


2004 Issue No.1

Good News Unlimited



**What
Prayer Meant
To Jesus**

**Getting
What You Want
Halfway To Heaven**

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Editorial



The good news of the kingdom is about God; about what God has done—something so tremendous and wonderful, that the eternal prospects of men and women have been guaranteed.

The Gospel therefore, is the proclamation of this fact as an objective reality, to be believed and trusted, but we cannot avoid discussing it in terms of what our response to it should be. In view of this, what did Jesus mean when he said, 'The kingdom of God is being preached and everyone is forcing his way into it?'

Surely he meant at least this, that there is no ambivalent way to reply to the Gospel. God's intervention in history; the unique event of the Christ, his life, his program, his direction, his burning compassion and his commitment to task—even unto death—is bound to cause crisis.

Birth is a violent occurrence. Perspiration and pain accompany it and there is no way around it.

'The law and the prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached and everyone is forcing his way into it' (Luke 16:16 NIV).

Just as there is no way for an 'plane to pass tranquilly through the sound-barrier, all change is disturbing. Similarly, the kingdom of heaven precipitates radical change; forceful action, cost and effort.

The religion of Christ is more explosive than many have realised. It bears within it the seed and the dynamic for world change. Sometimes it has been trivialised by the impression that its program is summed up in church membership, attendances at services and various other benign practices. These are good and right, but there are other aspects of Christ that need to be taken into account. He was not always the meek and mild figure that some of us know. He was sturdy enough to strike fear into the hearts of the money-changers. He savaged the Pharisees; exposing their abuses with blistering speech. He spared not their sensitivities with soft words.

Great forward movements in Christianity have been marked by the 'forcefulness' that Jesus spoke

of, like the Quaker movement of the 17th Century for example. Today, many associate 'Quaker' with that which is quiet and harmless. In their beginning Quakers were so urgent and emphatic in their convictions that they were imprisoned in their thousands. They earned their name because of their great vehemence. They were often given to physical trembling.

The message of God's abounding grace, with the forgiveness, mercy and eternal life that flows to us from it is so amazing, that it calls for no small adjustment in the conduct, direction and enthusiasm of it.

A spirited, wholehearted response to the love of God stands as the only appropriate rejoinder

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WHAT PRAYER MEANT TO JESUS

Ron Allen

In its most commonly practised form, prayer is the people's way of getting what they want. But what was prayer to Jesus? It was anything but his 'getting what he wanted'. His prayers contradicted that objective. 'Not my will, but yours be done' (Luke 22:42). Despite this apparent disavowal of personal gain through prayer, Jesus nevertheless regarded his praying as a most successful enterprise.

Prayer was such a prominent component in his life, that it largely explains his uniqueness. He is widely seen as the greatest personality that ever walked the earth. His disciples perceived the role that prayer played in fashioning him thus. They asked him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1).

If it is asked what was Jesus' own estimate of the part played in his life by prayer, we need only read his words, 'I am not alone, my Father is with me' (John 8:16). The result and reward of prayer for Christ, was the presence of God. Through praying he knew himself to be accompanied, overshadowed, imbued with and inspired by God.

If we take Jesus' example in prayer as a benchmark for what prayer might accomplish for us, we might start then, with the concept of prayer as communion with God. In thinking this way about prayer, we can easily come to think of it as an exercise in fellowship. i.e. personal friendship. This will relieve us of the need to confine prayer to special places (churches, worship rooms, funeral parlors); special poses (kneeling, hands folded, eyes shut, head down); special times (once a week, once before bed time).

As fellowship, prayer is much more than 'saying prayers.' Brother Lawrence talked about establishing ourselves in God's presence by continually



conversing with him. In a relationship with someone whose friendship you value highly, communication is a way of life. Prayer comes into its own, when viewed as a means by which we maintain and enjoy our relationship with God. Few are as equipped for life in this world as the one who can say with Christ, 'I am not alone, my Father is with me.'

Imitating the Best Prayers.

Thinking of prayer primarily as communion, helps short-circuit a lot of intellectual difficulties that people have with prayer—especially unanswered prayer. Troubled thinking regarding prayer can arise from the mistaken idea that all the prayers of the Bible are there for us to imitate. This must not be so.

If we have learned to use prayer as some kind of 'Aladdin's lamp' to be rubbed so that every desire of our heart can be met, prayer will produce many puzzles. Yet if we will pray simply to commune with a God who is really there, then prayer will be a fruitful and meaningful practice for that reason alone; irrespective of our success or otherwise in getting what we want.

The most rewarding relationships are those in which the parties do not wait before one another, demanding favours. Carmen (my spouse) and I have observed with wry amusement, a couple we know. They have not attained high levels of satisfying communion in their nuptial estate. She says:

'Hun, have you taken out the trash?'

He replies, 'No, I did it last time.'

'Well, change the baby's diaper then.'

'No, I did that last time as well; why don't you do it?'

'You're wrong, I did it last time.' . . . and so it goes.

The best relationships occur when friends are cheered, encouraged, comforted, calmed, strength-

ened and rewarded, just by being with one another. Then, the friendship does not stand on the one successfully meeting the other's wants. Through prayer, persons can enter into friendship with God. Those who know him as a friend do not wear themselves out wondering why this prayer and that one, was not answered. They have communion with God—all else pales.

Prayer Makes God Real.

Some people complain, saying, 'I have stopped praying because God is not real. It's like whistling in the wind.' Others, having prayed say, 'God is real to me because I pray.' Some lament their lack of friends. But sometimes the reason is not hard to find. The person is not friendly. If that holds true in human relations it is just as true in relationships with God. God is not intrusive. He does not force us to listen to him, or to talk to him. *'I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in'* (Revelation 3:20). That Scripture goes on to describe what will happen if the door is opened: 'I will eat with him and he with me'—a wonderful picturing of God and humanity enjoying together the intimate rewards of table fellowship.

Constancy and immediacy are two ingredients of good friendship. If you hope to experience reality in friendship, talk often with your friend. In good and bad times, keep talking. In just the same way, immediate and constant prayer makes God real.

My Dad was a man who prayed. He prayed with his family. He prayed when he was milking the cows, driving the truck, lifting hay, walking along, riding a horse. Not out loud, and not in such a way as to hinder him in what he was doing. I observed him many a time, murmuring away. Those who have found in prayer, a doorway to Divine fellowship, do not save up their prayers for emergencies only. They practice God's presence.

Do you suppose God is in heaven and must be issued with a 000 prayer to get him down here? God is always here. *'He is not far from each one of us'* (Acts 17:27). *'I am with you always, even unto the end of the world'* (Matthew 28:20).

Prayer will not make the disappointments and pains of life go away, but it will make them recede in importance. A man may say, 'I fell and broke my leg; I was in pain, but my friend was there and he helped me.' A woman says, 'My husband fell ill, and after a long struggle, he died, but my friends came and stood beside me.' Another, 'I was slandered, but

I had a friend who came to me, who was not ashamed of me and would not let me struggle alone.'

'The Lord is close to the broken hearted' (Psalm 34:18). *'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me'* (Psalm 23:4).

Beating Back Anxiety.

We inhabit, and are part of, an economic system that is frenzied, predatory and competitive. It is an environment that fosters acquisitiveness. Much anxiety is generated if, for one reason or another, we find it hard to keep up with the standard of living being set. Prayer mitigates anxiety by helping to create a patient, receptive temperament, rather than an aggressive one.

It should be noted however, that it is tempting to reach out to God in the same way that we are tempted to reach out for economic advantages. Prayer of that kind only yields more anxiety. Prayer used primarily to seek God for himself, brings about a quiet acceptance of who God is; what he has already provided; a resting in his wisdom and his providence.

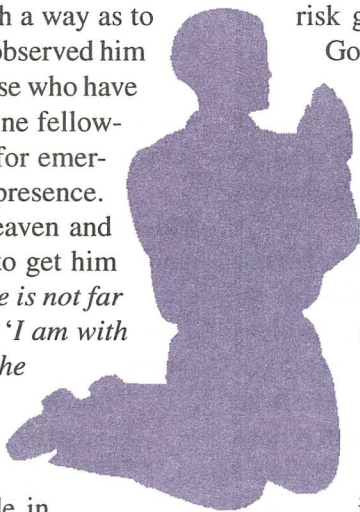
Rehearsing the Joys.

Prayer valued for communion's sake, can sometimes consist in a rehearsal of the features of a friend's personality that one finds so rewarding. During my itinerant absences from home, my wife (Carmen) and I indulge ourselves in 'more-than-usual' reminders of things we find so pleasing in each other (Thanks be to email!)

Without this kind of maintenance, relationships risk going cold. It is just so between us and God. Observe some prayers of this kind, from Scripture:

'I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth' (Psalm 121:1). *'The Lord gives strength to his people'* (Psalm 29:11). *'I acknowledged my sin to you, I did not cover up my iniquity ... and you forgave the guilt of my sin'* (Psalm 32:5). *'You are my hiding place, you will protect me'* (Psalm 32:7).

Prayers of this kind beg for nothing. They just recount the goodness of God. They have something other than restless human ambition and craving at their centre. Sometimes our needs and troubles are so all-consuming to us, that prayer becomes a repetition of our dreads and worries. Such prayers can leave us more



distressed than ever.

In prison, one might guess that the apostle Paul's prayers would be brimful and cascading with despair, 'Get me out of this hole. How can I do your work in this place?' But no, his prison prayers were about God. *I kneel before the Father from whom the whole family in heaven and earth draws its name* (Ephesians 3:14-21). By any assessment, Paul made a mark on world history. The Christian tradition that holds sway in this land, and in many parts of the globe; from whence our freedom, justice and scientific progress derives, came to us through this man who prayed, and whose prayers were not about himself, but about God.

Even Second Rate Prayers Are Useful.

In our prayers, we need not be anything else before God but what we really are. We truly are a cauldron of wants; a sack of lusts, but we have no-

where else to go with these than to God. When we take all our hankerings to God, we are not rejected. He welcomes our juvenile approach to him, because, as a wise Father, he knows that *'we do not know what to pray for'* (Romans 8:26). The expression of our unbridled yearnings to God, no matter how foolish, is never a waste of time. Does a parent cast off the offspring because the child keeps asking for stuff that is cheap, ridiculous and harmful? No! The child goes on bleating out its silly demands while the parent often replies by granting things the child never thought of asking for.

And so the child grows. He comes to appreciate the ways of his parents. More years pass and it is apparent that Mum and Dad are fading. Soon they will cease to be. Then the child recognizes with utmost clarity, that which is really precious to him, Mum and Dad themselves—much more precious than any thing they might give to him. ♦

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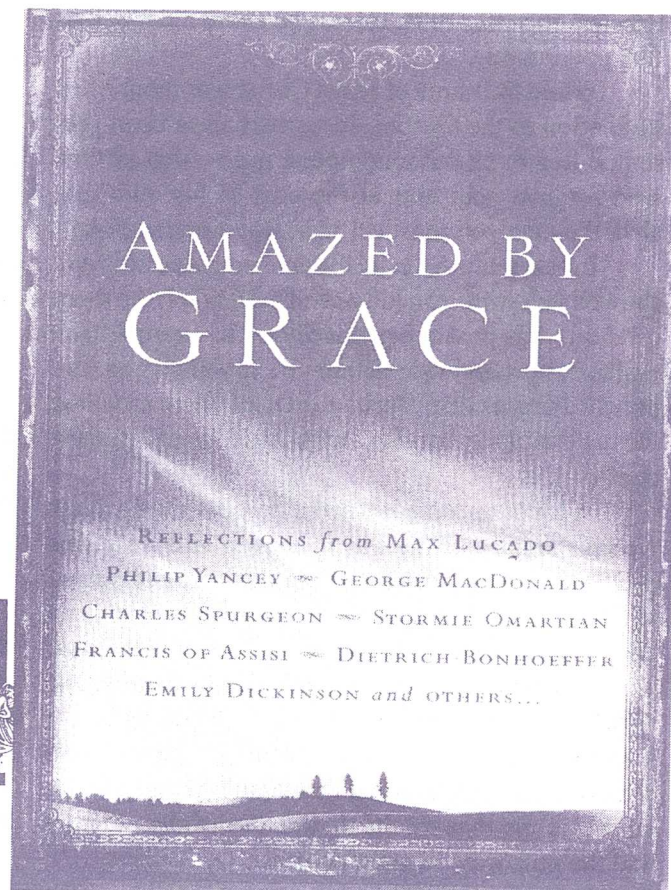
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Halfway To Heaven

—A Testimony

Some of you, like me, began your spiritual lives believing in a much different gospel than that which is actually found in the Bible. Those around you may have spoken of the Gospel in ambiguous terms; or said that those who would be saved, must, above all, join some church denomination.

You memorised texts like, *'This gospel of the kingdom must be preached in all the world ...'* But if you were like many, you would have been hard-pressed to tell anyone exactly what the Gospel was. Perhaps once in a Bible class, you heard it defined as 'the good news'.

While the name of Jesus Christ was mentioned in relation to the Gospel, Jesus may have been presented in a dual, but incomplete light—that of One who forgave your sins at the cost of his own life, also, the One you must act like. But it ended there.

In this picture, Jesus forgave you your sins and showed you what you jolly-well better do from there on. Jesus was pictured primarily as the example you had to follow and woe betide you if you copied him poorly. Phrases like, 'Jesus paid it all' were mouthed during the song service, with little grasp of their depth.

A lot of us have learned a new emphasis. Now we say, 'Jesus paid my way to heaven' and we have a pretty clear idea why the Bible describes salvation as a 'free gift'. We know we are talking about a 'done deal'—something we heard rarely, if ever, in the past.

The barest essentials of the Gospel came to me slowly some twenty-five years ago. They had to push a lot of junk out of the way so that I could see them clearly. Somewhere along that time line an idea occurred to me that set the distinction of the old way and the new way, in great contrast.

Jim Lalone

In the old way, Jesus got me only halfway to heaven! He forgave me my past sins, but *I* had the huge task of getting off this earth and into heaven pretty much on my own shoulders. Super Christians learned how to get quite a bit of assistance—but no more than that.

Sound familiar? Did you struggle to live a life that would be good enough?

In my 'new mind's eye' I pictured my old self standing outside the gates of heaven—sins forgiven, but I couldn't get through the gates with only *that* much. I had to have lived the right kind of life.

The glory of the Gospel is that not only did Jesus *die* perfectly for all of us, he also *lived* perfectly for all of us. I saw these as two distinct things—his death and his life.

No way could my sorry mess of a life get me through those gates. But the perfection of Jesus was more than enough to fill the bill, to finish the job, to get me on the other side of those gates.

To picture getting only halfway to heaven is obviously an artificial thing. You are no longer condemned, but neither are you approved. You are just somewhere in limbo, but it helped me to see and feel the great distinction between the roller-coaster that was the old way and the steadiness that is the new way.

To retell it, the death of Jesus pulls us out of the 'burning'. That's very clear, but more than that, the life he lived is yours and mine for the asking; it's more than enough to earn our ticket through the gates. It is our passage into realms where the spiritual beings we could never see on earth, are more real than the old earth itself. This is the mystery that Jesus gave us the solution to. ♦

GETTING WHAT YOU WANT PRAYER AS UNREFINED DESIRE

Ron Allen

A Heartfelt Desire.

Whoever said that man is a praying animal, spoke truly. Prayer is a uniquely human activity. In our self-conscious estate we scarcely cease to think about ourselves; what would we like to do; what would we like to have; where would we like to go. We are a sea of wants and each person—believer or otherwise—consistently offers up to the universe, his hearts desire, in the earnest hope that the universe will make him lucky.

What is my demand on life; my overriding wish? What do you believe would satisfy you; if only it would come to pass? A girl wishes her parents would buy her the doll of her dreams. An adult is sweating on a pay rise so he can buy a new car. Someone is calling on the gods for a lottery win. A woman desperately wants to be married, another yearns to be pregnant. A wronged man longs to see the ruin of his enemy.

Immature Prayers of the Bible.

There are many examples of these kinds of prayers in Scripture.

Samson was ready to give up everything for Delilah. *'Get her for me, she pleases me well'* (Judges 14:3). That was his prayer. Later, when that prayer had been answered, Samson prayed again. *'Strengthen me just once more and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes'* (Judges 16:8).

Hezekiah, when he learned he was soon to die, prayed a prayer that was more like a temper tantrum (Isaiah 38:1-3). The Psalmist entreates God to fulfil his desire for revenge on enemies:

'Show no mercy to wicked traitors. May his days

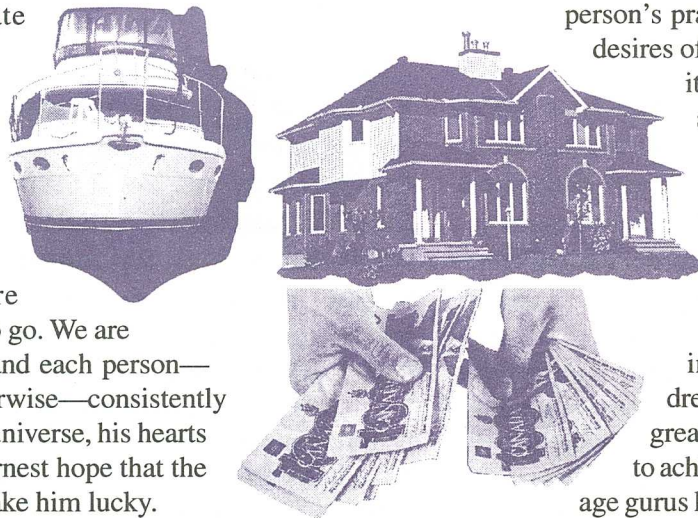
be few; may his children be fatherless. May his children be beggars; may they be driven from their homes. May no one extend kindness to him' (Psalm 109:13). The Pharisee offers up to God his arrogant chant: *'Lord, I thank you than I am not like other men'* (Luke 18:11). The mother of James and John brings her unashamed ambition for her two sons to Jesus *'Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit on your right and the other at your left in your kingdom'* (Matthew 20:20-21). A plaintiff, fresh from a fraternal scrap, approaches Jesus. *'Make my brother divide his inheritance with me'* (Luke 12:13).

Unsatisfying Results in Prayer.

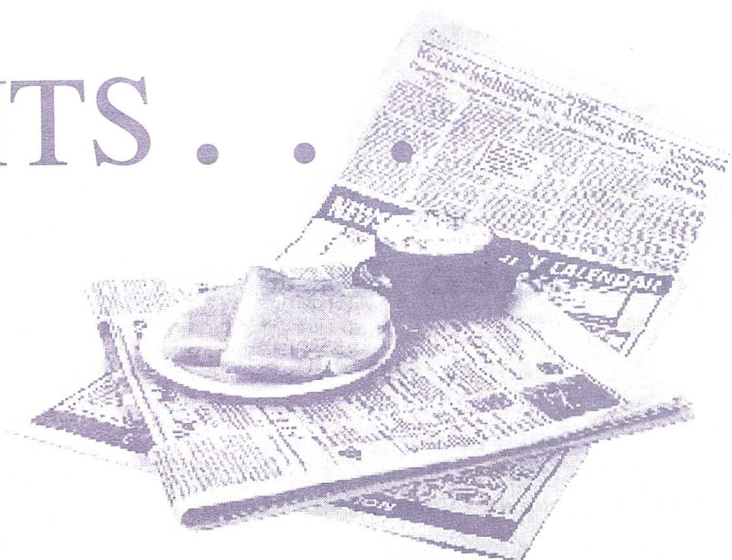
The ascendant craving of a person's life is that person's prayer. If we admit these rampant desires of ours in our definition of prayer, it will help us to identify one reason why prayer is so often successful in helping us to attain our goal and why it is such a powerful force in human life. If something sits at the forefront of your mind for long enough; consuming your waking hours and occupying your dreams, it will tend to influence you greatly in organizing your resources to achieve what you have in mind. New age gurus know this and encourage seekers to visualize their dreams. The prayer of an individual life does tend to lay claim to its owner's interior and exterior environment, drawing things into its whirlpool. The universe will respond—within limits—to the insistent lust of the human spirit.

Samson gets what he wants. It does him no good, but he gets it still. The Prodigal Son receives his demand. But after a while, he does not enjoy it. Ahab gets his hands on Naboth's vineyard and his life is destroyed. Lot was successful in his desire, but not to his long-term satisfaction.

This is how it comes about that greedy and dishonest people sometimes prosper and go about claiming that God is answering their prayers. I have personally known of men who have wantonly desired a woman they had no right to, and later when they were successful, were bold enough to say, 'God must have wanted me to have her.' The Bible has plenty of answered prayers like that; prayers that destroyed the asker. Time and again, Israel's prayer was answered. They wanted a golden calf; they wanted a king like the other nations, and God *'gave them their requests and sent leanness into their souls'* (Psalm 106:15). ♦



NEWSBITS . . .



W Wesley's 300th.

John Wesley's only journey to America was an unsuccessful eighteen month stint as a missionary in Georgia. But now, three hundred years after Wesley's birth, scholars say the founder of Methodism and a host of other churches, is one of the three or four most influential religious leaders in American history.

Wesley never intended his Methodist movement to be a new denomination—he simply wanted to revive the Church of England. But Wesley's movement that emphasised holiness and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, went on to found the Methodist Church; three predominantly black churches, the Salvation Army, the Nazarenes and had significant impact on the Pentecostal movement.

—*Religion News Service.*

G Gay Bishop.

London: The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has broken his silence over the controversial appointment of Jeffrey John—an openly gay priest—as bishop of the Church of England, by declaring that it does not alter the Anglican Communion stance on homosexuality.

Williams has previously expressed sympathy with homosexual relationships, but as leader of the Anglican Communion, he has said he would uphold the decision of the 1998 Lambeth Conference of the world's Anglican bishops, which rejected 'homosexual practice' as being incompatible with Scripture.

—*Ecumenical News International, PO Box 2100
CH - 1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland.*

M Monastery in Prison.

A Jail for long-term prisoners seems an unlikely place to open a monastery offering spiritual retreats. Yet a series of articles by Swedish journalist, Agneta Lagercrantz, on spiritual retreats for long-term prisoners, helped convince a prison management to open just that; a permanent 'monastery' inside a jail, which was thought to be unique in Europe.

Lagercrantz, a journalist for the *Svenska, Dagbladet* newspaper, received the 2002 John Templeton European Religion Writer of the Year award in Trondheim, Norway, at the assembly of the Conference of European Churches.

—*Ecumenical News International, PO Box 2100,
CH - 1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland.*

D Divinity Student Accused of Smuggling.

Moscow: Andrew Okhotin, a Harvard Divinity School student, is set to stand trial in Moscow on charges of trying to smuggle \$48,000 into Russia.

Andrew said the money was legal and intended for Christian charities. He also said that custom officials tried to extract a \$15,000 bribe for letting him go.

Hundreds of thousands of US evangelical Christians are praying for the Baptist student. Six members of Congress are lobbying for his release. The lawmakers are led by Rep. Joseph Pitts, R-Pa., who, twenty years ago fought for the release from a Soviet jail of Okhotin's father, an underground Baptist Pastor.

—*Religion News Service.*

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Topics

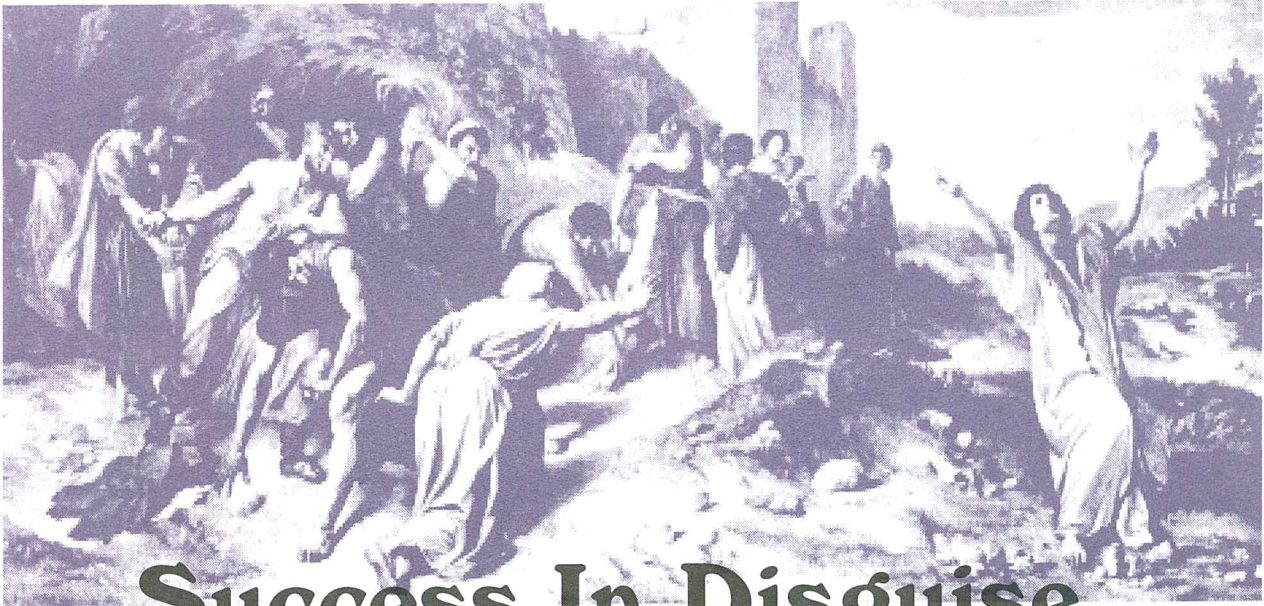
The Gospel, Our Only Hope.
Immortality, Mirage or Fact?
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(The Development of the Biblical faith in Immortality.)

An Eternal Weight of Glory.

*(How the Blessed Hope addresses the
Disappointments and Injustices of this Life.)*



Success In Disguise

Desmond Ford

In a rebellious world, Christian witnesses for Christ rarely meet with spontaneous and unqualified success. Scripture, church history and Christian experience, testify to this, and the truth must be learned well, lest discouragement creep into our labours.

The greatest preacher of all time, after three and a half years of gargantuan toil, had a mere five hundred converts—far, far less than a modern Billy Graham could produce in one crusade. No wonder Jesus gave to his disciples a sacrament of failure. In Matthew 10:14 we have the record of our Lord's admonition for the disciples to shake the dust off their feet on leaving a town where unbelief prevailed.

It is a sacrament we no longer observe. It seems easier to forget Christ's words than to underline the barrenness of our efforts. Yet there will be loss if we ignore our Lord's warning. Read the biographies of Carey, Hudson Taylor, Adoniram Judson. In each instance, a handful of years had passed before a single convert was made. Most of us would have quickly decided we had mistaken our call.

Reading an old book by F W Farrar, I was struck by its summary of the life of the earliest foreign missionary, who was the model for all who followed:

'How sad it was and how fruitful! From that day on, when blind, trembling and with the scars of

God's own thunder on his soul, he had staggered into the streets of Damascus, what a tragedy had encompassed him in ever-deepening gloom! That first peril—when he had been let down in a basket through a window—the flights from assassination; the hot disputes at Antioch; the expulsion from Iconium; the stoning at Lystra; the quarrel with his own heart's brother; the acute spasms of that impalement of the flesh by a stake at Galatia; the agony in Macedonia of outward fightings and inward fears; the five Jewish scourgings; the three Roman flagellations; the polished scorn of Athens; the factious violence of Corinth; the streaming tears of the parting at Mellitus; the gnashing fury of Jewish mobs; the illegal insolence of provincial tribunals—these were but a fragment, a small fragment of his trials and miseries.

Even the brute forces of nature seemed to be against him. He had to struggle in her rushing water-courses; to faint in her sultry deserts; to toss for long days and nights in leaky vessels on her tempestuous seas. This was the persecuted, perilous life on which he had to look back as he sat chained to the rude legionary in that dreary Roman prison.

He seemed to have found no results for his labours, no reward for his immense self-sacrifice. He seemed to have been abandoned and forgotten by the very churches which he had loved. Nor did any sun-beam gild the last unrecorded scene.

See the bent, gray, weak old man, led by a soldier along the Appian Road; see the sword flash and the head fall and which, think you, of that small handful of weeping Christian brethren could have dreamed

in his wildest dream, that, to the poor martyr's, glorious memory; shrines more magnificent than that of the Capitolian Jupiter, should tower over cities more glorious than Imperial Rome, long centuries after ... nor did the saint, the martyr himself dream of it. His thoughts were not of earthly crowns. He asked the service, not the payment; the battle, not the victory. Type of all true missionary lives, his was "the faith triumphant in failure", which is better than self-congratulations on any visible results.'

—*Saintly Workers*, pp. 165-167.

Recently Lance Gersbach, a man greatly loved by all who knew him, was martyred in the Solomons. He was a man who spoke little, but thought much. He loved his wife and family, he loved his church, he loved his Saviour and he sought to do all the good he could for his fellow men. He paid for that love with his life. A healthy, vigorous, intelligent Christian—yet he died, leaving his wife and two young children. What a loss! What a mystery!

And yet—I repeat the thought expressed to me at his funeral—this earnest, loving missionary for Christ, did more in his final sacrifice, than if he had lived many lives and spoken with the tongue of Billy Graham from the pulpits of the world's great cities. The word of the tragedy sped around the whole wide

world and millions wondered and sympathised with his bereaved family. If only one in every thousand of these thought twice about the matter, they would have been forced to ask, 'What am I living for? And is it worth dying for? What was the Gospel for which this very special man surrendered his life?'

It is easy to see that Lance Gersbach accomplished more in his last moments than most of us could ever do in lifetimes. How mysterious God's ways, and yet how full of glory. But for most of us we try to say a word here and there—a kind of touch and a thoughtful deed there—the fruitage will not be so apparent. In the midst of suffering and apparent failure, we may even, like the Saviour on the cross, cry, 'Why?'

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways beyond ours. Consider all the fruit trees of the earth. In each instance it took much longer to grow the tree than the life of the fruit. But it will be the opposite with every Christian. We are but the creatures of a day, but our fruit, though often not seen here, will last into eternity, giving us everlasting joy and giving God glory.

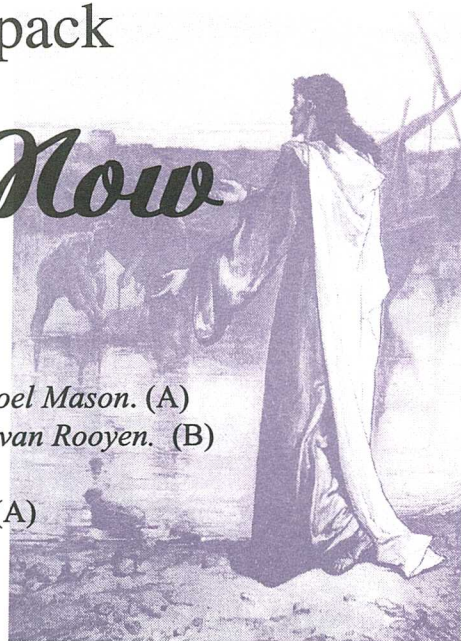
'Therefore my dear brothers, stand firm, let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain' (1 Corinthians 15:58). ♦

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Guilty!

‘She’s guilty, she’s guilty!
What have you to say?
We caught her in the act,
She should die today.’

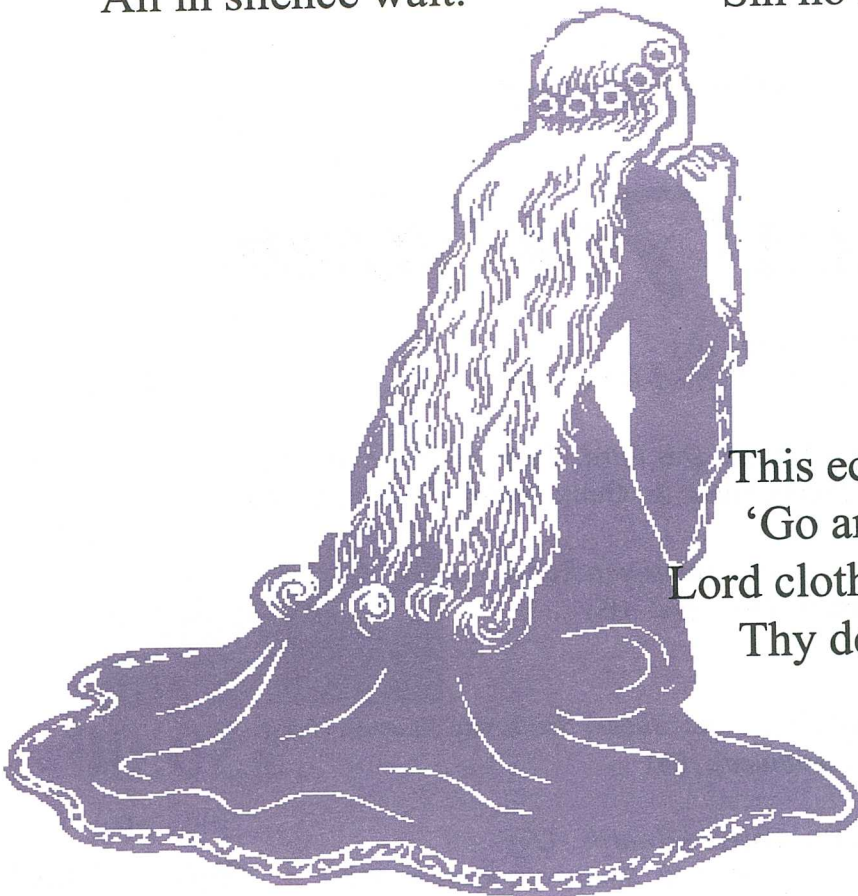
‘Let him who has no sin
Cast at her a stone.’
Then he stooped and wrote,
Words by us unknown.

‘According to our law
Stones should end her days.
How judgest thou her sin?
Grace? Or Israel’s ways?’

The men left one by one,
They each understood.
Condemned by their own sins,
Throw stones, no one could.

He sees her bowed in shame,
Eyed with scorn and hate.
The crowd has gathered round,
All in silence wait.

‘Where are thy accusers?’
‘Gone, my Lord,’ she said.
‘Nor do I condemn you,
Sin no more instead.’



This echoes in my ears,
‘Go and sin no more.’
Lord clothe me with thy robe,
Thy dear child restore.

— Kathleen Rogol.

Saul's Conversion and Commission

Acts 9:1-19; 13:1-4

THE GOSPEL AND THE SPIRIT (7)

Rodney Nelson

Zealous for God.

The record of Acts is one of God working out the development of the early Church. It tells how God used individuals to spread the gospel under the inspiration and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. No individual is mentioned more prominently than Saul, also called Paul (13:9).

Over half of Acts is devoted to the ministry of this man. Outside of the Lord himself, no individual has had more written about him than Paul. Christian scholars have devoted their life's work to studying, writing and preaching about Paul.

Paul's zeal was a personality trait both prior to, and after his conversion. Whatever may be said about his life, Paul was consistently zealous. Before conversion, his zeal was to protect and defend the *'traditions of his fathers'* which were centered in the law (Galatians 1:14). He described this part of his life as one of *'confidence in the flesh'* (Galatians 3:4).

A Zealous Testimony.

Recently, I was discussing New Testament Christianity with students in my sophomore World History class. I described Saul's zeal and hatred for the early Christian believers. His objective was to cleanse Judaism of this new sect that had dared to challenge the traditions of Pharisaism and the law.

One student commented that Osama bin Laden might be a modern day parallel to Paul in his zeal to destroy the church. I commented that the conversion of Osama bin Laden to Christianity would be similar in degree to Saul's conversion to Christ.

Of course, Saul would not commit suicide nor sanction such actions as a protest against Roman rule, but his hatred of Christians parallels bin Laden's hatred of Israel and America. Saul was not technically a political zealot. His mission seems to have focused on the destruction of the church. His persecuting zeal is seen, when those who stoned Stephen, laid their clothes at his feet, signifying his leadership in the attempt to destroy the church (Acts 7:58; 8:1). Following this incident, the first great persecution of the Church began in Jerusalem. Whereas earlier persecution focused on the apostles, this persecution resulted in *'all except the apostles being scattered throughout Judea and Samaria'* (8:1). The irony is, that in persecuting and scattering the Church, Saul was creating the opportunity for the Church to grow outside Jerusalem (8:4-8).

Blinded by the Light.

If there was one true thing about Saul it was his honesty. He was driven by a wholehearted commitment to God. In Acts 22:1-5 Paul recounts his zeal to destroy the Church. He cites his Jerusalem heritage, though birthed in Tarsus and his training under the great rabbi, Gamaliel. He believed his zeal for God to be on a par with any of those in his listening audience (22:3). His zeal to defend his heritage meant that he would stop at nothing to rid Israel of its plague—even to obtaining special permission from the highest Jewish authorities to chase Christians down, wherever they may have fled (22:5).

Then, everything changed. His sight was turned to blindness in order for him to escape darkness and see the light. On hearing a voice speak to him out of the light, Paul asked who it was, the voice declared, *'I am Jesus'* (9:5).

The identification between the Lord and his Church personifies the spiritual and literal body of believers as the *'body of Christ'*.

Overwhelmed.

Imagine Paul experiencing this epiphany—this encounter with the risen Saviour! Not only is he confronted by the Lord, he is made aware that he is persecuting Jesus. Here is a man who denies the truth of Jesus and who pursues the destruction of his followers; a man so caught up in his hatred for the followers of the One who now confronts him, that his ha-

tred for them is indistinguishable from his hatred of them. Saul was an enemy of Christ himself.

The Damascus Road encounter was so overwhelming and crushing, that, for three days Saul did not eat or drink (9:9). God was preparing him for a life and ministry of suffering, so that he would identify with the sufferings of his Saviour (9:16; cf. Romans 5:3; 8:17-18; 1 Corinthians 1:8; Philippians 1:29-30; 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:2; 2 Timothy 1:8, 11-12; 2:8-9).

What does this say about Saul? Why this ironic twist of fate? The persecutor will now be persecuted for the sake of the One whom he persecuted. By his own testimony, he did it to *'somehow attain to the resurrection from the dead'* (Philippians 3:11). For this he forgot what was behind, *'I pressed toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus'* (Philippians 3:14). Preeminently, however, his suffering made him *'consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things'* (Philippians 3:8). What a revelation and realisation!

Ananias was told to seek out Saul and to heal him (Acts 9:12). Saul did regain his sight, but it was more than physical sight. He now saw with the eyes of the Spirit. He was immediately baptized and with his sight's return, regained his appetite (9:18). More importantly, he began to declare in the synagogues that *'Jesus is the Son of God'* (9:20). What a transformation!

Commissioned.

Saul's conversion occurred when he was confronted by the risen Lord; his commissioning was by the Holy Spirit (13:2). His special commission was to *'carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel'* (9:15). Ananias' concern about the suffering of the Church due to Paul's campaign against it, was answered by Jesus: *'I will show him how much he must suffer for my name'* (9:16).

After his baptism, Paul became the recipient of the hatred he used to engender among the Jews. While in Damascus, he boldly proclaimed the Gospel in the synagogues (9:20-22), resulting in a plot to kill him (9:23-24). Escaping to Jerusalem, he continued to proclaim the Gospel to the Jews (9:28-29), which brought another attempt to kill him. Having reassured the Jerusalem disciples that he was legitimate, and for fear of his safety, the disciples sent him to Tarsus (where he was born) via Caesarea (9:31).

In the meantime, Jewish believers, scattered after Stephen's martyrdom, had spread as far as Antioch where they witnessed the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 11:20). Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to take account of the Gentiles becoming part of the Church (11:22). Upon arrival, he saw the *'evidence of the grace of God'* (11:23). Afterward, he went to Tarsus to look for Saul and returned with him to Antioch, where they spent an entire year teaching the new Gentile disciples (11:25-26). It was during this time that believers were first called Christians, signifying the development of the Church from a distinctly Jewish sect to a separate entity identified as Jewish and Gentile in composition. Antioch was the cosmopolitan base from which the Church would appeal to the Gentiles throughout the Empire.

After a year the Antioch church was prosperous and largely self-sufficient, a major player in the fledgling Christian Church. The prophesied famine throughout the Roman world gave the Antioch church the occasion to demonstrate its independence, by sponsoring a fund-raising operation to help the Jewish brethren in Jerusalem (11:27-29). Saul and Barnabas were the expeditors of this effort (11:30). The commissioning of Saul for his first missionary journey, along with Barnabas, was directly connected to the raising of help for the Jerusalem church. This was a giant step forward in making the Jewish and Gentile portions of the Church one body.

While the Antioch brethren were fasting and worshipping the Lord, the Holy Spirit said, *'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'* (13:2-3). With the sending out of Barnabas and Saul, the Church took the initial step of evangelising the Gentiles from a largely Gentile church. The account in Acts sees this commissioning as an act of the Holy Spirit (13:2, 4). The reception of the Holy Spirit by the Gentiles was a revolutionary development in the history of the Church, without which, Christianity would have remained a Jewish sect. The conversion of Saul and the infilling of Gentiles with the Spirit, were complementary occurrences. After Saul's commissioning in Antioch, Luke refers to him solely as Paul (13:9-13).

The ministry of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of Paul, went together in the ministry to the Gentiles. Throughout the remainder of Acts the Spirit uses Paul to establish churches and to declare the Gospel among Jews and Gentiles, in a manner no other apostle could have done. The conversion and commission of the greatest New Testament persecutor of the Church, into its most zealous evangelist and defender, testifies to the decisive role the Holy Spirit plays in the life of the Church, both then and now. ♦

PRAYING IN JESUS' NAME.

In the Bible it is revealed that within God there is a perfect Father-Son relationship. In Christ we see what it means to be 'Son of God.' As St. Paul says, 'He is the image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15).

What then do we see?

We see a perfect trust and confidence in the Father, a belief that he is entirely good and all-powerful. But more than this, we see a perfect oneness of mind, heart and will between the Son and his Father. This oneness shows itself not only in trust, but also in obedience (Matthew 7:21; Mark 3:35; John 5:30, 14:31).

To pray truly in the name of Jesus then, means that we offer ourselves to God as Jesus did, to want and do always only what the Father desires. Thus a great part of our prayer will be first, asking God to show us what is his will, and then praying for grace and power to do it.

—Sister Gertrude.

Christian Prayer, pp. 32-37.

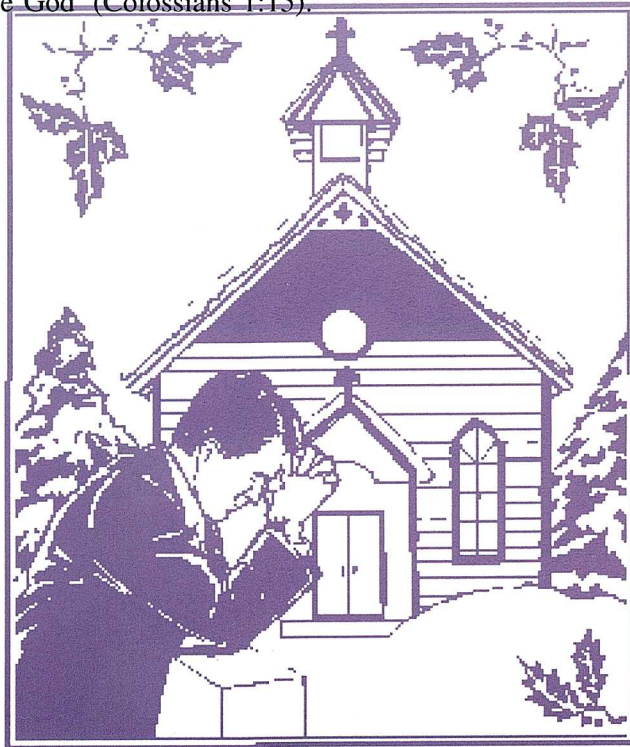
NOT THE NORMAL KIND OF SECURITY.

It may not be the kind of answer that we want—the kind of stopgap peace, the kind of easy security, the kind of end to loneliness that we are apt to pray for. Christ never promises peace in the sense of no more struggle and suffering. Instead, he helps us to struggle and suffer as he did, in love for one another. Christ does not give security in the sense of something in this world, some cause, some principle, some value—which is forever. Instead he tells us that there is nothing in this world that is forever, all flesh is grass. He does not promise us unlonely lives. His own life speaks loud of how, in a world where there is little love, love is always lonely. Instead of all these, the answer that he gives, I think, is himself. If we go to him for anything else, he may or may not send us away empty. But if we go to him for himself, I believe that we go away always with our deepest of all hungers filled.

—Frederick Buechner.

The Magnificent Defeat, pp. 124-130.

PARAGRAPHS ON PRAYER



NO SITUATION UN-ENRICHED.

I think it must honestly be said that there are situations in which prayer is not the most relevant way of cooperating with God and we must find what it is. That is not thinking secularly instead of religiously. It is loving God with our minds. No one, if the house caught fire, would kneel and pray. The religious duty is to throw on water and summon the fire brigade.

If I needed an urgent operation and there were only two surgeons in the place, a competent one who was a pagan who beat his wife and a pious duffer who took his wife to church twice on Sunday, and prayed every day, I would choose the pagan, not the duffer who prayed. So would you. We must search for, and find, the relevant way of getting done what we believe to be God's will. No enthusiast for prayer must pretend that prayer is the activity most relevant to every situation, though there can be no situation unenriched by it. The skillful and prayerful surgeon would be the best option.

—Leslie Weatherhead.

When the Lamp Flickers, pp. 189-192.

PERSISTING IN PRAYER.

It is not that God has to be pestered into compassion by our persistence, but that it is only through persistence; through hoping against hope, believing despite doubt, that a man can open himself to the compassion that is there in abundance. It is only when you ask a question out of your very bowels, that the answer is really an answer. It is only when you stretch out your hands for it until your arms ache that a gift is really a gift.

—Frederick Buechner.

The Magnificent Defeat, pp. 124-30.

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Prayer was such a prominent component in Jesus' life, that it largely explains his uniqueness. He is widely seen as the greatest personality that ever walked the earth. His disciples perceived the role that prayer played in fashioning him thus. They asked him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1).

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