak decided to enlist his help. He sent his prince-elders with a suitable amount of gold and silver to buy Balaam's services. Balaam received them and asked them to stay the night. That night, he consulted with God, who told him to refuse the offer. The delegation reported this to Balak.

Balak sent another delegation. This time, it included his more distinguished prince-elders and even more gold and silver. Again, Balaam invited them to stay, and that night consulted with God – it seemed that this Gentile prophet had open access to God. God told Balaam to go with the delegation, but he had to obey God and speak as directed by God.

The next day, Balaam saddled his donkey and set off to Moab. Suddenly, an angel with a sword appeared in the middle of the road. The donkey saw this, turned off the road, and went into a field. Surprisingly, the powerful wizard could not see the angel. Angry at the change in direction, he beat his donkey with a stick. As the donkey continued along a narrow lane between two vineyards, she saw the angel again and had to squeeze to the side of the lane to avoid the angel. This pressed Balaam's foot against the wall so he got angry and beat the donkey again. The donkey continued into a smaller lane and ran into the angel again. There was no escape this time so the donkey knelt down and refused to move. This was a smart donkey.

Again Balaam hit her. "Why did you hit me?" spoke the donkey, "have I not served you faithfully before?" It must have been incredible for the donkey to speak. It was even more incredible for Balaam to answer her. Balaam acted as if it was commonplace for animals to speak. The Lord showed the angel with the sword to Balaam, and he immediately saw his peril. He fell on his face, confessed, repented and begged for forgiveness. This story is part of a larger collection of Balaam stories. Let me draw some lessons from the story:

### *The Lord is in total control*

This was a popular story among the Jews for many centuries. It showed that the Lord, our God, was in total control of the situation. The Lord was aware of what was happening with his people in Transjordan who had just defeated the people of Sihon and Og. Yet he was also aware of what was going on in Moab.

Balaam was a Gentile prophet. We are told that he was a powerful sorcerer and diviner. It is not surprising that God sometimes



used people from outside the nation of Israel. Some scholars have questioned if Balaam was a true prophet. The names used for the Lord then were Elohim and Yahweh, but Elohim was also a generic name for God. Hence Balaam might have been worshipping a god when he suddenly came into contact with the real God, Yahweh.

This story illustrates in a wonderful way that God is in total control of the situation. From where you are standing now, it may not appear so. You may be wondering why God has allowed some bad things to happen to you. Be assured that God has not abandoned you. As God has shown, He was well aware of what was happening in Moab, which was quite a distance from where the Israelites were encamped. What is even more wonderful is that He forbade Balaam to “curse them.” No one who belongs to God can be cursed because God is more powerful than powers and principalities.

### *The Lord demands total obedience*

One may wonder why God was so tough on Balaam. After all, did Balaam not follow God’s instructions closely? When God said, “Don’t go,” he didn’t. When God said “Go,” he went. My suspicion is that God was not unreasonable, but He knew the disobedience in Balaam’s heart. Though outwardly Balaam was a model of obedience, in his inner heart there must have been treachery. He must have been thinking that he could fool this “god” by pretending to obey, and then when the occasion was right, he would curse the Israelites.

Later in the book of Numbers, we are shown that Balaam was responsible for leading the Israelites into idolatry and sexual immorality. In fact, Balaam’s name was infamous through the Bible, from Numbers to Deuteronomy, and even in Revelation.

God's instructions were clear: "Say only what I tell you to say." The fact that He sent an angel to kill Balaam meant that God knew Balaam did not intend to follow His instructions to the letter. Many of us do not take the Lord seriously. We bargain with the Lord when we are in trouble. We make our vows when we are emotionally or spiritually trapped. We pledge to give of our time, money and possessions if the Lord will help us. Yet when we are out of trouble, we forget our bargain, vows and pledges.

We also take the instructions of the Lord lightly. We know what He wants us to do, the kind of life He wants us to live, and the kind of people He wants us to be. All his instructions and expectations are all available to us in the Bible so we cannot plead ignorance. He even came as Jesus Christ to show us how to live. Yet, we so often disregard His instructions when they inconvenience us; when they move us out of our comfort zone; and when they demand something sacrificial from us. The story of Balaam shows us that God will not be mocked.

*Listen to all around you because the Lord may speak through them*

The talking donkey demonstrates that sometimes we can miss seeing something that is right in front of our eyes. Balaam, for all his divination skills, could not see the angel with the sword. Yet his donkey could. We must have humility and not be dogmatic in our walk with the Lord. Sometimes, our pride may blind our spiritual eyes. Then we cannot see where the Lord is leading us and may walk right out of His will.

God does not always choose to speak through the high and mighty. He also speaks through the lowly donkey or ass. So we must be alert to discern God's leading and instruction from all things

around us. Anyone and anything can teach us spiritual lessons if we are humble and sensitive enough to discern them.

The story of Balaam, his donkey and an angel teaches us that God is in total control; that He demands total obedience; and that we have to be spiritually discerning if we do not want to miss His guidance to our regret. It means we have to walk closely with Him at all times.

# Shout to the World

16

**E**lie Wiesel writes:

One of the Just Men came to Sodom, determined to save its inhabitants from sin and punishment. Night and day he walked the streets and markets protesting against greed and theft, falsehood and indifference. In the beginning, people listened and smiled ironically. Then they stopped listening: he no longer amused them. The killers went on killing, the wise men kept silent, as if there were no Just Man in their midst.

One day, a child, moved by the compassion for the unfortunate teacher, approached him with these words: "Poor stranger, you shout, you scream, don't you see that it is hopeless?"

"Yes, I see," answered the Just Man.

"Then why do you go on?"

"I'll tell you why. In the beginning, I thought I could change man. Today, I know I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, it is to prevent man from ultimately changing me."

This short story from Wiesel has a powerful message for us as we

struggle to live a Christian life or a life pleasing to God in the world. The world has a powerful and seductive influence on us. It knows the right buttons to push. Get this mobile phone and it will make you look sophisticated, techno-savvy and well connected. Drive this brand of car and the world will recognise you as a successful man. Do not leave home without this credit card because you are a well-travelled jetsetter. It takes a lot of effort and wisdom to resist the temptations of this world. Satan tempted our Lord Jesus with the satisfaction of fleshy desires (bread from stones), security from harm (angel's protection), and power and wealth (all the kingdoms on earth). And Satan is still tempting Jesus' disciples in these areas. Jesus taught that we, His disciples, are not of this world but are destined for another.

As new Christians, many of us were full of fire, shouting and screaming, as we tried to make people understand the danger they were in. We were like people standing at the edge of a cliff and shouting to others, "Do not walk over there. There is a cliff. You will fall over to your doom. Turn back." And, to our astonishment and dismay, we discovered that nobody was listening to us. Nobody paid attention to our message. Nobody believed us. The people kept on walking and fell off the cliff. Soon we stopped shouting and screaming. Maybe we whispered a bit here and there. But as we stopped fighting the world, we became like the world. We were like someone swimming against a current. The moment we stopped swimming, we were swept back by the current.

I wonder how many of us have stopped swimming against the current and are even now swimming with the current. It is so easy to stop shouting and be with the crowd. Just relax a little here and there. A small white lie; a little stealing and cheating here and there. Nobody will know. We become insensitive to the needs of others. We eat, drink and are merry to excess.

The Christian life is a life of constant struggle. We struggle against our flesh, the world and Satan. We know that we cannot change man; only God can do that. However, we must always be on guard that the world does not change us. That will happen if we let down our guard and stop struggling against the world. So, brothers and sisters, let us continually encourage one another in our struggle. We cannot go at it alone; a piece of coal that falls out of the fire cools down very fast. Do not let the world change us.

A  
CHRISTIAN  
ON  
THE RUN







# The Spirituality of Sleep



“If you find it hard to sleep, stop counting sheep  
and talk to the shepherd.”

*author unknown*

**I**n Shakespeare’s play, *Macbeth*, ambitious Macbeth, after murdering his king, said with deep psychological insight, “Sleep no more, Macbeth does murder sleep’ – the innocent sleep, sleep that knits up the revelled sleeve of care, the death of each day’s life, sore labour’s bath, balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course, chief nourisher in life’s feast.”

A person with a calm mind and a peaceful heart will have a night of quality sleep, waking up refreshed. On the other hand, someone with an anxious mind and troubled heart will have trouble getting to sleep. Even when sleep does come, it will be troubled by nightmares, and the person will wake up tired and irritable.

We live in a hurried and stressful world. We want to be successful and we define “success” as being beautiful (or handsome); having a position that is high up — if not at the top of — the corporate ladder; lots of money in our bank accounts; living in large, luxurious bungalows; driving around in powerful, sleek European cars; wearing expensive jewellery and clothes; and having numerous titles and diplomas before and after our names. To achieve “success,” we are

willing to work hard and sacrifice much, and in doing so, end up with anxious minds and troubled hearts.

Jesus Christ told His disciples a story about a farmer who worked hard and was very successful. God blessed him bountifully, and his crops yielded so much grain that he planned to build a new granary to store them. Unfortunately, he congratulated himself instead of God that he was so successful that he did not need to work any more and could retire and enjoy himself. That night, the rich farmer died in his sleep and someone else got to enjoy his wealth. Jesus taught about the illusion of success and the transience of life. We deceive ourselves when we think we have control over our lives. Who among us can decide the time and date of our birth or of our death? Yet we act as if we can. We are like the farmer in the story, working hard to accumulate material wealth or “success” and neglecting the spiritual aspect of our lives.

True success lies in living a life that honours our Creator God; living a life that pleases him; and cultivating our relationship with him. True success means not being trapped by the consumerism of the world. It means using things rather than using people. True success does not harm others but help the poor and the weak. It means valuing people rather than things, and developing meaningful relationships with people. True success is about having time for work, play and rest. The fruit of true success is a calm mind and a peaceful heart. This means at least getting a good night’s sleep!

# Busy, Busy, Busy



I have watched people walking in Oxford Street in London, Orchard Road in Singapore and Jalan Wong Ah Fook in Johor Bahru. They all have the same look – a hurried expression on their faces as if they must rush because of great urgency. They all have the same stance – body leaning forward, taking rapid long steps. They do not look each other in the eye; they are lonely souls in a sea of souls. Do you feel that your life is out of control; that you are on a roller coaster that is not only going faster and faster, but is even in free fall? Our lives are so crowded with meetings, appointments and to-do lists. Our labour-saving devices, electronic organisers and computers have failed to save us time. Even time seems to have speeded up. What, it is September already? Didn't we just celebrate Christmas?

Our hurried and busy lifestyle is killing us. Our bodies are so stressed that we are aging before our time. We are suffering from stress-related diseases, such as anxiety syndromes, depression, hypertension and coronary heart disease. We de-stress by escaping into a make-believe world provided by Hollywood and the entertainment industry. Others find relieve in consumerism by shopping. Many of us are addicted to caffeine, tranquilisers and Prozac. We feel trapped in a lifestyle in which we are neither content nor happy.

The opposite of busyness is not idleness. It is a simple lifestyle. It is a life in which we live for what is essential and is willing to forego

the rest, no matter what our neighbours have. It demands the courage to go against the ways of the world. A simple lifestyle does not mean possessing less but being detached from our possessions. It is freedom from the chains of materialism. Once we are detached, we can let go and find that we do not really need much to lead a contented life. Jesus taught in Matthew 6:19-21 that where our treasure is, there our heart will be. If our treasure is to accumulate material things and there is no end to that accumulation, our whole focus (heart) will be on that. That is like chasing after the wind. It is only when we focus on the eternal that we are able to detach ourselves from the chains that bind our hearts and minds. Then we will be free and less anxious and less driven. We will have time to look around and be aware of our own needs, our relationships and God's creation.

Slow me down, Lord,  
Ease the pounding of my heart by the quieting of my  
mind.  
Steady my hurried pace with a vision of the external reach  
of time.

Give me, amidst the confusion of the day, the calmness of  
the everlasting hills.  
Break the tensions of my nerves and muscles with the  
soothing music of the singing streams that live in my  
memory.

Teach me the art of taking minute vacations – of slowing  
down to look at a flower, to chat with a friend, to pat  
a dog, to smile at a child, to read a few lines from a  
good book.

Slow me down, Lord, and inspire me to send my roots  
deep into the soil of life's enduring values, that I may  
grow towards my greater destiny.

Remind me each day that the race is not always to the  
swift;  
that there is more to life than increasing its speed.  
Let me look forward to the towering oak and know that  
it grew great and strong because it grew slowly and  
well.

# Rhythms of Life

19

**D**isclaimer: These characters in this story are fictitious and any resemblance to anyone is unintentional. Warning: The dialogue is in Malglish (Malaysian English) and may be hazardous to anyone speaking Queen's English.

[Three friends met at Starbucks during lunch break.]

John: Aiyu, finally, got empty table. My feet got pain. What are you having? I'm having a regular mocca latte.

Philip: Me, I am having a double espresso. Caffeine level is low and I need the extra boost. What about you, Matthews?

Matthews: I'll have a hot chocolate la!

John & Philip: What!

Matthews: I am very stressed, lah. Scared coffee will make me crazy.

John: Yeah, I know what you mean. My job as a pastor is keeping me busy too. You know, this week alone I have to lead two Bible studies, not to mention preparing for this Sunday's sermon. Last night, I had to conduct a wake service for one of our members.

Philip: Talk about busy. My clinic has been overflowing. There is an intestinal flu epidemic going on. Everyone vomiting and having diarrhoea. Then after work, I

have to attend Bible study, prayer meeting and this Sunday my turn to preach. Who got time to do all these things? Sometimes I fall asleep during prayer meeting.

Matthews: Oh, no wonder you prayed so long last week. I thought I heard you snore! Hey guys, I need your prayers. I am having a hard time with my PhD supervisor. She is really stressing me out. Sometimes I wonder why I want to get a PhD.

Philip: Get permanent head damage (PhD)?

Matthews: Ha, ha. You know why. Boy, am I tired. I need a long break. Research and writing is hard work, you know. No play play.

Philip: Same here. Very tired and very fed up with it all. Sometimes I wonder why I bother to serve in church. After work, I am so tired that all I can do is lie down and watch TV.

John: At least you have a 42-inch plasma TV. I am tired too. I struggle to get up in the morning knowing there are so many things I need to do. Sometimes I dread to meet my church members. Always giving me more things to do.

Philip: Who ask you to be pastor? Taking a break does not work for me. My holidays are more tiring than my work. After a family holiday, I need a break to recover from my break. Do you know what is wrong with us? Why we are so tired?

John: I think I am over-committed. Too many things to do.

Matthews: Me too.

Philip: Maybe we should rethink our lifestyles. Be less over-

- committed.
- John: Huh, see who's talking. Your life is so busy that I wonder whether God gives you an extra hour or two every day.
- Philip: Hey, I am serious, guys. Being tired all the time is no good. We will end up being burnt out. Remember that sermon by that preacher on ending well. I want to end well. I don't want to burn out and fall away.
- Matthews: Yeah, that was a good sermon. I like his jokes. I get his point too. I remember during the sermon I wondered whether I would last the course. I was drowsy and fighting to keep awake during the sermon. I want to end well too.
- John: Well, doc. You have the diagnosis here, over-commitment. What is the treatment?
- Philip: You can't afford my fees. Never mind, I shall charge you 50 dollars per hour. Friend, friend, never mind lah.
- Matthews: Can also. Okay, doc. What to do?
- Philip: Sabbath.
- Matthews: Sabbath!
- Philip: Yes, Sabbath. We do not have Sabbath in our lives. Our lives are doing, doing, doing all the time. No time set aside for rest.
- John: I know what you mean, Philip. I just preached a sermon on Sabbath last Sunday. How we need to make time in our busy lifestyle for Sabbath rest. I called the sermon "Sabbath Rest." Never thought about my own life, though. I just cannot see how to apply it in my own life. My wife is complaining I am doing too much.



Philip: Maybe your wife is correct. Sometimes our wives see what we cannot see. Don't tell my wife or I shall never hear the end of it.

Matthews: Sabbath. Hmm, have not thought about the Sabbath for a long time. Working on my studies on weekdays and in church all weekends, completely forgot about a day of rest. Sabbath is a day of rest, isn't it?

John: Observing the Sabbath is the Fourth Commandment. Remember the Ten Commandments? Hey, your PhD is in theology, isn't it?

Matthews: Oops. Guess that's what you call a pilgrim's regress. You study all about God but you forget to live with God. So what makes you think Sabbath is the answer to our tiredness?

Philip: I was reading Philip Yancey's new book on prayer. In it, he mentioned something about Ajith Fernando. Remember Ajith, he spoke to us last year. During the relief effort for the tsunami victims, Ajith wrote something for the relief workers that Yancey quoted. I like it so much that I wrote it down. Now where is it? Ah, yes, here it is.

"In his email entitled 'Disciplines for Emergency Workers' Ajith wrote, 'God has built into our systems a rhythm of life which we must not violate; output and input; work and rest; service and worship; community activity, family activity and solitude.'" When I read that, it struck me that there is a rhythm of life, like our body rhythm. And God has built a rhythm of work and rest into our bodies. We are all so tired because we broke the rhythm. God worked

- for six days and rested on the seventh.
- Matthews: Wished God worked a five-day week! I get what you mean about the rhythm and Sabbath. But look at my life. I am so busy. So how?
- Philip: We all busy lah. But that doesn't mean we don't look after our health. I have seen people change after their first heart attack. They began to realise that not all things are important. We can do with less in our lives. What do you think, John? You are rather quiet.
- John: I think that observing the Sabbath as a day of rest is not just good for our health. I think it is a matter of obedience. God gave the Ten Commandments as guidelines for the Israelites. That's the Law. Does that mean we under the New Covenant do not need to obey it? I think that we need to observe the Sabbath-rest too. It is just a matter of obedience to Jesus.
- Philip: I have been thinking along the same lines too. I think obeying Jesus is more important than serving Jesus. I have been reviewing my schedule. Some things I do are not that important. I am thinking of rearranging my schedule so that I can have a day of rest each week. May not be a Sunday. This means I may have to cut down on some activities. Can or cannot?
- John: Makes sense to me too. Sabbath-rest as obedience. I wonder how my elders will take it if I begin to say "no" to more responsibilities.
- Matthews: Look for a new church? Joking only lah. Alamak! Time to go. I need to meet my supervisor in half an hour. Hope the next time we meet, we will not be so tired. Jom, guys.

# The Caffeine-driven Life

20

Wake up every morning, mind in a mush,  
already late, running in a rush.  
Brain not engaged, still not in gear,  
coffee, o coffee, I need thee here.  
I need the fix, I need the kick,  
a cuppa of java will do the trick,  
To get through the day I need the buzz,  
hot coffee, iced coffee, no need to fuss.  
Too much work, deadlines, too little time,  
another cuppa coffee and all will be fine.  
Need energy, lift up mood for a euphoric day,  
coffee will energise, colourise and yom the way.  
Clock-out time, day is done, night is coming  
energy draining, fuzzy mood darkening.  
Going home, coffee glow from cheeks fading,  
caffeine level in bloodstream slowly falling.

Such is life, with hustle and noise, our busy condition, a life truly driven by the world's only legal addiction. Fill the cups with espresso, latte, mochas and macchiato available only in Starbucks, Coffee Bean and alfresco.

We live in a fast-track world where everything is zooming by us

at a great speed. Like a hamster on a treadmill, we need to be constantly running to remain in the same place. Just when we are coming to terms with a handphone that has a camera, comes a new model that takes pictures and sends them, surfs the Internet, receives television programmes, updates us on the latest football scores, and still allows us to make a phone call. To survive in this world, many of us feel that we do not have enough energy to make it through the day. Hence the sale of stimulants such as Red Bull is skyrocketing. The caffeine in coffee is a stimulant. Coffee may be the commonest ingested legal stimulant in the world. Surprisingly, many scientific studies reveal that coffee is actually beneficial to health for most people. Coffee is addictive, as those who do not get their daily cuppa will tell you. Is it possible then, in our caffeine-driven life, to maintain Christian spirituality?

Many of us who are trapped in this fast-track world feel that we cannot maintain our spiritual life. We feel that we can do this only if we enter a monastery where we will have all the time, quietness and solitude to be with God. We long for such an opportunity but probably will never have it in our life. I believe that this notion of achieving spirituality is a fallacy and a myth. Most of us will go crazy after a day in a monastery without our Korean serial, CNN and other distractions. I believe the key to spirituality in our caffeine-driven life is to be mindful of where we are and how we can arrange our life around our schedules. We must master our caffeine-driven life and not let it master us.

First, we must be aware that there is nothing wrong with our lifestyle at the moment. In another century, we may be planting rice, but we are here and now, and we have to accept it with grace. We are right where God wants us to be.

Second, we must be mindful of the dangers of our lifestyle. The creator of our bodies knows that our flesh-and-blood bodies need

rest. Hence He mandated the Sabbath. It is important for us to take time out to rest. Rest periods should be carved out on a weekly and monthly basis, with provision for at least one annual vacation. If we are convinced that something is important, we will find time for it.

Third, in our busy lifetime, it is possible to “stop time.” We do this by practising the spiritual discipline of meditative or centring prayer where we can take time off and spend it with the Lord any moment of the day. That is what Paul meant by praying unceasingly. There is a quiet oasis of calm inside each of us where we can meet with Jesus any time, even in the middle of a hectic day.

Finally, we must be mindful of what is important and needs to be done, and what is not. Prioritise is the keyword. We need not do everything. But, we must do the needful, that which the Holy Spirit is prompting us to do. Then we can lead a Christ-centred life in the midst of our caffeine fuzz. Adelaide A. Proctor put it aptly in this poem:

It isn't the thing you do, dear,  
It's the things you leave undone,  
Which gives you the bitter heartache.

At the setting of the sun;  
The tender word unspoken,  
The letter you did not write,  
The flower you might have sent, dear,  
Are your haunting ghosts at night.

The stone you might have lifted  
Out of your brother's way.  
The bit of heartsome counsel  
You were hurried too much to say;

The gentle and winsome tone,  
That you had no time or thought for,  
With troubles enough of your own.

These little acts of kindness,  
So easily out of mind,  
These chances to be angels  
Which even mortals find –  
They come in night and silence,  
Each chill reproachful wraith,  
When hope is faint and flagging,  
And a blight has dropped on faith.

For life is all too short, dear,  
And sorrow is all too great,  
To suffer our slow compassion  
That tarries until too late.  
And it's not the thing you do, dear,  
It's the thing you leave undone,  
Which gives you the bitter heartache,  
At the setting of the sun.

In our caffeine-driven life, it is possible to practise Christian spirituality and experience the presence of God. Eagle Brook Church in Lino Lakes, Minnesota, in the United States is building a new auditorium. This auditorium will have theatre-like seats with cup-holders for coffee cups. “Coffee is such a part of our church culture,” commented the director of operations. The local press has speculated that the coffee culture is the major reason Eagle Brook has become the largest church in the state. Coffee, anyone?

# Renovation of the Soul

21

Recently, we had to do some massive renovation work in my father's garden. My father's house is built on a hill slope. After about 10 years, we discovered that the soil in his garden was beginning to shift down the slope. The contractor took a look and shook his head. There was a gleam in his eyes, which might have meant that he was thinking about buying a brand-new Mercedes! He told us that the soil movement was due to an inadequate barrier below the house.

He suggested that we dug a deep trench around the outer perimeter of the garden. Then he would sink about a few hundred tree trunks (each about eight feet long) into the trench. Next he would tie these wooden stakes together with iron bars. Finally, he would pour concrete into the trench to fix the whole structure. That should hold the garden in place, he declared. I was sure it would hold the garden in place. It sounded like we were building a fortress.

We would not have been aware that the soil in the garden had shifted if not for a one-inch gap appearing at the base of the perimeter wall of the garden. It may be the same with our spiritual life. We go to church regularly to worship, and think everything is going well. We think the hymn "It is well with my soul" describes our spiritual life.

We may have been Christians for so many years that we have become too comfortable in church. We may not be aware of an inner shift in the soil of our inner spiritual life away from God. Maybe we

have been praying less and do not attend prayer meetings any more. We find less and less time to read the Bible. Where once there was an urgency to share about Jesus with our non-Christian friends, there is none now. We find ourselves putting less and less into the offering bag.

It may even have been years since we regularly examine our lives to see if we are living in a manner that is glorifying to God. We share less and less with each other about what God is doing in our lives. We are more often full of anger than of gratitude. Anger is a sign that we are not content with what we have. If that is so, we may need to do some renovation in the garden of our souls.

Francis A. Schaeffer, writing in *True Spirituality*, offered some insights: “The true Christian life, true spirituality, does not mean just that we have been born again. It must begin there, but it means more than that. It does not mean only that we are going to be in heaven. It does mean that, but it means much more than that. The true Christian life, true spirituality in the present life, means more than being justified and knowing that I am going to heaven.

“It is not just a desire to get rid of taboos in order to live an easier and looser life. Our desire must be for a deeper life. And when I begin to think of this, the Bible presents to me, the whole of the Ten Commandments and the whole of the Law of Love.

“True spirituality, the true Christian life, is not just outward, but it is inward – it is not to covet against God and men.

“But it is even more than this: it is positive; positive inward reality, and then positive in outward results. The inward thing is to be positive and not just negative; and then sweeping out of the inward positive reality, there is to be a positive manifestation externally. It is not just that we are dead to certain things, but we are to love God, we are to be alive to him, in this present moment of history. And we are



to love men, to be alive to men as men, and to be in communication on a true personal level with men, in this present moment of history.”

Renovation of the garden of our soul starts inwards. We need to shore up the foundations of our lives with the Word of God, the love of God, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Our spiritual lives must be in continual movement; vertically in a relationship with God and horizontally in relationships with other people. It must be happening now and always. As Schaeffer said, “in this present moment of history.”

This continuing process of interacting with God and with men as we deepen our inner spiritual life is known as spiritual formation. Dallas Willard explained it better in his book, *Renovation of the Heart*: “Spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes the inner being of Christ himself... The result is that the ‘outer’ life of the individual increasingly becomes a natural expression of the inner reality of Jesus and his teachings. Doing what he said and did increasingly becomes part of who we are.”

If our spiritual life is continually being involved in the process of spiritual formation, then we need not fear that we will slip and fall. Our inner life becomes the life of Christ himself! There is no more solid foundation than Jesus Christ. It is worrying to hear that only three out of 10 Christians finish well. This is a good reminder for us not to be complacent but to be always intentionally involved in the spiritual formation of our souls.

# The House with Golden Windows



There is a story about a young boy who lived with his parents in a cottage on a hillside overlooking a valley. Every evening, he would sit on his front porch and looked over to another house situated on another hillside at the other end of the valley. His favourite moment was when the sun was sinking in the west; the other house would burst into a dazzling golden light. How happy the people who live in a house with golden windows must be, he thought. He would fantasise about living in such a house. How happy he would be. He looked around his own house and wished that his house had golden windows too.

One day, this boy packed his favourite toy and a loaf of bread, and set off to the house of his dreams. The journey took longer than he anticipated. It was sunset when he climbed the hill slope, and he was disappointed when he reached the other house. It was a cottage like his own home, smaller and more run-down. The windows were ordinary and were not golden at all! It was such a let-down. The kind folks in the cottage offered him a bed for the night, as it was too late for the journey back. He shared supper with the simple folks and went to bed early. The young boy was eager to start his journey early the next day and leave this disappointing house.

Early the next morning, he let himself out just when the sun was rising. He looked across the valley towards his own house. As the rays of the rising sun struck his home, it burst forth in a dazzling golden light!

We have heard the phrase, “The grass is always greener on the other side.” How often have we packed our bags, like the boy in our story, to seek a greener pasture? And how often have we been disappointed when we reach the other pasture, only to find that what we have left behind is better. What is this part of our personality that is never satisfied with what we have and always wants more? We always feel that if only we have a little more money, we will be happy. “If only” becomes our fantasy. If only we are more well known, more powerful, more beautiful, then we shall be happy. If only our house has golden windows.

The Church Fathers have a name for this attribute: “covetousness” or greed. The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defined “covetousness” as (1) marked by inordinate desire for wealth or possessions or for another’s possessions, and (2) having a craving for possession. This is one of the seven deadly sins. The other deadly sins are lust, gluttony, sloth, wrath, envy and pride.

Covetousness or greed can be an all-consuming obsession. To become richer, more famous or more powerful demands a great investment of our time and effort. To achieve that sales target, we are willing to work hard. To meet that deadline, we are willing to give more of our time and effort. This obsession is a demanding mistress. It takes away all our time, effort and perspective so that we do not have time for anything else. Unfortunately, our society rewards this obsession. Our society calls this obsession “success” and defines it in terms of what we have, not in terms of who we are.

The Church Fathers recognised covetousness as a deadly sin because being consumed with covetousness or greed will leave behind broken marriages, dysfunctional families, traumatised children and lost souls. Jesus asked the question, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?” Covetousness or greed will divert

our attention from the things that are important to things that will not satisfy. If only my house has golden windows.

Covetousness or greed not only becomes a magnificent obsession but it may also replace God in our lives! It is so easy to change allegiance from God the Father to the “Money” god. The temples of worship of “Money” are the world’s stock exchanges and financial institutions (including banks). If you find that you spend more time at the stock exchange or banks (unless you work there) than in church, check who your God is. It is often a subtle change, a short step from wanting more money to worshipping money. Money is fame. Everyone knows who you are if you have money. You will never lack company if you have money. Money is power. Money gives you more possessions. Money is success. Satan tempted Jesus by offering him all the kingdoms on earth and their wealth. All Jesus had to do was worship Satan, who was appealing to the covetousness and greed in our hearts. Jesus did not succumb, but that is not so for many of us.

I am not saying that we should not desire to improve our standard of living. We have a duty to provide for our loved ones and family – financially, emotionally and spiritually. There is nothing wrong with working hard and making money. What I am saying is that we must learn contentment. We must learn to say when “enough is enough.” We must exercise caution, and not allow the desire to provide for ourselves and our family to cross the line into covetousness or greed. We need to re-examine our lives and review the reasons we are working so hard. Is it to provide for ourselves, our family and our children’s education? What happens when you have saved enough? Do you still want to earn more because it is never enough? Or will you consider giving the excess to kingdom work or to charitable organisations. How do you decide enough is enough?

If you do not know when enough is enough, you will keep working, making money and chasing that elusive dream of “the grass is greener on the other side.” You will become obsessed with money or, even worse, commit idolatry, when your money becomes your God. It is my hope that you will not end up like the young boy who discovered too late that the house with golden windows was his own house.

T.S. Eliot wrote in the *Four Quartets*:

There are three conditions which often look alike  
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:  
Attachment to self and to things and to persons,  
    detachment.  
From self and from things and from persons;  
    and, growing between them, indifference  
Which resembles the others as death resembles life,  
Being between two lives – unflowering, between  
The live and the dead nettle.

# How Heavy is Your Burden?

23

There is an old story about three men and their sacks. Each man had two sacks, one tied in front of his neck and the other on his back. When the first man was asked what was in his sacks, he said, “In the sack on my back are all the good things friends and family have done. That way they are hidden from view. In the front sack are all the bad things that have happened to me. Every now and then I stop, open the front sack, take the things out, examine them, and think about them.” Because he stopped so often to concentrate on all the bad stuff, he did not make much progress in life.

The second man was asked about his sacks. He replied, “In the sack in front are all the good things I have done. I like to see them, so quite often I take them out to show them off to people. The sack in the back? I keep all my mistakes in there and carry them all the time. Sure they are heavy. They slow me down but you know, for some reason, I cannot put them down.”

When the third man was asked about his sacks, he answered, “The sack in front is great. There I keep all the positive thoughts I have about people; all the blessings I have experienced; all the great things other people have done for me. The weight is not a problem. The sack is like the sails of a ship. It keeps me going forward. The sack on my back is empty. I cut a big hole at the bottom, and put in all the bad things that I can think of about myself or hear about others. They go

in one end and out the other, so I am not carrying around any extra weight at all.”

What we carry around affects our spiritual life. The writer of Hebrews used the metaphor of a runner to illustrate the spiritual life. Living the spiritual life is like running a race. We cannot imagine a marathon runner running with a sack on his or her back. That will hinder the running. A runner will do everything he can to reduce the excess weight. The writer of Hebrews advised us to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles” in order to run the race (Hebrews 12:1).

Unfortunately, many of us are like the first man. We keep before our eyes all the bad and horrible things that have happened to us – our poor relationships with others, our bad experiences and unfulfilled expectations in church, and the horrible events that have scarred our lives. What is out of sight is out of mind. We do not remember the good that others have done for us. Our focus is on the bad things that crowd our thoughts, causing anger and bitterness. It is hard to run forward when there is so much negative emotional burden. The heaviness of these burdens causes some of us to drop out of the race, like those marathon runners falling by the roadside. Once down, we are contented to stay down and refuse to get up. Others leave the church, not realising that they are bringing their sacks with them. Still others seek spiritual growth yet do not bear fruit and make progress because their souls are being poisoned by bitterness and unforgiveness.

The second man keeps his achievements and the things that make him feel good in front of him. He revels in his accomplishments, his wealth, his fame, and in his sacrificial service for the church. He always reminds others of his contribution to the church, and the favours he has done for people. He turns a blind eye to his mistakes, his imperfections, his idolatry, and his pride. All these he throws into

the sack behind him so that he does not see them. Unfortunately, what the eye does not see remains in the subconscious. The prick of conscience is a constant thorn in his side and the sacks remain heavy. Such people need great effort to run. Some can hardly walk. Every step is a struggle because of the weight they carry.

The third man fills his front sack with positive thoughts, gratitude and appreciation for people around him, and the blessings he has received. As for the gossip, slander and bad experiences, he forgives and forgets. He throws them into the sack on his back that has a big hole at the bottom. The back sack is empty, and he is freed from bitterness, hatred and anger. He feels only the goodness of this life and the blessings of God. All these make his sack act as a sail. The Holy Spirit, who is like the wind, blows at the sail and helps him forward as he runs the race. Running the spiritual race is so much easier if we get rid of bitterness, unforgiveness and anger. That is what Jesus is helping us to do when He offers us His yoke. Many of us are running like the first or second man. Our sacks are heavy with our burdens and they wear us out. Jesus offered, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Being yoked with Jesus is like the third man. He is like Eric Liddell, an Olympic runner in the movie, *Chariots of Fire*, who said, “God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure.” For Eric Liddell, however, the Olympics were not the ultimate race. The son of Scottish missionaries to China, he saw his whole life as a race: a race for the kingdom of heaven. That is why two years after taking the Olympic gold, he sailed to China to become a missionary himself.



# Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD)

24

During the time of the Cold War, thousands of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) from the two superpowers then, the USSR and the USA, were poised at one another, ready to be released at the press of a button to unleash complete total destruction on both countries. The thinking behind this fearsome strategy was Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). The fact that your enemies could destroy your country at the same time that you destroyed theirs was meant to prevent the leaders from being too hasty in their decision-making at the threat of war.

In our society today, there is also a MAD strategy in play. The proponents are ourselves and other people in our society. This play is very destructive. It is also dangerous in that it acts on our subconscious, at a level where we are unaware of our involvement in the destruction. More surprising is that it is socially acceptable. In fact, society praises its outworking. I am talking about our achievement-oriented lifestyles.

What is wrong with being achievement-oriented? Achievement by itself is good. The comforts and security of our society are provided by people who achieve what they set out to do. It is the cost of achievement that is the problem. Many achievements are obtained at the price of broken relationships, dysfunctional families, exploitation of fellow human beings and self-abuse.

How did this situation arise? We are created in God's image. Human beings are created for unconditional love. Unfortunately, early in our childhood, we are taught that love is conditional. This is especially true in Asia, where we live in a culture of shame. We are given love if we do something; if we are nice to our siblings; if we are obedient and polite. Love is withheld if we misbehave. So we learn from young to play the game, the game of gaining conditional love. We learn early on that achievement always wins conditional love. Yet, our souls long for unconditional love. Almost all of us can recall the longing for this love. Because we cannot get this unconditional love from those we love ones, we learn to repress it.

Repression does not make the longing go away but converts it to aggression, irritability and anger. This repression is self-destructive. Many of us are angry most of the time. Some of us even get ulcers, hypertension and depression as a result. The repression also causes us to be cruel to others and to want to hurt them. As these impulses are subconscious, we often behave badly without realising it. That is why we always hurt the ones we love.

As we repress our need for unconditional love, we continue to pursue our need for love, even conditional love, through achievement. Unfortunately, we soon discover that earned love is not fulfilling. With all our achievements, we still feel empty inside. So we anaesthetise ourselves with entertainment, sex, trophies and even more achievements. We learn that the maxim: "he who dies with the most toys wins" wins nothing. The achievement-oriented lifestyle grips us in a destructive, vicious cycle.

The only way for us to get out of this vicious cycle is to receive unconditional love. God is the only Person who can give unconditional love. Receiving the unconditional love is the first part of the journey.

We then need to break the subconscious thought patterns that have developed in our minds. We can break them by worship.

In worship, confession brings to our conscious mind destructive thought patterns, repentance helps us to renounce them, and proclamation and prayer help us to celebrate and embrace the healing that unconditional love brings to our lives. When we establish a pattern of worship in a community of faith, it helps us to break out of the vicious cycle of an achievement-oriented lifestyle.

It is only when we receive unconditional love and do not have to repress our need for it that we achieve shalom; the peace with God, with man and with all creation. Hence the need to continue to worship regularly with a community of faith.

Worship is the antidote to prevent the mutual assured destruction of our souls.



A CHURCH  
IN THE  
WORLD





# Keep in Step

25

Look at a herd of sheep. You may be able to get them to move together in one direction, which farmers in Australia use sheep dogs to do. The sheep dogs will herd the sheep, but the sheep will never be able to march in a precise and coordinated manner. They will trip over and run into each other, and make a lot of noise. A herd of sheep does not exhibit teamwork.

An emperor of China decided to see if his people could work together. Were they capable of teamwork? He issued a decree that everybody must eat with four-foot long chopsticks; they were not allowed to eat with their hands. The decree must be obeyed on pain of death. After six months, the emperor wondered how his people were responding to the decree. So he sent out his great captain to see what was happening. In the first village that he visited, the captain saw that the people were starving. They had a lot of food, but were unable to get the food into their mouths with the long chopsticks. The captain visited other villages and encountered the same situation. People were starving and dying, even though there was an abundance of food. One day, he came upon a village that was happy and well fed. He asked the people, "How is it that you are happy and well fed while others in the country are starving?" The villagers smiled and said, "When we first tried to eat with the long chopsticks, we just could not get food into our mouths. One day, we decided to feed each other." That was teamwork.

Teamwork is working together – whether you are feeding each other, or marching together in drill, or doing a project together in school. We need each other. To succeed in any enterprise, we must work as a team.

Even Jesus Christ had a team. His team was made up of 12 men called disciples. He told them, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19).



# How Expensive is Your Church?

26

I wonder how you will answer if someone asks you, “How expensive is your church?” Your first impression may be, “My church is free. No annual fees, no service charges and no membership dues. It is not expensive.” Then if that person persists, “What about your church’s expansion plans? New building projects. What will it cost you, as a member? How expensive will it be to remain in your church?”

Many churches, especially bigger churches in the Klang valley, are embarking on multimillion-dollar building and expansion plans. I am sure there are excellent reasons for these projects. Rising church attendance, increasing ministry programmes and a bigger staff are some of them. I am also sure the churches have excellent Christ-centred, carefully discerned reasons that are in God’s will for them. However, I hope that churches are not planning to spend huge amounts of money (estimates of \$50 million, \$30 million and \$10 million, to give a few numbers) for the following reasons: “We want a church campus that looks like Rick Warren’s church campus in California” It is great to have a church campus like Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church in Lake Forest. The whole complex is bigger than some of our local university campuses. The main auditorium can sit 5,000 people and have the latest audio-visual equipment. We must realise that we are not in California but in Malaysia. We have to be realistic and contextualise our church buildings. Sometimes we look at

mega churches in other countries and want to be like them. There is nothing wrong with mega churches provided it is God who wants us to have them. There is something wrong when we try to imitate and end up with only the superficial simulacrum of the whole concept. A multimillion-dollar building may be the proverbial white elephant and turn out to be a millstone around our necks. Instead of trying to build physical assets, we should concentrate on and invest in building spiritual assets in our members.

“We must show the surrounding community an impressive church building so that they will know our God is a powerful God!” Aesthetic buildings are good to look at but we should aim for functionality and multi-purpose usage. Then the building project will not cost so much. If the intention of building is for show, we need to rethink our priorities. If we think God will be glorified by man-made structures, then we need to take another look at Old and New Testament history. Also, we must exercise sensitivity when desiring to build impressive, attention-drawing buildings in a country where the “priority” religion is not Christianity.

“Our church building must be more impressive than that other church’s building because we are better than they are.” Keeping up with the Jones also occurs in religious communities. We need to be aware of this and not get caught in a vicious circle. Often, it is a subtle and unconscious need on our part to compare ourselves with others. The onus is on both the church leadership and the members to ensure that the tremendous investment in money, effort and work is for the expansion of God’s kingdom, and not in proving themselves better than other Christians. Good Christian stewardship demands that every dollar we spend must be accountable and go towards the mission of the church, which is evangelism. How many missionaries and “full-time” workers suffer from a lack of finances while home

churches are putting up “fine” buildings? The work of the gospel expands not through buildings, but through personal relationships and effective stewardship of financial resources.

“We must have a new church building/expansion because there is not enough space.” On the surface this sounds like a good reason. However, “not enough space” is a perpetual problem. I have never been to a church that has “enough space.” When I was visiting Rick Warren’s church, the people I spoke to also complained of insufficient space. The solution to this lack may not lie in having new buildings, but in more creative use of existing space. We need to have a paradigm change in our thinking that regards a church as operating out of a single building. Can a church not have a small shop lot for an administration office, rent halls for worship and services, and hold other meetings in homes? Instead of building a new building every time the congregation grows, should we not think of leasing or renting bigger convention halls or hotel ballrooms for worship services? In fact, many convention halls/hotels offer audio-visual equipment and adequate parking facilities.

I have nothing against churches that have visions for multimillion-dollar building projects. I just hope they are aware that the fund-raising, work and taxing of their members may drain their resources and divert their attention from the more important task of building the Kingdom of God.

# Sorry, We're Closed

27

If we were to take a survey of all Protestant churches in the world, I wonder how many we will find with locked or closed doors to the main hall/auditorium/sanctuary most of the week. These doors are probably opened for church services or other activities that usually last one or two hours. If, for example, an average church holds two Sunday services (four hours), a midweek prayer meeting (two hours) and cell group meetings or Saturday activities (six hours), church events will take up to 12 hours a week or 0.7% of a week (168 hours). In other words, the front door is locked 99.3% of the week. The church's mandate is to bring people into the Kingdom of God. This may be difficult to do if church doors are locked. Of course, you may argue that we need to lock the church because thieves may come in and steal things. Again, this is interesting because the church is made up of the followers of One who has no place to lay his head. Should there be anything to steal?

Maybe it is not an issue that our church doors are locked and closed most of the time. What of our minds? Paul wrote in Romans 12:2 that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. For our minds to be renewed, they must be open. Open to new ideas. Open to reviewing our thinking. Open to changes. We are living in a world in which changes are the only constant. A closed mind becomes fossilised very fast. A closed mind can be compared to someone driving

a car while looking at the rear-view mirror all the time. Throughout church history, the Holy Spirit has always worked through people with open minds. The numerous revivals and renewals of the church are spearheaded by people who were open to new ideas, open to reviewing old ones and discarding them when they were no longer relevant, and insisted on new ways of seeing and doing things. Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin and Ignatius of Loyola are examples of Christians whose minds were open to the Mind of God.

Inside the safety and security of the Christian faith community, our eyes may be closed to the pain and suffering of the world outside. Continuous exposure to violence, terror and gory images through movies, CNN and other news media and novels has desensitised us. We can watch an old woman crying in the ruins of her home after the devastation of a hurricane while eating dinner with no problem. Pictures in TIME magazine of adults and children dying of AIDS in Africa do not move us to tears because our eyes are closed. We look around with our closed eyes and asked, "Where are the poor, the sick, the defenceless and the helpless?" The darkness behind our closed eyes does not move us to action. Eyes that are open to the needs of the world will lead us to feel the Heart of God. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Dame Cecily Saunders who started the hospice movement, and Dorothy Day are examples of Christians who have seen clearly the needs of the world and have done something about it.

A monkey trap is a metal tin with a small hole that contains sweets. When a greedy monkey reaches into the hole and grasps a handful of sweets, it cannot get its hand out of the can because the hand grasping the sweets is bigger than the hole. This is how monkeys are caught. We grasp our gifts and wealth with our closed hands and refuse to let go. Instead of blessing others, we withhold blessings and

slow the expansion of the Kingdom of God. God has blessed some of His people with acute business sense and abundant wealth so that they can finance the front-line troops who are the missionaries and full-time workers. Unfortunately, many of these front-liners are suffering because of the closed hands of the supply lines. George Muller of Bristol was able to tap into the abundance of God and raised support for orphanages, schools and the China Inland Mission because he had open hands.

We close our hearts to the pain and hurt on our neighbours' face because we do not want to get involved. Our time is limited and we do not welcome the interruption to our lives that involvement with others will bring. So we close our hearts and build walls around them. In time, our closed hearts become hearts of stone, feeling neither love nor pity. Life revolves around a series of goals and objectives. We use people instead of things to achieve these objectives; people are used and discarded. Disposable humans become the norm. Marriage becomes a convenience rather than a covenant. Divorces become common because in a closed heart there is no room for commitment other than to self. Eugene Peterson, Marva Dawn and Dallas Willard have tried to open us to the Heart of God who is Love. A Christian faith community is a place for open hearts.

May God have mercy.

Spirit of God,  
you are the breath of creation,  
the wind of change that blows  
through our lives,  
opening us to new dreams, new hopes,  
and new life in Jesus Christ.

Forgive us our closed minds,  
which barricade us against new ideas,  
preferring the past to what you might  
want to do through us tomorrow.

Forgive our closed eyes,  
which fail to see the needs  
of your world,  
blind to opportunities of service and love.

Forgive us our closed hands,  
which clutch our gifts and our wealth  
for our own use alone.

Forgive us our closed hearts,  
which limit our affections to ourselves  
and our own.

Spirit of new life,  
Break down the prison walls  
of our selfishness  
that we might be open to your love,  
and open for the service of your world:  
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

(source of prayer unknown)

# Just Do It

28

I have always been fascinated by the Desert Fathers and Mothers who lived in the fourth century. These men and women left behind everything they had to live in the hostile deserts of Egypt, and later Syria and Palestine. The desert is a deadly, unforgiving environment. In the day, the sun bakes the land mercilessly while the nights are freezing cold. Yet these people left behind comfortable, secure lives and loved ones to live alone in the desert. They moved there to fight the demons in the desert, and the demons within themselves. Like Jesus' temptation in the desert, these elders sought the purifying furnace of the desert to encounter God. Though we are separated by 1500 years, cultural, social and linguistic differences, the teachings and sayings of these elders have much to teach us.

A brother said to Abba Poemen, "If I give my brother a little bread or something else, what happens when the demons spoil these gifts by telling me that it was only done in order to please people?" The old man said to him, "Even if it is done to please people, we are still obliged to offer what we can." He told the following parable.

"Two farmers lived in the same town. One of them sowed and reaped only a small and poor crop, while the other did not even take the trouble to sow and, as a result, reaped absolutely nothing. If a famine comes upon them, which of the two will find something to live on?" The brother replied, "The one who reaped the small poor crop."



The old man said to him, “So it is with us: we sow a little poor grain, so that we will not die of hunger.”

Abba Poemen has given us two important lessons on serving or ministry. First is that no matter what we do, it will always come out of impure motives because of our fallen nature. There is no such thing as pure altruism. Everything we do will be tainted by our sinful nature. Somehow, pride and a desire for power, glory and affirmation will dog our every action. Does this mean we do not do anything? Abba Poemen said even if our motives are impure, we still need to serve others. This reminds me of the disciples who complained to Jesus that some people were baptising people in His Name. Jesus’ answer is illuminating – so what, they are also doing God’s work! (paraphrased Mark 9:38-39)

The second lesson is that we have to sow even if the harvest will be meagre. In the parable, Abba Poemen did not elaborate on the soil condition in the town. The soil must have been so infertile that the second farmer did not even bother to sow. Yet the elder said, “So it is with us: we sow a little poor grain, so that we will not die of hunger.” There are times when our service seems to fall on such hard ground. For all that we put into our labours, the outcome is so discouraging. We became frustrated because we do not see the fruit of our labour. Those whom we serve do not appreciate us. Our loved ones misunderstand our calling. We burn ourselves out in an effort to generate “results.” As we look at our own service or ministry situations, we may be tempted to give up like the second farmer. Jeremiah, often known as the “weeping prophet,” never did see the fruit of his labour. In spite of his preaching, his people refused to repent and he saw the destruction of his beloved country. Yet Jeremiah persisted until the end. Explorer and missionary Dr David Livingstone made one convert in all his years of hard work in darkest Africa. Yet his explorations opened the way for others to

follow, and the years after his death saw the opening of Africa to see the Light.

Abba Poemen's message is simple: just serve the Lord as faithfully as you can. Sometimes we can be so hung up on the whys and wherefores that we lose sight of our calling. We are called to be faithful servants.

# The Hands

29

A short stubby hand reaches out to touch the coarse linen swaddling his body in a stable. Another hand reaches out and touches a soft gentle face, that of his mother, Mary. There is another face, one with bristly hairs, and it is that of his father, Joseph. Moments before, these hands enfolded the whole of all known universes, able to create something out of nothing and bringing order out of chaos. Now these are the hands of a small, helpless baby boy, unable even to feed himself. These are the hands of God Incarnate.

A small hand reaches out to touch the gold lining of the walls of the Temple. The boy's hands are small, soft and gentle. These hands play with mud, making mud cakes and animals. The fingernails are stained as the hands patiently mould and form figurines. These hands point and gesture, chasing the thoughts of their owner as he argues a point with the teachers in the Temple. These are the hands of a young Immanuel.

A hand reaches out for a piece of wood. This hand is now hard, callused at the fingertips and scarred on the palms. The hands have worked at a carpenter's workshop for many years. They have learnt to appreciate the feel of good wood, touching the grain and perceiving the plane of a cut. They know how to handle tools, and where to cut and where not to cut. They have made straight what was once bent, and bent what was once straight. These are the hands of a carpenter's son.

A hand reaches out and begins to write on the sand, as an angry mob mills around, picking up stones and rocks. The men are ready to punish a woman caught in the act of adultery. The punishment is death by stoning. The men hesitate as they read what a finger of the carpenter's son has written on the hot burning sand. Then their hearts burn with shame. One by one, they toss aside their stones and rocks, and walk away. A hand reaches out to the hapless woman and a voice says, "Go and sin no more." These are the hands of love.

A hand reaches out and touches a blind man's eyes. Eyes that cannot appreciate the bright colours of flowers; the beauty of the setting sun; and the smile on the face of a beloved one. "Do you see anything?" A gentle voice asks. The man looks and sees tree shapes walking around. Doubts begin to fill his heart and hope fades. The hands touch his eyes again. Suddenly, the world comes into focus. It is such a beautiful world. These are the hands of healing.

A hand reaches up and a voice asks for water. The Samaritan woman hesitates and wonders about this Jewish man's motive. It is late morning and they are alone. She pours water from her jar and watches as the man drinks from his cupped hands. These are not the soft, pale hands of a priest, scribe or rabbi, she notes. Her mouth opens in awe as these hands point to the sky to emphasise that true worship is neither here in Samaria nor in Jerusalem, but in spirit and in truth. These are the hands of spiritual globalisation.

A hand reaches out and clasps its partner tightly in prayer. The body tenses as the mind struggles with the commitment required of the carpenter's son. Beads of blood form on his brows, flow down his face and fall on the grass. The night is dark, the air heavy, and the world is hushed at this significant moment in kairos time. The hand searches in vain for another human hand, but his friends are all asleep.

Finally, the moment of decision, “Yet not what I will, but what you will.” The tense hands relax. These are the hands of a saviour.

A hand is laid out on a piece of wood and a heavy nail is violently driven through it. Tissues are torn, tendons cut, bones crushed and nerves scream out in pain as the brutal blow is struck. Then, as the cross is hoisted into the air, the hands tear as the weight of the body bears on them. These hands hold the body on the cross as the man struggles with his breathing. A voice says, “It is finished.” A dividing curtain somewhere tears and light shines through. These are the hands of Christ.

A hand reaches out to Thomas for him to examine. A day ago, these hands lay ashen and dead in a tomb. Thomas looks at the nail-pierced hands and bursts out in worship, “My Lord and my God.” These pierced hands hold a sobbing Mary Magdalene and clasp the trembling hands of a beloved disciple. They make breakfast for headstrong Peter. These hands were dead but are now alive. They bless the disciples as the man ascends to heaven. As the resurrected Christ sits at the right hand of God, his hands continue to intercede for his followers on earth. These are the hands of God.

Many hands now reach out to one another and their neighbours. These hands help the poor, defend the helpless, encourage the depressed, liberate the oppressed, comfort the distressed, gather the lost, restore the broken, heal the wounded, calm the angry, feed the hungry, lift the fallen, pray for the hopeless, reach the unreachable, touch the untouchable, forgive the unforgivable, teach the clueless, empower the powerless, and demonstrate Christ-like character on earth. These are the hands of the Body of Christ.

Now, give me a hand.



# HEROES AND SUPERHEROES







# The Lion of Narnia

30

C.S. Lewis said, “Let us suppose that there were a land like Narnia and that the Son of God, as He became a Man in our world, became a Lion there, and then imagine what would happen.” Thus the *Chronicles of Narnia* were created. It is a series of seven books about the adventures of six children (Peter, Edmund, Susan, Lucy, Eustace and Jill) who enter Narnia through a wardrobe in the attic of the house in which they are staying. Narnia is a land of talking beasts and walking trees. When Mr Beaver first explains to the children about Aslan the lion in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Susan and Lucy wonder if it is safe to approach the lion. “Who said anything about safe?” answers Mr Beaver. “Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. And He’s the King, I tell you.” In the course of the story, Aslan sacrifices himself for Edmund and is resurrected, echoing the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Centuries have passed in Narnia, and the children have returned to England in *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia*. The land has forgotten Aslan and is ruled by evil Miraz. The children are summoned to restore the rightful king, Caspian, to the throne and to bring back the Old Narnia of talking beasts and walking trees.

*The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”* is a sea adventure. Caspian sets sail to find the seven Narnian lords who have ventured to explore the Eastern seas. Edmund, Lucy and their cousin Eustace join Caspian

on this sea voyage. Reepicheep, a mouse, goes along on a more mystical quest – to find Aslan beyond the dawn. It is, in essence, “a spiritual journey” for Reepicheep.

*The Horse and His Boy* is about two runaway children – a peasant named Shasta and a princess named Aravis – who escape to the north to Narnia. In the story, the two runaways and their talking horses are driven together by Aslan who also comforts Shasta at the tombs. Aslan helps them to defeat the invaders of Narnia.

In the next book, *The Silver Chair*, Eustace and Jill are commissioned by Aslan to rescue Rilian, Caspian’s son, who has been abducted. The pair has to travel to the Underworld to rescue him.

*The Last Battle* sounds like something from the book of Revelation. It takes place in the last days of Narnia. A false Aslan (actually a donkey covered in a lion’s skin) has taken over the land. Again the children, Eustace and Jill, arrive to help. This time, though, even they cannot redeem the land. Aslan destroys Narnia, which ends in “a rising sea and winter cool.” The next morning, a new Narnia arises and everyone’s final destiny is revealed for eternity, and the good are rewarded.

Lewis wrote *The Magician’s Nephew* to explain the creation of Narnia. This explains why it is listed first in the chronicles even though it was written last. In the book is an echo of the biblical book of Genesis. Narnia starts as a dark void, until a Voice sings and creation begins. Aslan calls certain animals and sets them apart from others. Those who are called, respond, “Hail, Aslan. We hear and obey. We are awake. We love. We think. We speak. We know.”

Lewis was adamant that these fantasies were not allegories but simply children’s stories. Yet Lewis’ Christian belief shines through in the stories. “Aslan is not a tame lion” is the thread that holds the series together. What can we learn from these 50-year-old stories?

One thing I have learnt is that our God is not a “tamed” God. He is the great “I Am.” He is an awesome God, striking fear in those who approach him, yet he is also love, taking care of our smallest wounds. We must always be mindful that we do not put him in a box and recreate him in our own image. He is the Lion of Judah.

Another thing I have learnt is the power of stories. Each of us is living a wonderful story – a story full of adventures and dangers. Yet throughout our stories, if we search carefully, we will see that God has always been with us. Like Aslan, God may appear in different forms, but he is present all the time and he is orchestrating, behind the scenes, all the events in the wonderful stories of our lives. That is why I love listening to other people’s stories and reading biographies. It reveals God’s intervention in our lives, forming and transforming us.

Finally, I have learnt what a privilege it is to be called and set aside by God for his glory. As the children in the Chronicles feel a special kinship with Aslan and all his created creatures, I, too, sense a special kinship with God and all my brothers and sisters in Christ (everyone from creation to eternity). It is a good feeling to belong to something that is bigger than me.

*The Chronicles of Narnia* is a reflection of life on earth. And here, we, like the children – Peter, Edmund, Susan, Lucy, Eustace and Jill – should take an active part in the greatest adventure of our lives. Do not wait for the movies. Live it now.

# Beware the Dark Side

31

George Lucas' *Star Wars: Episode 3 – Revenge of the Sith* was one of the most awaited summer releases of 2005. *The Star Wars* movies – six in total – represented a significant milestone in movie making as the computer became as important as the actors and cameras. This futuristic intergalactic war epic started off in the middle of the story with *Episode 4 – A New Hope*. To get an idea of the storytelling, imagine reading a book from the middle and finding out the ending, and then reading it from the beginning. *Revenge of the Sith* tied the beginning to the end, which is already known. In *Star Wars*, the underlying philosophy of power is the Force, an energy that sounds suspiciously like the Tao of Taoism. The Force inside the Jedi Knights seems similar to the Chi in Chinese religions. Before watching *Revenge of the Sith*, we already know that Anakin Skywalker will be seduced by the dark side of the Force. The movie revealed the reason for Anakin's choice. When he chose the dark side, Anakin became Darth Vader, who was powerful in many ways, yet was in bondage to the Emperor.

There are certain similarities between the *Star Wars* series and another movie, *Kingdom of Heaven*. In the *Kingdom of Heaven*, a movie about the Crusades, one of Saladin's (a famous Muslim general) deputies said, "In Islam, God said 'submit'. In Christianity, Jesus said 'choose.'" Both stories are about the choices that people make. Choices that destroyed a fictional intergalactic empire and a historical

Jerusalem. The kingdom of heaven is the kingdom of conscience, as the narration in the movie so eloquently put it, “We choose with our minds and our hearts to do what is good and we do it.” Choices that could seduce a soul, or redeem it. While the violence may not be edifying, the basic tenet of these movies resonates with our Christian faith.

In our Christian life, we are asked to choose daily. To choose to walk with Christ or to walk for ourselves and away from Christ. Our God is a God who gives His people the freedom to choose. We are not puppets on a string, manipulated by a master Puppeteer. We are given the freedom to choose, even to say “no” to God. Joshua, the military leader of the Israelites, declared at the beginning of the conquest of Canaan that he would choose Yahweh and fight his battles following the Lord’s strategy. Jeremiah chose to follow the Lord even though he was asked to do some funny things to illustrate God’s message. Jesus chose to drink from the cup of suffering in Gethsemane and died a humiliating death on the cross. There are also those in biblical records who chose badly. Lot chose the rich plain where Sodom and Gomorrah were. His home was destroyed and he committed incest with his daughters. David chose to lust after Bathsheba, leading to adultery and murder. Judas chose to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

We are asked daily to choose. We must learn to do it with wisdom. That is why knowledge of the word of God is important. The Bible is a manual for decision-making. It helps us to be in the light rather than in darkness. So choose wisely. Beware the dark side.

# Why the Hulk Should Be Red, Not Green

32

**T**he fictional comic book character, the Incredible Hulk, was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1962. The Hulk is the alter ego of a mild-mannered physicist, Dr Bruce Banner, who is accidentally irradiated by gamma radiation. Whenever he gets angry, he will turn into the Hulk, a creature of pure rage that is invincible and incredibly strong. The angrier the Hulk gets, the stronger and bigger he becomes. I guess he is green because of the gamma radiation. Why green and not red? The English expression for becoming angry is “seeing red.” A red Hulk will be more appropriate.

Many of us are aware of the beast within us. And of the thin veneer of civility that makes us respectable citizens. Occasionally, someone snaps and the beast breaks out. Then we are horrified by the violence done to persons and properties. Sometimes, it is not a person but a mob or a nation that rages. In the aftermath of the carnage, we are again reminded of the evil that lurks in the heart of human beings. In our hectic, chaotic and stressful lives, anger is a constant emotional companion. While some of us are aware of it, others are not. Many try to repress their anger. In doing so, they become impatient, irritable and aggressive. Repressing anger does not make it go away. Like energy, emotions can be converted into other forms. Repressed energy is converted into hatred, bitterness and anxiety.

“Please don’t make me angry. You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry” are well-known words from the Hulk television series. They turn up in every comic, TV programme and movie involving the not-so-jolly green man. What makes you angry? Could it be social injustice, exploitation of the poor, religious intolerance, and maybe abuse of political privileges? My reasons for getting angry are often not so righteous. I get angry because I do not get my way: Why do people not behave the way I expect them to? Why do projects not go the way I plan? Why does the universe not happen the way I want it to? I get angry and then I feel guilty. I remember what Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (Ephesians 4:26-27). Paul was referring to Psalm 4:4, “In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.”

I also remember an old Cherokee story named “The Two Wolves.” An old Cherokee was teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego.”

He continued, “The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought for a minute and asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

As I reflect on this story, I draw out some wisdom. The psalmist, the Apostle Paul and the old Cherokee did not deny the existence of

anger or being angry. In fact, they all acknowledged it. They also taught me that the only way to deal with anger is not to feed it. The only way to deal with anger is to starve it of attention and other emotions. The Hulk is pure rage – violent raw energy – and red is an appropriate colour. Green reminds me of leafy meadows, peacefulness and calm. Methinks the Hulk should be red. Or even better, blue...



# Beowulf Retold

33

*Beowulf* is the oldest epic poem in the English language. Dated around 700 AD, it is the source of most of Western mythology and heroic stories. The epic starts in Denmark. King Hrothgar's palace, named Heorot, has been under attack by a monster called Grendel for 12 years. In these nightly attacks, Grendel kills and carries off the king's warriors for food. Beowulf, a prince of the Geats in southern Sweden, arrives with a small band of warriors to aid King Hrothgar. One night, Beowulf engages Grendel in fierce hand-to-hand combat. Grendel cannot match Beowulf's strength and is mortally injured, but he manages to escape by tearing off his arm. The next day is a day of rejoicing. However, that night, Heorot is attacked by Grendel's mother. The following morning, Beowulf tracks her to a cave, kills her, and brings back to King Hrothgar, Grendel's head.

In the second part of the epic, Beowulf returns home to King Hygelac. After the death of the king and his son, Beowulf ascends the throne. After 50 years of Beowulf's rule, the country is attacked by a fire-breathing dragon. An aged Beowulf fights the dragon, eventually killing it with the loss of his own life. The epic ends with his funereal rites and lament. Unlike the characters in most early epics, Beowulf is an altruistic hero. Many scholars agree that the epic was gradually infused with Christian symbolism as monks duplicated the manuscript. Some scholars regard the epic as a Christian allegory, as a battle

between good and evil. It is significant that Beowulf's three battles are not against man but a monster, an evil demon, and a destroyer of civilisation. His sacrificial death is the culmination of a hero's life.

In the movie, *Beowulf* (2007), screenwriters Roger Avery and Neil Gaiman went beyond the epic to show us a very different portrait of Beowulf. Their Beowulf was not the altruistic hero of the epic but a flawed human being. He was a fighter with an appetite for glory, land, gold and women. He wanted to be immortalised in songs. He enjoyed the stories being told about himself and was not above embellishing some details to make himself look better. In the movie, after killing Grendel and being attacked by Grendel's mother in turn, Beowulf tracks her to her cave. There, instead of killing her, he is seduced by her promise of a kingdom, land, gold, women and invincibility in return for impregnating her. This sin will come back to plague him.

The movie continues with Grendel's mother fulfilling her part of the bargain. Beowulf becomes king. The kingship, glory, land, gold, women and invincibility become wearisome, as King Beowulf soon discovers. He is constantly in battle with those who want to kill him and thus become legend themselves. Then the country is attacked by a dragon, which turns out to be his son (by Grendel's mother). Beowulf succeeds in killing the dragon by sacrificing his life. It is interesting how Avery and Gaiman have turned the epic story about good versus evil into an examination of personal sin and its consequences.

Beowulf is led down the path of self-destruction by his pride. Thus he is unable to resist the temptation of power, sex and riches. By his Faustian pact with Grendel's mother, he plants the seed for his own destruction. He sells his soul for worldly success. A small sin grows into a big one. Beowulf redeems himself in his final act of self-sacrifice to save those he loves.

This movie version of *Beowulf* reminds me of another action hero

in the Bible – Samson (Judges 13-16). Samson was proud and arrogant about his great strength. Thus he was unable to resist the temptation of beautiful Philistine women and wealth. He sinned by marrying the women, thus breaking the Mosaic Law. The consequence of his sin was that he was blinded and chained like an animal. His redemption came when he sacrificed himself by pulling down Dagon’s temple, killing himself and many Philistines. In spite of his flawed nature, Samson was considered a Judge and a leader of the Israelites.

Beowulf and Samson revealed a flawed humanity, prone to pride and sin. Before we are too quick to judge them, we must remind ourselves that we too share the same flawed humanity. The lesson is how not to sin and suffer its consequences. 1 Peter 5:8 and James 1:14-15 warn us about the danger of temptation to sin.

Our vulnerability to temptation arises from our false self (also called “the old nature” or “the old man”). This false nature tells us that we can be happy only if we have power, land, gold, sex, fame or invincibility. When temptations appear, they whisper in our ears that it is okay to commit a small sin so that we can get what we want. “It is only a small sin,” they croon, “probably no one will notice.” They quote Scripture to show us that all our sins have been forgiven, so just do it! Our false self neglects to tell us what our true self already knows. We are forgiven for our sins, but we still have to bear the consequences.

Sometimes, the consequences of our sins may affect many generations. King David, the apple of God’s eye, had to watch his newborn child (conceived in adultery) die, and suffer the treachery of his son Absalom. When we sin, we are not the only ones who suffer. Often, our loved ones suffer too. So when temptation appears, run away as fast as you can – in the opposite direction! G.K. Chesterton remarks, “It is always simple to fall; there is an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands.”

# A Lesson from Post-humans

34

Over the Christmas period in 2005, I had the luxury of reading two large tomes of science fiction by Dan Simmons. *Illium* (2003) and its sequel *Olympos* (2005) offered more than 1000 pages of interesting reading. [Warning: The following commentary contains spoilers so if you want to read the stories yourself, please do not continue with this.]

Dan Simmons starts the story in the plain of Illium where a six-year-old war is being fought before the fortified city of Troy. It is the real-life action of *The Iliad* as told by Homer, complete with heroes like Achilles and Hector, and gods like Zeus and Hera. The story is told from the perspective of a 20th-century Iliad scholar, Dr Thomas Hockenberry, who slowly discovers that he is a bio-engineered being made from his own DNA but with incomplete memories of his former self. He later finds out that this Illium is on Mars, not on earth, and that he is living in the distant future where post-humans have improved themselves to such a high degree that they enact the roles of gods in Greek mythology for their amusement. Hence their involvement in the Trojan war. Their advanced technology makes them “gods” to the proto-Greeks. It also turns out that the post-humans maintain a small population of 1000 of the “original” humans on earth as a sort of museum.

As the story unfolds, it transpires that the post-humans are not satisfied to play out their little games with bio-engineered beings but want to explore other universes too. One of these universes is the universe of our literary imagination. Apparently, our literary imagination comes to life in this universe and creatures like Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the "gods with thousands of hands" from the poet Keats cross over to the future earth. The result is a war that drives the post-humans to live in satellite colonies in space. This explains their venture to Mars and the establishment of a colony of original humans on earth who have no knowledge of the post-humans. These original humans are well provided for and are only interested in a hedonistic lifestyle, reminding me of the Elois in H.G. Wells' classic story, *The Time Machine*.

The story is further complicated by the fact that the post-human manipulation of space has created a distortion that could endanger the universe. Their colonies catch the attention of sentient human-machines that have been created by humans and sent to asteroids and the moons of Jupiter to mine for precious minerals. Over the years, these human-machines have forgotten their origins on earth, creating distinct cultures of their own. Now, sensing a threat to the universe, they plan an exploratory expedition. Dan Simmons tells a long and complex story. He has always been fond of telling science fiction epics, mixing science and metaphysical science in his novels.

In the past, science fiction authors like Arthur C. Clarke would write of human beings evolving into non-corporeal beings with god-like powers. Nowadays, we speak about post-humans instead. Have we been improving or "upgrading" our human body? Yes, we have. We are operating on and doing hip replacement for the elderly and those with hip fracture, and knee replacement for those with knee injuries

from old age, too much jogging and badminton. We strengthen weak spines with titanium rods. In gene therapy, we replace defective genes with normal ones in cases of cystic fibrosis. Where aging is concerned we force back the ravages of time on our faces with facelifts and Botox injections. We also do face transplants for damaged and distorted faces. Embryonic stem cell research offers the potential of growing new organs, and cloning offers the potential of a form of immortality. With the present rate of biomedical and technological advances, it is not inconceivable that in the future, if the Lord does not come soon, we may “technologise” ourselves out of our present “original” shape. As Christians, do we have any opinions on this? Does the Lord allow us to mess around with his original blueprint of the human body? Are we, human beings, to be “co-creators” or just “stewards” of his creation?

When I use the term “co-creator,” I do not mean that we are able to create as God creates, *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). We are creators too in the sense that we utilise God’s created matter to make something that has not existed before. Therefore, we can say we “create” works of art, a novel or a specially designed cathedral. The word “steward” carries the implication of a caretaker. I believe we are to be both. I believe that we are to be “co-creator” with God in the care of his creation. I also believe that there is a caveat: that we are to be responsible co-creators and stewards. Dan Simmon’s two books tell the story of what can go wrong if we are not responsible co-creators and stewards.

TALES FROM  
THE  
MONASTERY







# A Religious KISS

35

Ah Beng was the only Chinese disciple of Abba Isaac, the most famous of all the Desert Fathers in the fourth century. Ah Beng had travelled from China to learn to love God and become a good Christian under the teachings of Abba Isaac. After 15 years, Abba Isaac decided that Ah Beng was ready to start his own monastery so he sent him home. With tears in his eyes, Ah Beng bade his *sifu* (master/teacher) goodbye and made his way back to China. He decided to settle in a small place called Sow Lin in China.

As a disciple of Abba Isaac, Ah Beng led a very ascetic life. He lived in a simple wooden hut. Soon he attracted many disciples and the building of a Sow Lin Monastery was in the works. Ah Beng owned only one loincloth, which he washed every day. Unfortunately, whenever he left it out to dry, rats would tear at it. So Ah Beng decided to keep a cat to drive away the rats. However, he found that he now had to beg for milk in addition to his own food every day. This took time away from his prayers and meditations. So Ah Beng decided to keep a cow to produce milk for his cat. Now Ah Beng found that he had to find grass for his cow. Again this cut into his prayer and meditation time. Then Ah Beng had a bright idea. Instead of begging for his own food and grass every day, he would cultivate the land around his hut. He would plant wheat and use the stalks to make hay for his cow. Soon Ah Beng found out the hard way that farming took even more

time away from his prayers and meditations. So, in frustration, he decided to employ people to work his farm. Ah Beng discovered that supervising his employees took up a lot of his time so he decided to employ a manager. In a short while, Ah Beng realised that he had become very rich!

One day, Abba Isaac decided to visit his disciple Ah Beng in China. Instead of a hut, Abba Isaac found Ah Beng living in a mansion. “Your house is like a temple in Sow Lin,” stammered a surprised Abba Isaac. “All this came about,” explained Abba Ah Beng, “because I wanted to keep my loincloth.”

As Abba Ah Beng found out that, a simple spiritual discipline of asceticism and the wearing of a loincloth can escalate into a full-blown Sow Lin Monastery. I wonder how many of us are aware of how complicated Christianity has become. We build multimillion-dollar churches that are used only a few hours every week. The rest of the time, the buildings are left empty. These are our houses of worship. We worship in air-conditioned comfort, with upholstered seats and a clear view of the stage on which musicians and speakers perform. Our sermons are uplifting, comforting and simplified so as not to make demands on our time, effort and wallets. We are entertained by karaoke choruses, PowerPoint presentations with audio and video, and brilliant performances by singers and choirs. There are many different English translations of the Bible, offering us, for instance, the choice to appreciate the beauty of the language (KJV) in our Bible reading, or to read the Bible like a newspaper (The Message). Our theology is so complicated and convoluted that we are willing to kill each other over it. We fellowship with people who are on par with us in status, both socially and economically. To help the poor and the marginalised, we prefer to give money rather than get our hands dirty.

We retreat into our religious ghettos and watch as social injustice and racial polarisation tear apart the infrastructure of our society.

Have you ever wondered what God really requires of us? Does God want big, fancy churches, emotionally stirring worship performances and Christians who are not disciples? The prophet Micah has this to say, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). God’s requirements are simple: we are to be just in our actions, we are to be merciful to others, and we are to walk humbly with our Creator God. Our Lord Jesus Christ has clarified the Great Commandment for us: we are to love God and to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:28-31).

Ever wonder how something as simple as discipleship can become as complicated as modern-day Christianity? I believe it is time that we re-examine the way we practise our religion. We need to get a religious KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid). We need to ask ourselves, of the many activities that we do in church, which does God require? Our church facilities and assets must also be examined to see if they are being used as God requires. We also need to reassess if we are neglecting what God requires of us: to seek social justice, to give voice to the oppressed and marginalised, to defend the defenceless and vulnerable, to eradicate poverty and to reduce suffering of the sick, wounded and traumatised.

If it means we have to simplify our lifestyles in order to act justly and to show mercy, let it be so. If it means we have to re-examine our dependence on lavish church buildings, let us do it. If it means our worship should be less of a performance and more of a service, let it be so. If it means our pulpit teaching must be more Christ-centred rather than man- or psychology-centred, let it be so. If it means we have to

reduce our church activities to a minimum so more time can be spent outside the church building to offer justice and mercy, let us do it. Jesus led a group of disciples for three years and left them to form a church. Within 300 years, the Church turned into the most powerful religious institution on earth after becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire. Unfortunately, it also became the richest, most ritualistic, power-hungry and self-centred institution on earth. Then, as now, the Church of Jesus Christ needs a religious KISS.

# Worship Gestures

36

“What are you doing? Sign language?” asked disciple junior grade Ah Beng of disciple senior grade Ah Kong. “Making the sign of the cross,” replied Ah Kong knowingly.

“Why?” Ah Beng asked again, reaching out for the last piece of bread on the table. They were having dinner in a large wooden shed. The simple shed was the site of the Annual Conference of Desert Fathers, Mothers and Hermits. The hermits usually attended by proxy.

“Abba Isaac is doing it, that’s why,” replied Ah Kong with an air of superiority. “I saw him making the sign of the cross over his bread just before he ate it.”

“Does that make it holy bread?” asked Ah Beng with an air of innocence.

“You trying to be funny?” Ah Kong asked suspiciously, rolling up his sleeves.

“No fighting,” said Abba Isaac to his disciples. “What are you two arguing about?”

“It is this sign,” Ah Kong answered, moving his hand just over his head, up down, then side to side.

“What sign?” asked Abba Isaac with a surprised look on his face. “Why are you waving your hand like that?”

“I am making the sign of the cross like you did before you said grace,” replied Ah Kong.

“Ah... so,” nodded Abba Isaac understanding. “First, stop waving your hand when you make the sign. Watch me.”

Holding three fingers together – thumb, forefinger and middle finger – Abba Isaac demonstrated to his disciples how to make the sign of the cross.

“The three fingers symbolise the Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The two fingers on your palm represent the two natures of Christ, human and divine. When you drop your hand from your forehead to waist, it represents Christ’s descent to earth. The upward movement is the resurrection. I do this to remind myself of our Lord.”

“But Abba Mathenius uses only two fingers,” said Ah Kong, “I saw him.”

“Abba Mathenius uses two fingers to signify the two natures of Christ and the three fingers on his palm, the Trinity. Notice how he makes the large cross over his whole body,” explained Abba Isaac. “He said it reminded him of God’s vastness.”

“How about Abba Rinardo?” chipped in Ah Beng, not wanting to be left out. “He crosses himself from left to right. Or Abba Andropus. He crosses himself from right to left.”

“Maybe Abba Andropus is left-handed,” Ah Kong said.

“Abba Rinardo is from Rome. The Roman Catholics use the left-to-right movement, which is the left cross. With that gesture, followers signify that they do not wish to be on Christ’s left but rather to be at Christ’s right side. Remember Christ’s parable on the goats and sheep? The goats will be on Christ’s left and the sheep on Christ’s right on the day of judgement. You do not want to be a goat on the day of judgement. Understand?”

“Aiyah, there are no sheep in China, only goats!” exclaimed Ah Beng.

“Stupid!” shouted Ah Kong, whacking Ah Beng on the head.

“Jesus was speaking figuratively.”

“Oh,” Ah Beng whispered sheepishly.

“Abba Andropus,” continued Abba Isaac, as if nothing had happened, “is from Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church’s gesture from right to left symbolises Christ descent from heaven to earth and to the Jews on the right, and then passing to the Gentiles on the left.”

“We don’t do that,” said Ah Kong smugly, “we are Protestants!”

“What are we protesting against...” Ah Beng started to say.

“That is a misconception,” Abba Isaac interrupted, “Abba Martin Luther prescribes using the sign of the cross. The Anglicans and Lutherans still use it today.”

“Shall we cross left to right or right to left?” wondered Ah Beng. “Ah, I know, left cross one day, right cross another day. Left, right, left, right.”

Abba Isaac sighed.

For many of us, worship is the segment of Sunday service during which we sing hymns or songs to the accompaniment of musical instruments and PowerPoint sceneries. Worship is more than that, and should encompass the whole of our lives. It is more than using our mouths to sing. It should involve our mind, heart, spirit and body. Not many of us realise how our bodies are also involved in worship. The gesture may be as simple as closing our eyes while we sing, or opening our hands, or lifting our arms. In prayer, we lean forward and close our eyes. When we feel the Lord’s presence, we may have an intense desire to kneel, or even lie prostrate on the ground. All these are indications that our physical bodies are involved in the act of worship. These are our body language of worship. And consciously or unconsciously, it may help us to worship better.

During its long history, the Church understood that our bodies worship together with our mind, spirit and soul. That is, she developed

liturgy in worship services and certain practices. These practices or actions remind our body of their language of worship. In other words, they prime our body for worship. Making the sign of the cross is a gesture of worship. Nobody knows when and how it originated. It does, however, help some people to recall their body language of worship. The great Church Father John Chrysostom said, “You should not just trace the cross with your finger, but you should do it in faith.”



# Ah Lek Inherits Heaven and Earth

37

**W**hack! The bamboo stick bounced off Ah Lek's shaven head as he let out an "ouch!" "Stop daydreaming," warned Abba Ah Beng, who was teaching his disciple how to study the Scriptures. Abba Ah Beng was a strong believer of an imported teaching method from Ha-mer-li-ca, which held that young minds were empty trash cans, waiting to be filled by their teachers. "Read the text," ordered Abba Ah Beng.

"The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. Romans chapter 8, verses 16 and 17," recited Ah Lek dutifully with the appropriate swaying of his body. For some strange reason, the Sow Lin Monastery used only the New King James Version of the Bible. No other versions were acceptable. "We are heirs of God" ran through Ah Lek's mind. Ah Lek remembered Ah Loong from his village. Ah Loong was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, being the sole heir of the rich village merchant. When Ah Loong's father died, he inherited the family business. According to the latest village gossip, he had 10 concubines and three mistresses, five houses and slaves, and was severely obese (which was a sign of prosperity in ancient China).

"I am an heir of God!" The thought jolted Ah Lek, and he almost fell off his stool. "God is rich," he reasoned, "He owns everything. That

means, one day it will all be mine!” After inheriting God’s treasures, Ah Lek fantasised, he would drive to Ah Loong’s house in his brand-new Lamborghini with a couple of pretty girls. His mansion would have a hundred rooms. It would be so huge that if he wanted to find his wife, he would have to use his handheld GPS locator. He would be ruler of all the nations; presidents and dictators would come to pay their respects to him. He would have buildings and statues built by people who wanted to worship him...

Whack! “You cannot hit God’s heir!” – the words slipped out of Ah Lek before he realised what he had said. “Why not?” asked Abba Ah Beng. “Because one day, I will inherit all of God’s riches. I am his heir. I will be rich and powerful,” stammered Ah Lek, fearful of the gleam in Abba Ah Beng’s eyes. “Ah,” said Abba Ah Beng, “heirs inherit when their fathers die. God, however, lives forever.”

We may laugh at the image of Ah Lek waiting forever to inherit God’s treasures but there is an important lesson we can learn from him – that of interpreting the Bible correctly. More specifically, do we take the words of the Bible literally? Ah Lek did, and thought that as an heir he would inherit everything from his father. Titus, however, understood that the heirs of God would inherit eternal life (Titus 3:5-7). In the Old Testament the Israelites knew that, as heirs, they would inherit the land of Canaan as promised to Abraham (Hebrews 11:8).

Paul taught Timothy that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 2:16-17). The literal interpretation of “Scripture” would be the Old Testament because the New Testament, as we know it, had not been written yet. However, all have us have accepted that Paul meant the whole Bible when he used the word “Scripture,” suggesting that we accept the essence of rather than the literal words of

Paul. Other examples of interpreting the Bible literally would be to accept that Jesus taught he had renounced his mother and brothers (Matthew 12:48); that we are to sell all our possessions (Matthew 19:20-22); and that we have to be born again by natural childbirth (John 3:1-9; poor Nicodemus must have wondered how he could fit into his mother's womb!). While these are obvious examples of Bible passages not to be taken literally, there are others that are not so obvious.

What happens when we try to interpret the Bible literally? Some Christians begin to pick and choose their passages. We can aspire to be a literal Acts 2 church while conveniently leaving out the part about being "together and had everything in common" (verse 44) and "every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts" (verse 46). Some believers stand their ground and insist that the whole Bible is to be understood literally. To do that, they have to live in their own communities and insulate themselves from the 21st century. The Amish are a good example of these Bible literalists. Those at the other end of the continuum are the Bible liberalists. They insist that the Bible has been written by men and provides good teaching on life and moral values.

How, then, do we, as Christians, understand the Bible? First, we should know that the Bible is divided into different genres: historical, poetic, prophetic or allegorical, and prescriptive. A poem cannot be understood literally, and we must not derive a doctrine from a historical incident recorded in the Bible. Second, we have to be aware of the limitations of various translations (or versions) of the Bible. These translations are called versions for a reason: they only approximate the true Bible or word of God. Each translation of the Bible has its strengths and weaknesses. Different translations reflect the biasness of those who have translated the text from the ancient Greek, Latin, Aramaic and Hebrew languages. It is good to have at

least two or three different translations of the Bible to compare. Third, Bible commentaries are useful if we recognise that they too have their limitations. It is better to study individual book commentaries rather than single-volume commentaries. There are scholars who have spent their whole life working on a single book, or sometimes a few verses of one book of the Bible, and their work is worth reading. Fourth, put yourself in the place of those to whom the Bible was originally directed. While it may be impossible for us to put ourselves in ancient Israel, we may understand the Bible better if we know more about the background, culture and language of the people of this nation. Finally, be open to the Holy Spirit as we read the Bible. We must be aware of our human tendency to read into the Bible what we want to hear. We must allow the Holy Spirit to open our spiritual eyes and hearts to what God is saying to us through the words and sentences of the Bible. That, in the final analysis, is how we should understand the Bible.

# Look at People with X-ray Eyes

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“Ah, this is the life,” said Ah Kow with a satisfied sigh as he lay back on the soft grass in the courtyard of the Sow Lin Monastery. Ah Lek burped in reply. This was the time of the day these young disciples loved the best; after a hearty meal and all the chores for the day have been done. They would laze around and watch the sun set until the call for evening prayers.

“Do you know the Abba who preached during chapel this morning came in his new BMW X6? Man, that is a beautiful car. I wish I could have a car like that,” said Ah Kow wishfully.

“Yes, you can. Didn’t you hear him tell us that we are the sons of God? As his sons, God has promised to make us rich, handsome and famous. To claim these promises, we are to visualise because God has already given us all these,” Ah Lek said with his eyes closed. “I am visualising a red BMW X6 with a beautiful girl in it.”

“I have never seen the chapel so packed with people,” Ah Kow said, ignoring Ah Lek. “It must be good to be famous and highly regarded by so many people. He must be very learned because he has found so many good promises of riches for us in the Bible.”

Ah Lek opened one eye. Seeing no red car, he closed it again, still visualising.

“He looked so handsome in his new robe. Not like the beggar who came to town last week. He was so ugly and dirty. He had a hump

on his back like camel. And he smelled! There were yucky blisters and sores on his arms and legs. Yet he said such good things about God. I went with Abba Ah Beng to the market today and there was a small crowd listening to him. He was talking about loving our enemies. Some people laughed at him. The children threw rubbish at him. Some of the men also threw small stones. He just stood there and did nothing. If I were him, I would have shouted at the people and thrown the rubbish back,” continued Ah Kow, picking his teeth with a stalk of grass.

Ah Lek opened his other eye. Still no red car. He closed his eye again and concentrated so hard that his eyebrows met in the middle of his forehead.

“I also heard that this beggar cured the blind man who lived at Jalan Ah Fook. You know, that man who was born blind. Of course, nobody believed that. I heard that some people said he got his power from the devil. That is not all. He also said he was the son of God.”

“What!” Ah Lek said, opening his eyes. “The Son of God! That filthy beggar? How can that be? Cannot be. The Son of God is handsome man with blond flowing hair and a trim beard. Most probably drives a BMW Z5.”

“Eh? Who said Jesus looks like that?” Ah Kow asked.

“All the pictures in Abba Ah Beng’s library are like that.”

“Cannot be. Jesus is a Jew and Jews have black hair.”

“Can be. Maybe he dyed it.”

“Cannot.”

“Can”.

“I beat you, then you know.”

“What are you boys shouting about?” rumbled Abba Ah Beng’s baritone voice. “I am trying to sleep here.” Surprised, the young disciples turned around and saw Abba Ah Beng’s bulky shape under a tree.

“What Jesus looks like,” mumbled Ah Lek.

“Ah, the prophet Isaiah described him as being ugly to look at, sickly with skin conditions, and despised by other people. The evangelist St John described him as poor,” explained Abba Ah Beng.

The disciples were speechless for a full 30 seconds. “What? I have always thought that Jesus is handsome, rich and famous, and has a large following. How can the Son of God be sickly and poor? Abba, that doesn’t make sense.”

“What is important in a man is not what we see but what is inside,” Abba Ah Beng explained in his teaching voice. “God does not judge a book by its cover but by the contents. Similarly, God judges a person not by his outward appearance but by his character.”

He continued, “So be careful how you judge people. And do not look down on those whom you feel are inferior to you. Remember this, Ah Kow, or you would have missed the chance to meet the Son of God this morning. Come, it is time for evening service. Let us walk there.”

Looking around and not seeing a red car, Ah Lek sadly joined the group of disciples walking to the chapel.

The question lingered in the air. “Will you recognise Jesus Christ if you meet him? Will you really?”

# Abba Ah Beng's Durian Theology

39

“Going to the cinema to watch movies is sinful,” declared disciple Ah Kow.

“No, it is not,” countered disciple Ah Lek, who loves to watch movies. “It is educational.”

Both disciples were washing toilets in the Sow Lin Monastery. The monastery had a policy requiring disciples to share in the maintenance of the premises. The policy was put in place to build character in disciples. The monastery also saved money by not having to employ more janitorial staff.

“Watching movies corrupts the soul,” Ah Kow continued. “Did not the Apostle Peter said, ‘Do not love the world or anything in the world?’”

“But the Apostle Paul said, ‘Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.’ Going to movies will renew our minds,” responded Ah Lek.

“Sinner!” shouted Ah Kow. “You just want to watch half-naked girls.”

“Do not,” Ah Lek shouted back. “I want to watch *The Passion of the Christ*.”

“Liar!” screamed Ah Kow, pushing Ah Lek. Ah Lek responded with a well-executed “drunken tiger falling down the hill” roundhouse kick.



Abba Ah Beng was sitting crossed-legged while eating a durian in the main hall when his two disciples were brought before him. He looked up at Ah Kow and Ah Lek with a gleam in his eyes, which left the two disciples quaking in their shoes. "Fighting again, I see," sighed Abba Ah Beng. "Ah Kow, open this durian with this screwdriver." Ah Kow reached out to grab the durian and tried to open the fruit. All he managed to do was give himself lots of painful scratches. "Here, let me," said Ah Lek, as he reached out and grabbed the screwdriver. With a skilful poke and twist, he opened the fruit into two halves, revealing seeds with a golden, fleshy outer layer.

A rich aroma filled the hall. Both Abba Ah Beng and Ah Lek inhaled with a satisfied "Hmm." Ah Kow gagged. "Such a wonderful smell," sighed Ah Lek.

"So horrible. Like rotten eggs!" Ah Kow complained.

"Here," Abba Ah Beng said, "eat, eat." Ah Lek took a seed and ate its luscious flesh with a look of ecstasy on his face. "Very good," he commented. Abba Ah Beng beamed. "Sure good. Special tree, B94," he explained. Meanwhile, Ah Kow shut his eyes as he put the fleshy seed in his mouth. "Urgh!" he croaked. "The inner seed is so hard." Then he choked and turned blue, as he had accidentally swallowed the seed.

"The Bible is like a durian," explained Abba Ah Beng, as he performed the Heimlich manoeuvre on Ah Kow. "To apply it, you have to know how to open it. Otherwise, all you get are painful wounds. With the correct technique, which is the Holy Spirit, you can open the Bible and taste its teachings. The succulent fleshy part of the seed can be likened to the interpretations and traditions of the Church. These are the negotiable parts of the Bible; like going to the movies or wearing jeans to church. Some people love them; others hate them. The hard seed is the inner core of Biblical teaching. It is non-negotiable and consists of truths, such as God is three and one (the Trinity); Jesus

is the Son of God; and Jesus is fully human and fully God. This seed, when planted in the right soil, will grow into a tree and bear good fruit.”

Both disciples blinked in awe at Abba Ah Beng’s insight, the durian forgotten. Abba Ah Beng calmly finished his durian, burped and said, “I’m going to town; my movie starts in an hour.”

Abba Ah Beng’s durian theology may sound strange to us but it does capture certain truths about the Bible. To some people, the Bible is like a thorny hard durian. It is difficult to hold. The thorns may scratch and puncture the skin, causing pain. Thus the Bible appears as an obstacle to many who seek the Truth. Some will spend their lives studying the exterior of the Bible, becoming an expert without tasting the succulent flesh within. As all durian lovers know, there are certain ways to open the fruit without causing themselves bodily harm. By inserting a screwdriver or a blade into a certain spot and twisting it, the durian will split easily into two halves. Similarly, to get to the truths in the Bible requires certain tools and know-how. The guiding of the Holy Spirit; a willingness to seek the truth; and a working knowledge of the language are primary requirements to split the hard shell of the Bible. Without the Holy Spirit to open our spiritual eyes, the Bible will remain an unopened fruit.

The Bible contains many teachings. However, the teachings are not all equally important. Knowing about God is obviously more important than knowing how many metres make a cubit. The teachings of the Bible can be broadly divided into two categories, as Abba Ah Beng explained. One category consists of teachings of core truths and their validity is non-negotiable. These truths are often codified, as in the Nicene Creed or the Westminster Larger Catechism. Some examples are God the creator, the Trinity, biblical inerrancy and the redemptive mission of God. These truths stand outside of culture, time

and space. The other category comprises the negotiable teachings. These teachings are to be interpreted in the context of culture, time and space (hence they are negotiable). They have to be adapted by each generation of Christians to be relevant to their era. Examples include if we should have our worship service on a Saturday or a Sunday, the type of music to play during worship service, and if we should serve grape water or wine during Holy Communion.

While it is easy to say that there are two categories – the non-negotiable and negotiable teachings – it is sometimes difficult to decide which category a certain teaching falls into. One example is baptism: should a believer be baptised by sprinkling or immersion in water? While at first glance the answer may seem obvious, proponents of each mode of baptism will be able find enough verses to support their stand. Another example is speaking in tongues: should it be allowed in church? What should we do in such cases? I believe it is time for us to stop fighting and believe that our God is large enough for both positions. Why must everything be either/or? Why not either/and? One of the reasons the Church is so weak is that we are so fragmented. We spend much of our time and energy fighting over the non-essentials (negotiable) while neglecting the essentials (non-negotiable). We will be so much stronger if we focus on the essentials of our faith.

# You Become What You Do

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**B**rother senior disciple Ah Meng is so pious that he will be made Abba soon,” observed Ah Lek, as he continued to knead dough to made mooncakes. Every year, the Sow Lin Monastery would make mooncakes for the poor in the surrounding villages. The mooncakes were eaten to celebrate the Mid-Autumn or “Mooncake” festival held in the middle of the eighth month of the lunar calendar.

“He prays so fervently that his pew often shakes and so many tear drops flow down his face that he wets his Psalter. He has memorised large chunks of the Bible too. And he is Abba Ah Beng’s favourite.”

“I don’t like him,” said Ah Kow, as he put a piece of dough into his mouth. “Yuk,” he said, spitting it out. “Senior disciple is always picking on others, looking for faults. He likes to point out my mistakes and always insists that I spend time confessing them.”

“You are right. Just this morning he hit me on the head during morning prayers. Who does he think he is?” complained Ah Lek.

“You were falling asleep.”

“Was not.”

“Yes, you were. I heard you snore.”

“The other day he told Abba Ah Beng that my cell was dirty,” said Ah Lek, changing the subject. “That tell-tale. Abba Ah Beng made me scrub my cell and his too.”

“The young disciples are ill-disciplined and not fit to be in this monastery,” Ah Meng pointed out to Abba Ah Beng during his time of spiritual direction. “They don’t know how to pray, how to read the Bible properly, how to be forgiving and how to help others. I want to help them so much. I want them to be holy. I want them to good disciples. I want them to give up their selfish desires and bad habits. In fact, I feel so strongly about it that I cannot sleep at night.”

“Yes, I have been hearing stories from the young disciples about you. It is good that you are so concerned about their spiritual formation. However, be careful that in your zeal you do not cross the line to become the opposite of what you are fighting. Let me tell you a story,” said Abba Ah Beng.

“Once upon a time, during the time of the Crusades, there was a young, strong white knight who was very pious and devoted to God. He made it his personal quest to kill all black knights. The black knights were unholy and impure. Throughout his long life this white knight killed many black knights. One day, when he was old, he met a young white knight on the road. To his surprise, he was immediately attacked by this white knight. He fought valiantly but was unable to overcome the young knight. Throughout the fight, a question lingered at the back of his mind, ‘Why is this white knight attacking me?’ Just before he was killed, he caught a reflection of himself in the shining shield of his opponent. The knight reflected in the shield was black.”

# Some Cats are Forever



Abba Ah Beng had bought a cat to catch the rats that were biting his loincloth. The cat was very cute but playful. During chapel service, it would quietly sneak into the chapel and distract the young disciples of Sow Lin Monastery from their prayers and meditations. A sudden touch of warm fur and a perfect purr were enough to draw the most devout from the depths of God.

Abba Ah Beng finally solved the problem by tying the cat with a string to a stake in front of the chapel. The disciples got accustomed to seeing the cat tied to the stake as they entered and left the chapel. After the cat died, Abba Ah Beng bought a new one and continued the tradition of tying his cat to the stake in front of the chapel before services. Abba Ah Beng was finally called home by the Lord and was succeeded by Abba Ah Lek, who carried on the tradition of tying the cat to honour his spiritual director and mentor.

A hundred years later, a brand-new gleaming mega-church auditorium stands where the Sow Lin Monastery used to be. It is large enough to comfortably sit 6,000 people. However, at the front entrance, there is a stake to which a cat is tied before each worship service. When asked the reason for this, senior Pastor Joe Pan said he did not know why, but there has always been a cat in front of the worship hall. He postulated that it might, in some way, draw God's blessings to the congregation. Anyway, who is he to change a hallowed tradition?

To this day, if you visit the mega-church where the ancient Sow Lin Monastery once was, you will see a cat tied to a stake in front of the worship auditorium. You can see the cat sitting and walking around. The cat is very active, except when its battery runs out.

Do we need to keep all our church traditions?





WINDOWS  
TO  
MY SOUL





# Why I am a Christian

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“Uncle, why are you a Christian?” asked the five-year-old daughter of an old friend when she was in my clinic for a booster shot. I have thought often about the answer to that innocent question. I cannot remember how I answered her. She must have been satisfied because she continued to admire a “Hello Kitty” sticker I gave her. The question stuck in my mind. I could not forget it. It is one of those questions that demand an answer. Yes, why am I a Christian? What is Christianity to me?

I guess I could start at Genesis and explain the Original Sin of Adam and Eve that caused the break in fellowship with God. Or I could discuss the Pauline theology of penal-substitution of Christ’s death on the cross. Another approach I could take is to look at the covenant theology of God. Yes, I could start with these. However, these will explain who a Christian is, but not why I am a Christian. And what being a Christian means to me.

I am a Christian because I am in a living relationship with God. I have not seen God, but I have a pretty good idea who He is by the portrait of Jesus Christ as given in the Gospels. However, it is not just an idea of God I have but a relationship. God is as real to me as my wife. Sometimes, it boggles the mind that the Almighty God who created the heavens and earth knows about me, is interested in my daily life, and has a living relationship with me. He even calls me son.

We talk together. In my prayers and solitude, I can sense His presence. I hear what He tells me through the Bible, other people, circumstances, dreams and visions, and mostly through a still small voice in my soul. I know I often disappoint Him and grieve Him. Yet, I also know His unfailing love for me. In this living relationship, He wants me to be me. He accepts me totally, faults and all.

I am a Christian because it makes me feel wonderfully more alive. I do not mean that those who are not Christians are not alive. Being a Christian makes me more alive because my life has a purpose. I am here because I am meant to be here. I am not here by accident. I am not here because I am working out my karma. Neither am I here because my mother married my father and they wanted to have a child. I am here because there is a greater purpose. I am here because I have a role to play in this greater purpose. This role is part of a greater plan. This greater plan is a plan for good. This plan is God's plan and is for all of eternity. God conceived of this plan and thus of me even before the creation of this universe. Having a role in God's greater plan means that everything I do here on earth, every single moment, is significant. No moment is wasted. There is a reason that I am alive. I have observed that some of the saddest people are those who do not have a purpose for their lives. In some ways, they are not living, just existing.

I am a Christian because, through me, God gives life to others. I know that I am not a perfect instrument. I have many flaws and am so self-centred. Yet there have been numerous occasions when God used me to help others; sometimes to give spiritual insight through my conversation, teaching and writing; sometimes to extend physical help through my medical work and community projects; at other times to bring others into a living relationship with him. I am often amazed myself. Did I really do that? That is so unlike me. Being a Christian is life-giving.

So the next time someone asks me why I am a Christian, I shall answer that I am a Christian because it makes me more alive in a living and life-giving relationship with God. Hmm. Okay. The next time another five-year-old asks me why I am a Christian, I shall answer, “Jesus loves me this I know...”

# Why I Love to Read

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I love books. I love to hold a new book in my hands. I love the smell of new books and feel the texture of the fine binding of leather books. Most of all, I love the sense of anticipation of the writing. Is it a new adventure that thrills and sets my heart racing, or does it offer new facts to expand my mental horizon? Will it contain insights to deepen my spirit or thoughts to stir the mind? Yes, I confess. I am an addict. I am suffering from biblioholism (an addiction to books). Whenever I walk into a bookstore, I look for a basket to put my new books. I wish the stores would provide supermarket trolleys. I buy my books at the local mamak store, small bookshops, big-chain bookstores and online. I am such a good customer that Amazon.com sends me personalised Christmas greetings and presents every year! People who visit my house and see my books always ask, "Have you read all these?" "No," I will reply, "they are for decoration." But I do read them.

Recently, I was cataloguing my books. I felt a deep sense of nostalgia as I keyed the name of each book into the database. Holding each book was like meeting an old friend. I remembered when I read them, the reactions they evoked and vignettes of my life when they were being read. I read this book when I was very homesick in Edinburgh; that book when my daughter left for Australia; and this trilogy when I was in Rome.

As I thought further, I began to realise that even though I loved books, I loved them not for their own sake. I am not a book collector who buys books to keep them in their original mint condition. I buy books because I love to read. I read because I love to learn. So I discovered that a love of learning is behind my love of books. Books are to be read.

I read because I have a hunger to know. I have a type of personality that is very curious about the world and wants to know about everything. As a kid I would stay indoors to read the encyclopaedia while other kids played football outside. Reading opens up to me a world that I would not have known otherwise. These days, Discovery Channel and the Internet help to do that as well. Even now, when I am grey-haired, I still have this hunger to know. Except that I now explore and appreciate God's wondrous creation.

I read because I want to understand. I like to connect new discoveries with what I already know. It is like finding pieces of a puzzle and fitting them together. I experience a deep sense of satisfaction when I begin to understand something. I love these "aha" or "eureka" moments, which show the glorious ecology of God's creation.

I read because I want to learn. Learning is not just knowing and understanding, but it also involves changes in our lives. Without assimilating what we have learnt, we are like those whom Paul described as "always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7). I have been asked why I am studying for a PhD (permanent head damage) at my age. I should be playing golf. Well, I am doing it because I want to learn to think critically. Critical and applied learning produces wisdom.

I know where this love of books and learning comes from – my father. Even though he had just a rudimentary education, he

taught himself by reading books and by observing and learning from others. I believe his hunger for knowledge and understanding has been passed on to me. We were not well-off financially, but there were always books around the house and my father studied them often. My father has modelled for me what Scripture teaches, “Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Proverbs 9:9-10).

I hope I have done the same for my daughters.



# Why I Began Blogging



I have always thought that a blog was the stain on my shirt after I have carelessly eaten laksa noodles until someone pointed out to me that laksa gravy makes a blot. A blog is a specialised website in which you write your journal or ideas and post on the Internet for all to see. In an attempt to reduce my ignorance, I ventured into the land of cyberspace and, to my delight, discovered that there was a vast domain to explore and bring into the influence of the Kingdom of God. Here are some reasons I blog for God:

Firstly, there is a vast store of information on the Internet. While not all information on the Internet is reliable, the same thing can be said of much of the information we receive from television, books, newspapers and our friends. The onus is on the recipient to filter the information and decide what to believe. One rule of the thumb is that the source of information must be trustworthy. An educational or recognised organisation is more reliable than a personal website (unless you know that person, of course).

Secondly, the Internet has made a true democratisation of knowledge. Information and knowledge have always been controlled by government censors, media magnates and professional watchdogs (also called peer reviewers). Now anybody can post comments and thoughts on the Internet. Some websites have moderators to block the more offensive contents, but independent websites offer greater

freedom for people to post whatever they want. The bad side is that there is a lot of nonsense on the Internet. The good side is that there is freedom of speech.

What has impressed me is the “wiki.” This is an encyclopaedia-like website where people work together to build up a searchable information database that is free for anyone to use. One good example is Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)), where a huge encyclopaedia is slowly being built up. The contributors are professionals and others who are giving away their knowledge for free. One would expect such a collaborative effort to be full of errors. A recent study, however, shows that on scientific subjects, the content of Wikipedia is as reliable as that of Encyclopaedia Britannica Online! Personally, I feel more Christians should be contributing to the building up of this type of database. The Apostle Paul asked how people would know of the gift of salvation if they had not been told about it in the first place.

Thirdly, over the years, ways of learning have changed. Gone are the days when we can sit down and listen to two-hour sermons by Charles Spurgeon and Jonathan Edwards. We are now used to receiving bites of information, interestingly packaged with sounds and pictures courtesy of CNN and MTV. Teens are learning more from the Internet than from churches or schools. Channels of communications have changed, and churches have to change their communication formats to be relevant to the present generation. The churches’ mandate is to go forth and make disciples, not wait for disciples-to-be to come to them. The message has not changed. Only the ways of saying it have.

Finally, a weblog encourages the formation of online communities. As a personal website, a blog can serve as a discussion forum. Postings are read and commented on by other bloggers (people who write blogs). If there are common interests, over time communities will form. Christians and seekers have formed such online communi-

ties. One of the challenges I see to the Church in the coming years is that these communities will grow and may even outnumber existing brick-and-concrete churches. Such church communities share sermons transcripts, listen to sermons online, and offer comfort and fellowship. Instead of condemning such communities, the Church should embrace and incorporate them into the existing church structure. I am waiting for pastors of cyberspace churches to appear.

Why do I blog? To communicate. Welcome to Blogosphere! Visit my blog at [www.draltang01.blogspot.com](http://www.draltang01.blogspot.com).

# A Letter to My Nephew

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**A**s you stand on the threshold of adulthood, you will begin a wonderful journey of discovery. This is a journey full of laughter and tears; joy and pain; happiness and sorrow; and light and darkness. However, do not be afraid to step forth because you will never journey alone. Your mother, father and sister will be with you. Your Uncle Alex, Auntie and cousins will also be with you. Most of all, at each step of your journey, there is One who will walk closely with you.

This is a journey of discovery. You will discover what a great and wonderful world you are living in. Your eyes will be opened to new vistas and broad horizons. In the process, you will discover yourself. Take time to know this person who is you. He may not be the person you want him to be yet, but give him time. Know that you are unique and in the vastness of creation, there is only one you. You will discover new and old friends. Take the time and effort to cultivate friendships because they are lasting in these ever-changing times. You will also discover stirrings inside you as you grow into a man. Keep yourself pure; avoid pre-marital sexual encounters until you meet the girl God has created specially for you.

You will also discover new knowledge and much information. Reflect on what you have learnt every day because knowledge and information are useful only if they are tempered with wisdom. Knowledge and information come and go, but wisdom remains.

Keep your mind open and retain your sense of wonder. College and universities will soon beckon. In terms of your vocation, think not of what you can do for God but what he can do through you. In your journey, you will work in many different jobs but you have only one vocation.

Be gentle with yourself and maintain a wholesome discipline. You will discover the liberty of freedom, but freedom is no excuse for laziness. You must have self-control and exert self-discipline. Know that all your choices have consequences, so choose well. Have short- and long-term goals and seek to fulfil them. There will be times of great success in your life. Enjoy them, but do not let them get to your head. There will also be times of failure and rejection. Learn from them and leave them behind. Live life with purpose, and you will find life fulfilling.

Be not ashamed of your heritage. Be proud because you have received the best attributes that China, Korea and Malaysia have to offer. Be they princes or paupers, your ancestors have passed on to you the great potential that you now possess. Go forth and fulfil that potential. Take time to embrace your heritage.

Take time to laugh because that is God's gift to mankind; receive joy for that is his salvation. Never take yourself too seriously or others too lightly. Be counter-cultural if you have to, for that is the Way of Jesus. You will find much human glory in the sports field and in physical beauty, and you will be tempted to lust for such glory. You will think that being popular is a worthwhile ambition and be willing to sacrifice for it. Football jackets, prom queens and popularity are temptations for you in this part of your journey, as wealth, sex and power will be in a later part. Learn to resist these temptations for they will lead to much heartache.

Get to know the One who walks with you. It is time for you

to develop your own faith because, all these years, you have been covered by the faith of your parents. You will discover that the One who walks with you is a self-revealing God. If you seek him, you will find Him. Develop godly habits of Bible reading and study, prayer, fellowship, spiritual friendship, silence and solitude, giving, service and journaling. Then your journey will be a powerful experience, as you dive into the depths of God and soar the heights like an eagle.

Finally, learn to love and be loved. You have grown up in a family built on love. Now you will be entering a world where love is often abused. And loving can be painful. However, there is no greater force in the world than love. Let love be your guide and your sustenance. Love is commitment and loyalty.

Our ancestors have a proverb that states, “A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.” Take that step now, and know that our love goes with you.

Your loving uncle,  
Alex, 2008

# Love is LOVE

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A paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13:

If I have earned a string of theological degrees, is a tenured professor in an renowned seminary and have mastered the linguistic intricacies of ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek, but do not care for the illiterate manual worker with a struggling family, I am like a bag of hot air or the static caused by the feedback of an MP3 soundtrack. If I can look into the future and discern the winds of change in the economic, social and political arenas, and if I am a spiritual master who has a large following, believing that I am the Voice of God, yet I do not lift a finger to help a stranger in need, I am as useless to one who is hungry and lonely as an empty chicken rice Styrofoam container. If I am a great philanthropist and give billions in aid relief to poverty-stricken Africa and if I sacrifice my health by burning out in ministry work for the church, but have done it to achieve a reputation and a name for myself, I already have my reward, which is my 15 minutes of fame. My ulterior motives, the need to please people, and other hidden agenda will eventually be revealed for all to see. If I see a person and not see an irritation, an interruption (to my busy schedule), a burden or a lesser being, and if I feel compassion and the need to connect with this person and perhaps offer help, I may have love.

Love has the capacity to stand outside time and wait for the right moment to come along. It is not rushed, dictated by the clock,

nor hurried by the tyranny of the urgent. Love has time to understand and walk a mile in another's shoes. Love is gentle and does not carry concealed weapons. It does not see the need to cut someone down to size or make mincemeat out of someone's ego. Love does not demand to have what others have. It does not need to prop itself up by stepping and standing on others to appear more beautiful, more powerful, richer or more honoured in society. Love does not need to show off, wearing masks and putting on performances all the time. Love reveals its true face. Love speaks softly and politely because its words are words of encouragement. Words to build up and not to tear down. Love uses its words to help others find and fulfil their God-given potential. Love has good anger management and does not let the sun go down on its anger. Love knows anger is but a symptom, and will seek the root cause of the anger. It seeks to heal inner hurts and understand the inner thoughts that lead people to do evil deeds. Love does not bear a grudge nor seek to get even. Love learns to forgive. Love returns good for bad. Love gathers all into its protective arms, believing that there is some good in all mankind. Love has marched with others in Alabama against racism, been beaten by batons in the Salt March in India, and stood before a tank in Tiananmen Square. Love believes that justice should be available to all. Love believes that there is always hope in this vale of tears. Love knows that we are living in the shadow lands and that, one day, Someone will lead us by our hand to our true home. Love sees that in the darkest night, there is always a ray of light.

Love is the energy that drives the universe. It never runs out, tires or loses its power. Love is for eternity. We have begun to realise that knowledge has its limitations. Quantum theory robs us of certainty and Chaos-Fractal theory robs us of control. The only constant in our lives is change. We have not been able to develop a Unified Theory of the Universe. Hence, we see in part and we understand very little.



Realising that there is nothing certain in this universe and that the ability to control our destiny is an illusion, we begin to understand that we have been thinking like a child. It is time to grow up and see the world as it really is. To see through the illusions that Satan has created to deceive us for so long. To realise that we have spent large portions of our lives chasing after the non-essential and neglected the relationships we should have nurtured and developed. Adult thinking will help us to focus on things that are eternal. These are our souls and the souls of others. The need now on earth is to purify and nurture our souls. In the process, we will develop faith and acquire hope. But most important of all, we will see and experience Love. And in the end, it is only LOVE that matters.

# What I Learnt in 2006



**A**t the end of a Sunday School lesson about Jonah and the whale, the teacher asked her class of eager six-year-olds, “What have you learnt?” The answers varied from God to love to fishing until a small voice called out, “Big fish vomits Christian!”

Ignatius of Loyola taught a spiritual discipline of reviewing our daily lives to discover the presence of God. He recommended we do it daily, weekly, monthly, biannually and yearly. So in the great tradition of Ignatian spirituality, I decided to find out what I learnt in 2006:

- I learnt that I never kept any of my New Year resolutions because I did not make any.
- I learnt that God answers prayers but often not in ways we expect and that He has a sense of humour.
- I learnt that no matter how many bookshelves I build, there is never enough room for my books.
- I learnt that God works slowly but His work is excellent and everlasting.
- I learnt that compassion for the poor involves giving but sacrificial giving is very painful.
- I learnt that I am in so much of a hurry that most of the time my soul is playing “catch up” with my body.
- I learnt that spiritual formation takes time, and I am very impatient.

- I learnt that a 10-day silent (no talking) retreat is a torture but God gets through to me. He could have called me on my handphone; he has my number.
- I learnt that no matter how many times I have read the Bible, there is always new truth/meaning waiting to be discovered.
- I learnt that most people prefer spiritual fast food to a wholesome Christian meal.
- I learnt that the Holy Spirit speaks to me but I have to lower my ambient noise to hear him.
- I learnt that saying “no” is harder than saying “yes” but I need to do “the one thing needful.”
- I learnt that there is no point worrying about what people think of me because they never think of me anyway.
- I learnt that in the name of reformation, we have often thrown the baby out with the bathwater so there are many babies lying around. I am looking around to pick up a few.
- I learnt that teaching may not lead to learning, but learning involves teaching.
- I learnt that after a child’s life has been saved, the parents will come back to complain about the bill.
- I learnt that God does heal in response to prayer but in his own way and timing.
- I learnt that the universe does not revolve around me.
- I learnt that I love to do research and write but I am not very good at it.
- I learnt that the congregation never remembers the

main points of my sermons but they remember my jokes and wisecracks.

- I learnt the need to connect with our young adults because they are the next generation of leaders.
- I learnt that the Internet is a vast communication network and resource, and that people actually read my blogs.
- I learnt that it is easier to loosen my belt than to lose weight.
- I learnt that we need to appreciate and love our friends because God may call some home early.
- I learnt that after 40 years, *Star Trek* fans are still baldly going where no man has gone before.
- I learnt that pain is a good teacher but I prefer to learn from a book.
- I learnt that parents expect doctors to have no life other than to be there when they want them.
- I learnt that I enjoy my comfort zone, but travel moves me out of it.
- I learnt that believing my body is 10 years younger does not necessary make it so.
- I learnt that the shoring up of my garden is expensive, and my contractor now enjoys his new Mercedes.
- I learnt that I am attached to BMWs but a Toyota can get me around just as well.
- I learnt that most people cheat in their golf scores.
- I learnt in Rome never to believe someone who claims his restaurant to be 100% Italian because his wife makes the pasta. As the food is hearty, so is the bill.

The Teacher in Ecclesiastes ended thus, “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Enjoy my haiku and blessings for 2007:

breeze blow sun high bright stream  
stream flow calm water reflect harvest  
find one thing needful

# What I Learnt in 2007

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**A**n unknown Abbot of Greve prayed, “Lord, may I be wakeful at sunrise to begin a new day for you, cheerful at sunset for having done my work for you; thankful at moonrise and under star shine for the beauty of the universe. And may I add what little may be in me to your great world.” I tried to live out this prayer for 2007. As in 2006, God taught me many lessons. I have never been a good student, often rebellious and headstrong, but I have been blessed with the Holy Spirit, a loving wife and children, and wonderful friends to make sure I learnt these lessons in 2007:

- I learnt that not making New Year resolutions is a good idea.
- I learnt that it is easy to pretend to be a Mr Know-It-All but deep down, I know that I really do not know anything at all.
- I learnt that it is okay to be me.
- I learnt that God is not impressed with what I have achieved.
- I learnt, after leading a silent retreat for a group of graduating seminary students, that they have been trained to be activists rather than contemplatives.
- I learnt that the more my true self wants to be closer to God, the more my false self draws me further.

- I learnt that knowledge and information do not automatically translate into wisdom and practice.
- I learnt that it is not easy to give up the things that I think I deserve.
- I learnt that it is very easy to be misunderstood if you are a preacher, church leader or Bible teacher.
- I learnt that acts of kindness can be mistaken for acts of cruelty.
- I learnt that all people are self-centred, including me.
- I learnt that while darkness is my constant companion, God is also present in that darkness.
- I learnt that while I value friends, I often take them for granted.
- I learnt that I need more than 24 hours in a day if I am to do all that I want to do.
- I learnt that the more I study the Bible, the more I uncover multiple levels of meanings in it.
- I learnt that it is difficult for me to forgive and to receive forgiveness.
- I learnt that either I accept that I will never be the person I want to be or be constantly angry.
- I learnt that the more I try to detach myself from worldly status symbols, the more attractive they become for me.
- I learnt that people do not like to learn the truth about the prosperity gospel.
- I learnt that I can understand spiritual truths better by writing about Abba Ah Beng and his smart Ah Leky disciples.
- I learnt that an academic pursuit of a PhD distances

me from people and life.

- I learnt that the more I research a subject, the more nebulous it becomes and the more uncertain I become.
- I learnt that the pain I feel in my heart is the also a pain that God shares.
- I learnt that it is easier to become cynical and judgmental as I grow older.
- I learnt that I enjoy working with university students and their youthful enthusiasm energises me.
- I learnt that the more I try to lose weight, the more I gain kilos.
- I learnt that inside this aging body is a little boy with a great sense of wonder.
- I learnt that I comprehend more about Paul, Corinth and the Greeks by being in Athens, Corinth and Delphi than by reading all the books about them.
- I learnt that in a top hotel in Athens, you must check your itemised bill because someone may try to change the amount on your credit card chit.

Each year is different; every year brings something new. I echo what Ruth Harms Calkin has written:

“Mysterious new year  
So wrapped in reserve and surprise  
You have no reason to feel smug  
Or even condescending.  
After all, the majestic God  
Has full knowledge of you



Just as he has of me.  
There is not an issue that you can evade.  
Furthermore you are powerless  
To do anything to me  
That God does not permit.  
All he allows in his infinite wisdom  
Is for my ultimate good  
And his greatest glory.  
Consequently, new year,  
You cannot trick or disillusion me  
By your baffling unexplainables  
Or your feverish activity.  
My times are in the hands  
Of my sovereign God  
Whose power is limitless  
And whose love for me is everlasting”





**M**any of us live life on the run. But busyness is not an excuse to neglect the spiritual formation of our souls. In fact, the busier we are, the more we need spiritual formation. This book allows us to practise *lectio divina*, which is the Latin for “spiritual reading.” *Lectio divina* opens us up to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and instils in us the disciplines of reading/listening, meditating, praying and contemplation.

Short and crisp, the meditations and stories in this practical and thought-provoking book will give you focus in your life, rejuvenate your soul and draw you closer to God. Topics covered include: choose to grow, know His love, yield to His rule, a Christian on the run, a Church in the world, heroes and superheroes, tales from the monastery, and windows to my soul.

“The value of this book will come as you slowly read a chapter, mull over the idea(s) expressed, and allow God to inform your thinking and reform your values, attitudes and perspectives.”

**Dr Allan Harkness**

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