

MANNA

ISSUE 78

Making Time for God

**My Time? God's Time! •
The Suffering of Christ • Straying and
Returning to the True Jesus Church**



“The goal of Manna is to inspire believers to live an active faith through mutual encouragement and the study of biblical truths.”

MANNA
ISSUE 78 Vol 39 No. 4
Publication date: December 2015

Making Time for God

Editorial

by Marian Shek

In the blink of an eye, another new year is upon us. At this point, we will usually look back and reflect on what we have achieved over the past year. Some will be satisfied that they have made the most of their time, while others will be disappointed that they did not reach their desired goals. Sadly, our personal ambitions often become buried under the more mundane dealings of life—and this is especially true of our spiritual ambitions.

Many will recognize the feeling that time is always against them, whether they are a student working to deadline, a professional juggling multiple projects, or a parent managing a chaotic household. It can often seem like there are not enough hours in a day. As Christians, we also have the duty to cultivate our spirituality and serve the Lord. But when our time and energy are limited, our faithfulness and service towards God are usually the first to suffer. After all, we think we can always draw closer to God later on, when we have more time. But is this really the case?

In fact, in this age of hyper-connectedness, any spare time that we have is easily filled with work tasks or mindless distractions. We never quite get round to devoting quality time to God. It, therefore, requires a conscious effort to set aside time for daily spiritual cultivation, to schedule our holidays around church commitments, such that church work always comes first, and to allocate top priority for God in our packed lives.

We may think that we can make time for God if we had better time management and multitasking skills. This is true to a certain extent, but this perspective defines God's work as just another task to tick off the 'to-do' list, to be done as quickly as possible, or left till last with the rest of the non-urgent items.

The writers in this issue of MANNA offer a different view—instead of making time for God as part of a good work-life balance, God should be our primary commitment, and all other areas that require our time and energy should revolve around this commitment. Whatever we choose to do is entirely driven by God.

As God has given us a limited time on earth, we should redeem it wisely—not spending it in pursuit of worldly success and that which will fade away, but in pursuit of God's will, laying up treasures in heaven (Eph 5:15–16; Mt 6:19–21).

God allows us to choose how we spend our time, but at every moment, He should not be too far from our thoughts:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.” (Deut 6:5–7)

If God is the center of our lives, then His will reaches into and illuminates every part of our lives. The struggling student will find the strength to complete his work through daily prayer; harried parents will find the patience and wisdom to raise their children by studying the word of God; and the professional will find that using his skills to support church work is no longer a burden and sacrifice, but a rich source of blessing and an essential part of his life.

We need to grasp every opportunity to serve the Lord and draw closer to Him, while there is still time. So whatever our resolutions for the coming year, let us resolve to make more time for God.

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Manna (ISSN1528-8617) is published quarterly by the True Jesus Church, IA Department of Literary Ministry,
21217 Bloomfield Avenue, Lakewood, CA 90715 USA.
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U.S. Postmaster: send change-of-address forms to 21217 Bloomfield Avenue, Lakewood, CA 90715 USA.

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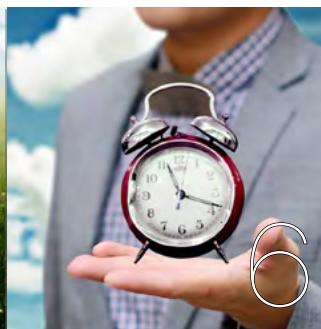
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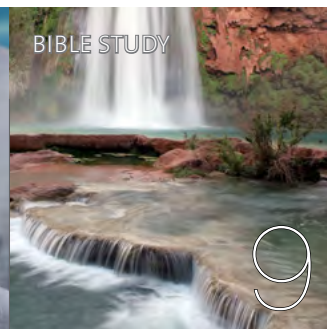
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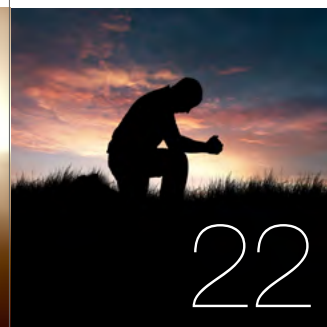
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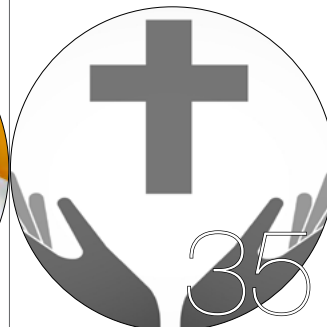
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Making Time for God

My Time? God's Time!

Philip Shee—Jakarta, Indonesia

Time is not only precious but, indeed, priceless. We often lament that there are not enough hours in the day, that time flies, and that life is short. The rich cannot buy more days, the powerful cannot extend his hours, and the genius cannot invent more minutes. Even though we can save time by outsourcing mundane tasks to others, and using technology to increase our efficiency, we still suffer from a lack of time. Ironically, one seems to get busier as society becomes more advanced.

We often hear about members who used to live in rural areas, at a time when they lacked basic amenities and conveniences such as electricity and transportation. They would labor on their farms from dawn till dusk, and yet attending morning-prayer and evening services were essential parts of their daily routine. As society progresses and urbanization brings more conveniences and affluence, many worshippers struggle to find time to participate in regular worship, let alone committing to serve in God's ministry.

This is a real challenge facing Christians and the church today. While we may yearn to devote more time to our spiritual lives and to serve our Lord in His ministry, somehow, we fail to sustain or even to start this commitment. We comfort ourselves that we will do so later, once we have accomplished this or that, but we find ourselves putting it off again and again as new challenges and life goals come along.

How can we break this vicious cycle? We can start by re-orientating

our lives so that God is in the center of all we do.

BALANCE OR PIVOT?

It is often said that we can manage our time better if we strike a good balance among the various commitments in our lives. This suggests that we allocate our time equally between work or studies, family, friends, our own interests, and God and His ministry. Also, some say that the balance changes as we progress through each stage of our lives—a student would focus his full attention on academic achievement, a graduate on building his career, and a middle-aged person on providing a comfortable life for his family and saving for retirement. During these periods, any spare time is further divided between leisure, family, friends, and God. Is this the best formula if we hope to make time for God? The Lord Himself has left the following guidance:

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.... (Mt 6:33a)

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. (Mt 6:24a)

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. (Mt 22:37)

While the contexts of these verses are not about how we use our time,



the underlying principles are relevant. They reveal the Lord's expectation of our unwavering, single-minded, and total devotion to Him. If we cannot serve two masters at the same time, how can we possibly see God as one of many commitments to juggle in our lives? Our love for Him should encompass all of our heart, our soul and our mind, and not just an allocated part. It is no wonder, therefore, that the Lord has instructed us to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness—and in doing so, we will receive all we need as a blessing from God, rather than through our own tireless pursuit. This suggests that the ideal formula is not about striking an equal balance between God and the other components in our lives. Instead, God should be the center around which our lives pivot.

The difference here is that God is not just another component of our lives, on par with our other activities and commitments. Rather, God is our primary commitment, and the other areas that require our time and energy revolve around this commitment. We may devote more time to some areas over others, and there will be times when we completely drop certain commitments. Our lives may not be equally balanced, but with God as our pivot, whatever we choose to do is entirely driven by God. All of our activities will be God-centered, as Paul writes:

He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

(Rom 14:6–8)

And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus... (Col 3:17a)



PRACTICAL LIVING FOR CHRIST

If we understand that God should be our pivot, how can we apply this in our lives? We can look at four steps to achieve this:

1) Stay Attuned to God

We must embed the idea that God is in the driver's seat as a key foundation in our lives. While Paul devoted his life to preaching the gospel, his path and where he spent his time were entirely directed by the Holy Spirit. In one instance, the Holy Spirit forbade him to preach in Asia or go to Bithynia, guiding him instead to Macedonia (Acts 16:6–12). In the end, he was led to Jerusalem, with the clear knowledge from the Holy Spirit that chains and tribulation awaited him (Acts 20:22–24). Instead of reasoning that his time and life would be better spent in further missionary travels, he submitted to God's guidance without question.

In hindsight, we can see God's marvelous arrangement: by spending time under house arrest in Rome, Paul was able to spread the gospel to the people who came to his rented house, rather than having to travel around (Acts 28:30–31). More importantly, being under house arrest provided him the time and setting where he could be inspired by God to write the four prison epistles, which are part of the New Testament today. These letters have reached, and continue to reach, many people across the world.

Their impact has far surpassed all that Paul could ever have done in his physical mission during his lifetime. We can, therefore, see how God's direct guidance helps us make the maximum impact with our limited time. And the starting point must be the constant devotion of our time to prayer and the word of God for guidance. As we stay attuned to God, our paths will be directed by him.

2) Simplify Our Lives

One big irony is that as technological advancement has made the world more efficient, our lives seem to be even busier. To break out of this contradictory state, we must first seek to understand how we ended up this way. Firstly, as things get done faster, we often look to get even more things done. Secondly, we are quick to fill up our free time to pursue the next level of achievement. Thirdly, we are ever ready to embrace the novelties that the world presents, including new gadgets, new restaurants, new holiday destinations, and new leisure activities.

The key to addressing this challenge is to simplify our lives. The Bible encourages us "that you should aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business" (1 Thess 4:11a). Indeed, if we can manage our ambitions by not setting our minds on "high things" (Rom 12:16), stop the endless pursuit of secular achievements, and find contentment in the satisfaction of our

”*God is not just another component of our lives, on par with our other activities and commitments. Rather, God is our primary commitment, and the other areas that require our time and energy revolve around this commitment.*



daily needs (1 Tim 6:6–8), we should be able to find time for the Lord's ministry.

3) Prioritize Our Commitments

As we face increasing demands on our time, it is critical to prioritize our commitments, especially if we are unable to find time to serve God. With God at the center of our lives and all other commitments built around Him, then the time to serve God will become readily available.

As we prioritize our commitments, the activities that make up our service to God should be non-negotiable.

When Jesus visited a certain village, Martha welcomed Him into her home. While she chose to busy herself with serving her guest, her sister Mary chose simply to spend time at the feet of Jesus, listening to His teaching. When Martha complained, Jesus corrected her by praising Mary for having chosen the good part (Lk 10:38–42). Although Martha was serving Jesus, she was deemed to have had the wrong priority. Hence, as we apportion the scarce time we have, the key is to consider how God would have us prioritize.

When Jesus reached out to people to follow Him, one person asked to be allowed to bury his father first. Another asked to go and bid farewell to those in his house. While both requests seem reasonable from a secular perspective, Jesus' response was less favorable—He concluded that these were not fit for the kingdom of God (Lk 9:59–62). Hence, in comparison to directly serving God, our secular commitments become insignificant, or even irrelevant.

As we prioritize our commitments, the activities that make up our service

to God should be non-negotiable. For example, we should be firmly committed to attending regular church services and spiritual convocations, carrying out our assigned church duties, and devoting time each day for prayer and Bible reading. Once these are fixed in our schedules, we can then allocate time to other activities. The activities we should prioritize are those that will contribute indirectly to our service to God. For example, a student should absolutely devote time

to their studies and a working adult should work hard in their vocation, as long as they are not distracted from their direct service to God. Hence, even when a student is busy with examinations and a working adult has a project deadline, they should not de-prioritize the non-negotiable fixtures such as prayer and attending church services. In addition, these other activities should be pursued only with the mindset that they are for the purpose of serving God more effectively. A student pursues education to be better equipped to serve God, not for riches or success. Any activities that add little or no value to the work of God should be the last on our to-do lists. These could be binge-watching television serials, aimless Internet surfing, or being addicted to computer games.

4) Employ Our Gifts

"But one and the same Spirit works all things, distributing to each one individually as He wills." (1 Cor 12:11)

This Bible passage highlights that God has given different gifts, or talents, to each individual. We may also have gained different strengths and skills through our education and work experience. We should be proactive in employing these gifts to serve God. If we choose to serve God in areas that are not aligned to our natural gifts, talent, or skills, we would not be using our limited time wisely. Hence, to make good use of our time for God, we should not attempt to focus on areas where others are clearly more suited to do. If each of us devotes time to serve God in the way for which we are best equipped, then our collective service will deliver the maximum impact in the minimum time.

CONCLUSION

Finally, as we continue through life attempting to make the best use of our time, we need to realize that our time, and our lives, are completely in the hands of God. Hence James reminds us: "Come now, you who say 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit'; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that' " (Jas 4:13–15). This realization makes it imperative for us to place God as the pivot of our lives. And as our lives revolve around God, we can minimize distractions and ensure our activities naturally stay within the boundaries guided by Him.

If we adopt the practical steps suggested above, to stay tuned to God, simplify our lives, prioritize our commitments, and employ our gifts, then making time for God becomes an irrelevant consideration as our entire lives and the way we spend our time will revolve around Him. With this understanding, let us endeavor to use our time wisely to fulfill what God has intended for us to accomplish for Him; while we are still alive, and while we still have time. ★



Making Time to Serve God

Shawn Chou—San Jose, California, USA

We have many things to do each day, some of which are necessary, such as eating, resting, sleeping, working, going to school, or studying. There are also many things that are not necessary, such as watching television, surfing the Internet, or shopping.

How we use our time is important as it is a precious resource. The Bible tells us to redeem our time, using it wisely for the Lord (Eph 5:16). In order to do so, we need to understand where our time comes from.

WHERE DOES OUR TIME COME FROM?

Many people feel that their time is their own and they can use it however they wish. The Bible tells us that time does not actually belong to us, but to God, and we are merely custodians. Acts 17:26 says that God has determined each of our pre-appointed times; therefore, how much time we have is not within our control.

Isaiah 38:1–8 records that God granted King Hezekiah an additional fifteen years of life. From this, we understand that God is the sovereign giver of our time on earth, and with

this recognition, we should manage it in accordance with His will.

THE PRINCIPLE OF ALLOCATING OUR TIME

In order to please God, we should live according to biblical principles. Colossians 3:2 urges us to set our minds on the things above, which are eternal. In so doing, we will spend less time on the things on earth, which are temporal. We will naturally prioritize matters of God over secular matters.

We may have many goals, such as earning a college diploma, finding a good job, and establishing a family. However, if we focus the majority of our time on the pursuit of such matters, we would have insufficient time left for the things above. By prioritizing our time according to biblical principles, we will refocus our efforts on matters such as serving God, knowing that what we do for Him will not be in vain (1 Cor 15:58).

A SPIRIT OF DEDICATION

Since our time is precious, how can we allocate more of it to serve God, amidst competing priorities? The Bible teaches us that if we want

to serve God, we must have a spirit of dedication. In Romans 12:1, Paul exhorts us to offer up our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. Only then can we serve Him wholeheartedly.

Without a heart of dedication, it would be challenging for us to serve effectively; our servitude could become a mere show (Col 3:22) or a routine (Mt 16:6). It could lack vitality, compassion, and love, and might be superficial, in a similar fashion to the deeds of the Pharisees who focused on the letter of the law but neglected its spirit. Those who have a heart of dedication will diligently offer their time to serve Him.

So what is a heart of dedication? Let us study two biblical characters to see how they offered their best to God:

David (1 Chr 29:3)

David was determined to build a temple for the Lord. However, God wanted his son Solomon to complete this work instead. In spite of this, David's heart of dedication did not waver. He offered his own savings instead of the money that was in his country's treasury, because he loved

God. As a result, God's name was glorified. From this, we realize there is a significant difference between serving God out of obligation and serving with a heart of willingness and a desire to please Him.

Mary of Bethany (Mk 14: 3–9)

Mary came to Jesus with an alabaster flask of costly spikenard, broke it and poured the contents on His head. Because this oil could have been sold for much money, others criticized her, saying that she was wasteful because the money could have been given to the poor. However, Jesus defended her and praised her deed before the crowd. Sometimes, we may be criticized or ridiculed for offering our time and resources to God instead of pursuing worldly gains. But we must firmly believe that Jesus will be pleased and will praise us for our precious offering.

David and Mary both loved the Lord, which was evident in their willingness to offer their best. Similarly, we must love God wholeheartedly so that we can be determined to serve Him.

WHAT IT TAKES TO TRULY LOVE GOD

Be Filled with the Love of Jesus

In Ephesians 3:18–19, Paul prays that the believers may be filled with the fullness of God. This fullness includes His abundant love manifested through Jesus Christ. What kind of love is this?

And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. (Eph 5:2)

For the sake of love, Christ completely sacrificed Himself for us. Something akin to this type of love is seen in parents who willingly endure hardship and sacrifice themselves unconditionally for their children. However, our Lord Jesus Christ went further than this, loving us while we were still sinners. Romans 5:6–8 says that He loved the ungodly who did not know Him and who were

unwilling to believe in Him. Such sacrificial love transcends everything.

Therefore, we must appreciate the depth of God's love by recognizing His saving grace. By doing so, His love will fill, motivate and inspire us to willingly and joyfully dedicate what we have to Him. When Jesus' love fills us, we will naturally strive to serve Him and dedicate our lives to Him.

Be Filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18)

In Ephesians 3:16–17, Paul emphasizes the importance of the Holy Spirit, stating that the Spirit helps us to understand the love of Christ and to be rooted and established in His love, while strengthening us with might in the inner man. If God's Spirit fills us, His power and joy will manifest through us, and we will not feel burdened in our servitude.

When we are filled with the love and Spirit of God, we will freely offer ourselves to be used by God. Such willingness will prompt us to overcome our limitations by prioritizing and dedicating sufficient time to serve Him.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Set Aside Time to Serve

Many of us would like to serve God, but somehow, time just passes us by, and we feel that we do not have enough time. If we do not manage our time wisely, even a thirty-hour day would seem insufficient for our needs. Conversely, if we manage it wisely, we would be able to serve God, even in the midst of our busy lives.

Apostle Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers to set aside their possessions for God in case there was

nothing left to offer (1 Cor 16:2). This approach can also be used when we are setting aside time to serve God.

The difficulty that we often face relates to our value system. If we can set aside time for God as the priority, we will find that we always have time to serve Him. Whatever time is left can then be used for other activities. For example, if we plan to visit members on a Sunday afternoon, we should dedicate the time for this work, and schedule other activities for another time. Without the right attitude, we will find that we cannot accommodate God's work.

Loosen and Bring Over

Now when they drew near Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, He sent two of His disciples; and He said to them, "Go into the village opposite you; and as soon as you have entered it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has sat. Loose it and bring it. And if anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it,' and immediately he will send it here." (Mk 11:1–3)

The Lord Jesus asked two of His disciples to bring a tied colt from a nearby village. After the disciples had loosened the colt and brought it to Jesus, He sat on it and went into Jerusalem, thereby fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy (Zech 9:9). Even though the animal was a lowly colt, the Lord Jesus was able to make use of it to fulfill an important purpose.

The colt is probably symbolic of many believers: we may be bound by many things, such as our studies, occupation, career goals, and family life. When we are constrained by

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such things, our movement will be restricted. Like the colt that was tied up, we will be limited by the length of rope. In order to be used by the Lord, we must free ourselves from the things of this world.

We need to understand why God wants us to work for Him. When God placed Adam in the garden of Eden, God commanded him to tend the garden (Gen 2:15). Because this was a direct command from God, Adam worked to serve Him; however, after Adam sinned, he was forced to work in order to provide for himself (Gen 3:17–19).

Today, God has forgiven our sins. Therefore, we should aspire to Adam's condition before he sinned. Although we must undertake secular work to survive, our goal in life should be to serve God. When choosing our career path, a primary consideration should be whether the line of work allows us time to serve God. Some occupations may regularly require us to work overtime, beyond our regular working hours. When God's love fills our hearts, we will be inspired to choose a career route that not only sustains our lives, but enables us to be uninhibited to serve God.

We must discern between the things that are necessary from the things that are not, and have the wisdom to untangle ourselves from the latter by limiting the amount of time we spend on them. For example, if our career occupies all or a significant amount of our time, then we should consider whether we need to change career paths. When we are bound by our worldly pursuits, there is often little or no time left for God. Just as Jesus could only use the colt after it had been untied, so we must be loosened from secular matters.

Lastly, we must be brought over to Jesus, just like the colt that obediently followed those who brought it to the

Lord. We know that a colt is typically stubborn, and if it is unwilling, it will not budge. However, this colt was willing to be led to Jesus. Today, when Jesus wants to use us, are we obedient enough to take hold of the opportunity to be used by Him, or are we resistant and stubborn? Perhaps we think that there is still time to serve God in the future, or we may be unwilling and uninterested in participating in the holy work. We may even repeatedly decline opportunities to serve, thinking that we do not need to do so in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Let us examine ourselves to see if we have a stubborn streak, and learn to be more obedient to the Lord and His calling. Once we learn obedience, God will be pleased to help us redeem the time to serve Him.

CONCLUSION

God does not need us to accomplish His work. However, He delights in seeing our willingness to take part in His ministry and to use our lives to serve Him. The Lord Jesus provided the best example while He was in this world: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

Let us constantly reflect upon God's saving grace and His mercy. May we be filled with the fullness of His love and His Spirit, and may our hearts overflow with thanksgiving so that we yearn to serve Him all the more. ★





Eden in the East

K.C. Tsai—Toronto, Canada

The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. (Gen 2:8)

Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and become four riverheads. (Gen 2:10)

Studying these verses, we can see that God planted Eden in the east. Its position is indicated by two rivers near Mesopotamia: the Hiddekel (Tigris), which flowed east of Assyria, and the Euphrates. Eden became the home of Adam, God's creation, a man without sin who bore the image of God.

Adam was created in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24). Yet he was not able to uphold God's command steadfastly. Adam sinned and lost his right to remain in the garden of Eden (Gen 3:24). Worse, through his action, sin entered the world and death spread to mankind (Rom 5:12).

Adam was driven out of Eden, and God placed cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the entrance to the garden. This was necessary to prevent man from entering and eating the

“Although man was cast out of Eden, God has a plan of salvation that provides fallen man a way to become a “new creation” and ... to find the way to return to the garden of Eden where he will be able to access the tree of life (Rev 22:14).”

fruit from the tree of life and living forever in a state of sin. However, God does not act without reason. He created Eden for a higher purpose. Although man was cast out of Eden, God has a plan of salvation that provides fallen man a way to become a “new creation” and to regain the image of God. Once restored with God's image, man will be able to find the way to return to the garden of Eden where he will be able to access the tree of life (Rev 22:14).

God placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen 3:24). Therefore, if man wants to regain access to the tree of life, in the garden of Eden, he must enter from the east.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

From the words of Moses (Deut 10:14), we see that the people of God knew from time immemorial that

“heaven” and “the highest heavens” belonged to God. Apostle Paul also talked about the “third heaven” and “Paradise” (2 Cor 12:2–4). According to one of Jesus' parables, this is the place where the saints rest—people like Abraham and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31).

The book of Revelation records the Lord Jesus' instructions to Elder John to write to the seven churches. Those messages revealed that victorious believers will be given the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the middle of God's Paradise (Rev 2:7). This privilege is on account of their endurance and triumph over sin and death. They have resurrected with Christ (Col 3:1) and have put to death their old nature: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, covetousness, anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, and filthy language. They have become a new person, renewed

by the Holy Spirit and the “knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (Col 3:10).

The garden of Eden is a symbol of the true church. As part of God’s salvation plan, He has chosen people to become His workmanship, created anew through Jesus Christ (Eph 2:10). And through this, God re-opens the sealed entrance to the garden and gives man access to the tree of life.

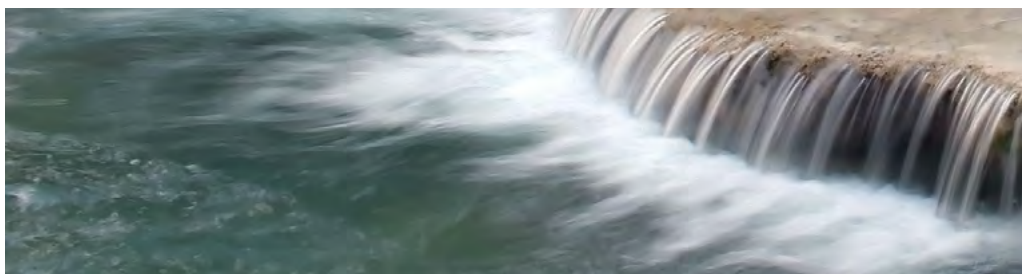
To be a new creation (Gal 6:15), man must be born again through the power of God. Jesus says, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3–5). Apostle Paul speaks of “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Tit 3:5). In summary, we need to be baptized and transformed by the Holy Spirit so that we can conform to the image of God.

IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Words of God

In the garden of Eden, God planted trees, pleasing to the eye and bearing good fruit. In the middle were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:9). With the tree of life in their presence, God allowed Adam and Eve, in their sinless state, to eat of the fruit and be able to live forever. As part of God’s broader salvation plan, the privilege of access to this tree is to be given to believers who have kept His commandments and triumphed over sin through Jesus Christ (Rev 22:14).

By placing the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Eden, man could glorify God by steadfastly upholding His word in the face of temptations. If man were to disobey—that is, to



eat the fruit—his consequence would be certain death. Alas, Adam and Eve were unable to keep this single commandment of God. They sinned and fell short of God’s glory (Rom 3:23), failing to fulfill His purpose for creating them (Is 43:7).

Moses once taught the Israelites that man should not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord (Deut 8:3). Before Adam sinned, he had been a living being, sustained by keeping the word of God. Today, we too must have God’s word and submit to it so that we can see the path of life clearly. God’s word is the bread of life; when we eat of it, we shall be a “living being” with spiritual life. Through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, the church offers believers living bread from the Bible, which can sustain their spiritual life, as long as they remember to collect their daily portion as they sojourn in the wilderness—the world.

Spirit of God

Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and became four riverheads. The first is Pishon; it is the one which encompasses the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good. Bdelium and the onyx stone are there.

(Gen 2:10–12)

In the same way that the rivers of Eden watered the garden, so the true church has a river of living water. The Lord Jesus promised those who believe in Him that they shall never thirst again, as this living water will remain with them forever, and their lives will always be full (Jn 4:14). The Bible explains that the living water is the Holy Spirit and those who receive the Spirit will experience a fullness of life. The Lord says, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink” (Jn 7:37). Jesus offers the Holy Spirit to those who thirst. Today, when people come to the true church, they can ask for this living water.

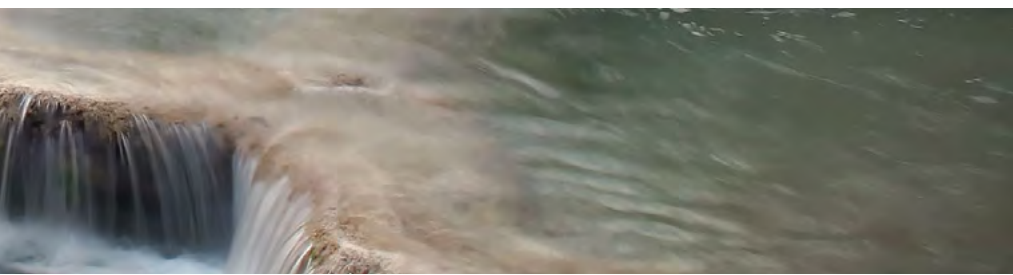
Church of God

In the garden of Eden, there was gold, bdellium, and onyx stone. The same reference is found in the Book of Revelation, where the precious stones are in the holy city, the “new Jerusalem”—the spiritual true church where God dwells forever (Rev 21:11, 21). This holy city is made of pure gold, signifying the holy and glorious true church (Rev 21:18). Her foundation is decorated with twelve kinds of precious stones, signifying the apostles’ teachings and the believers’ virtues (Rev 21:19–20). Furthermore, the twelve gates of the holy city are twelve pearls, each gate comprising one pearl (Rev 21:21), signifying the complete truth in the true church. It is through the truth of the gospel that a person can come to know Jesus and His salvation, and to understand that He is the only way to the Father (Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12).

“MY FATHER HAS BEEN WORKING UNTIL NOW”

But Jesus answered them, “My

“The garden of Eden is a symbol of the true church. As part of God’s salvation plan, He has chosen people to become His workmanship, created anew through Jesus Christ (Eph 2:10). And through this, God re-opens the sealed entrance to the garden and gives man access to the tree of life.



Father has been working until now, and I have been working." (Jn 5:17)

This was the Lord Jesus' reply to the Jews who persecuted Him for healing on the Sabbath. But what did He mean? Had not the heavenly Father already created everything in six days and rested from His work on the seventh? This statement is not referring to God's creation but to the work of salvation. After Adam's downfall, God set about paving the way for "new creations." Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus." Colossians 3:10 says, "[A]nd have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him."

So, when Jesus said, "My Father has been working until now," He was speaking of God's salvation plan—the plan to make "new creations" through the death and redemption work of Jesus on the cross. Through this plan, man can be spiritually renewed: removing his old nature and embracing the new through baptism. He can be filled by the Holy Spirit and live according to the truth. And as a new creation, man regains the image of God (Eph 4:20–24).

Once, when some Jews asked, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent" (Jn 6:28–29). The work of God is to save sinners and to bring them back to the tree of life, to Paradise, before His presence (Rev 2:7). It entails man responding to God's message of salvation with a heart of belief so that he can be transformed into a new creation with the image of God (2 Cor 5:17).

WHY DID GOD CREATE ALL THINGS?

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. (Col 1:16)

Prior to creation, only God existed. On the last day, after the heavens and the earth pass away, those who have triumphed over sin and death will also be present, together with the angels (1 Thess 4:16–17). In God's eyes, the period from creation to the end of time is but a moment in eternity. However, this "moment" offers us an insight into God's purpose for man. God created man so that man could give Him glory (Isa 43:7).

“God created man so that man could give Him glory (Isa 43:7).”

Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your descendants from the east, and gather you from the west; I will say to the north, "Give them up!" and to the south, "Do not keep them back!" Bring my sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by My name, whom I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him.

(Isa 43:5–7)

Here, Isaiah prophesies concerning the last days. God will gather the saved—those who are called by His

name—from every nation, tribe, and tongue. These are those who fulfill the purpose of their existence—to glorify God.

Adam would have glorified God had he kept God's commandment not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Created in God's image in righteousness and holiness, Adam ought to have held firm to God's word, kept his heart pure, and overcome temptation. However, he broke God's command and fell short of His glory (Rom 3:23). As a result, he faced condemnation (Rom 5:12–14).

WHY DID GOD CREATE ADAM, KNOWING HE WOULD SIN?

Even though Adam failed, there were numerous others who would be able to glorify God after him. They would include Old Testament saints like Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, who served God in the face of challenges, and New Testament disciples like Peter, John, Stephen, and Paul, who courageously faced persecution and kept the faith in Christ. Today, there are many brethren in the church who glorify God, serving silently in spirit and in truth. Therefore, even though Adam sinned, there are others who live to glorify God.

Glorifying God is not merely a matter of proclaiming, "All glory be to God." It entails persevering in faith, loving God wholeheartedly, and enduring in the face of trials. A good example is Abraham whose faith was tested when God asked him to offer up his only son in his old age. He firmly believed in God's promise that his descendants, as numerous as the stars, would come from Isaac's lineage (Gen 21:12). Knowing that God had the power to raise his son from the dead, Abraham willingly submitted to God. By raising the sacrificial knife, God was greatly glorified. Another example is found in Luke 18:9–14: the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax-collector. Both came before God to offer quite different prayers: one was pompous and self-righteous, the other was penitent. The tax-collector,

who could not look up to heaven, beat his breast and said, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" In the presence of the holy and righteous God, the tax collector knew his own unworthiness and pleaded for mercy. In doing so, He gave glory to God.

As believers, let us reflect soberly, according to the measure of faith that God has given to us (Rom 12:3). Based on our level of faith, we should strive to glorify God. We need not feel compelled to act beyond our faith, as not all of us can be like Abraham. But at least we can do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Mic 6:8). In this way, we will work out our own salvation (Phil 2:12) and ensure that we are worthy to be in the company of those who are present when the Lord Jesus comes again.

Those who can come before the tree of life in the garden are those who enter the new Jerusalem through its gates (Rev 22:14). This city is the true church and its people are the ones who come under the name of God and have been created for His glory.

In the Book of Revelation, John recorded his last vision: "He who sat on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new'" (Rev 21:5). The use of the present tense here reveals that God's work is to make all things new. When God made Adam and Eve, they were new creations, but after they sinned, God continued to make new creations, calling those whom He had chosen before the foundation of the world to be in Christ—that is, to be part of His true church (Eph 1:4).

THE GLORY OF GOD IN THE TEMPLE

After Solomon had completed the building of the temple, priests and Levites carried the ark of God from the city of David into the inner sanctuary. When the trumpeters and singers were praising God after offering sacrifices, a cloud, radiating the glorious light of the Lord, filled the temple (2 Chr 5:1–14). The glorious light that filled the temple signifies the indwelling of God; the Spirit of God filled the temple when it was dedicated to



Him. God delighted in the offerings made by David and his son. God told Solomon, "I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice" (2 Chr 7:12).

However, Israel was split into two kingdoms after Solomon's son, Rehoboam, was crowned as king. People of the northern kingdom, Israel, were prevented from going to Jerusalem and were redirected to worship the two golden calves made by Jeroboam. They also worshipped Baal and other false gods. And in the southern kingdom, the majority of the Judean kings failed to lead the people to steadfastly worship God. Besides offering sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem, they also worshipped Baal and Canaanite gods (Jer 7:8–11). These resulted in the Spirit of God departing from Solomon's temple, the very dwelling place God had chosen to place His name (Deut 12: 5, 13–14; Jer 7:12–15).

THE DEPARTURE OF GOD'S GLORY

In the sixth year of the Babylonian captivity, Prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of God's glory departing from the temple. God's glory departed first from the cherub, pausing at the threshold of the temple (Ezek 9:3; 10:4); withdrawing from the threshold (Ezek 10:18); lingering at the door of the east gate (Ezek

10:19); withdrawing from the city and stopping on the Mount of Olives, on the east of the city (Ezek 11:23); and finally disappearing altogether (Ezek 11:24).

From Ezekiel's vision, we note how God's glory lingered at several points before it vanished. This shows God's reluctance to leave the temple that stood in the midst of His people. How could He remain in a place that had been defiled? Inside the temple, all kinds of defilements would go on: there were images of abominable creatures worshipped by the Israelites (Ezek 7:20; 8:7–11), women would weep over the foreign deity, Tammuz, at the door of the north gate (Ezek 8:14), and men would worship the sun with their backs to the temple in the inner court (Ezek 8:16). It was no wonder that God was furious. His glory, His abidance, would surely depart from the temple.

Chapter 2 of the book of Acts records the incident where God poured out His Holy Spirit and established the apostolic church after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. But a century later, the church swayed in the face of persecution and heretical attacks, and relinquished the original and genuine truth. The result was the secularization of the post-apostolic church.

One example was the adoption of Sunday as the day of rest in place

“The Lord God established Eden in the east; an act with spiritual significance. And after having driven Adam and Eve out, God placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen 3:24). The way back to the garden of Eden is also from the east.



of the Sabbath. It was a case of the church changing course, as in Ezekiel's vision, from praying towards the temple of the Lord and keeping His commandments (2 Chr 6:26, 29, 32, 34, 38), to turning their backs on God and honoring the sun.

True to Ezekiel's prophecy, the glory of God departed from the post-apostolic church: He stopped pouring out the Holy Spirit (i.e., the cessation of the early rain period).

THE RETURN OF GOD'S GLORY

And behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east. His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth shone with His glory. (Ezek 43:2)

From Ezekiel's vision, God's glory will return to the temple from the way of the east. This is consistent with the way to the tree of life, recorded in the book of Genesis.

The Lord God established Eden in the east; an act with spiritual significance. And after having driven Adam and Eve out, God placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen 3:24). The way back to the garden of Eden is also from the east.

The Bible prophesies that God would accomplish His salvation grace from the east, raising up the true church of the last days. At "an acceptable time," and "in the day of salvation" (Is 49:8; 2 Cor 6:2), God would pour out the latter rain—the Holy Spirit—from the east, to establish His spiritual temple.

THE TRUE CHURCH FROM THE EAST

During the twenty-fifth year of the

Babylonian captivity, some twenty years after Ezekiel's first vision, God brought Ezekiel to a gate facing the east. There, he witnessed the glory of God entering from the east; he heard God's voice, like the sound of many waters, and saw the earth radiant with God's glory. Then Ezekiel witnessed the glory of the Lord entering the temple through the east-facing gate (Ezek 43:1–4).

This vision prophesied the downpour of the latter rain, the Holy Spirit, who will come again in the last days from the east, to revive the apostolic church. The prayers of believers, through the infilling of the Holy Spirit, are like the sound of many waters and of thunder, and are filled with cries of "Alleluia!" (Rev 19:5–6).

God will fill the true church of the last days with His glory, starting from the east.

Keep silence before Me, O coastlands, and let the people renew their strength! Let them come near, then let them speak; let them come near together for judgment. Who raised one from the east? Who in righteousness called him to His feet? Who gave the nations before him, and made him rule over kings? Who gave them as the dust to his sword, as driven stubble to his bow? Who pursued them, and passed safely by the way that he had not gone with his feet? Who has performed and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, am the first; and with the last I am He.

(Isa 41:1–4)

Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, "My counsel shall stand, and I will

do all My pleasure," calling a bird of prey from the east, the man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it.

(Isa 46:10–11)

The above passages prophesy that God will raise up a man from the east; make him stand upright; give him all nations and make him ruler over kings. God will call a "bird of prey from the east," or a "man" who will implement God's will from a far off country. From a historical perspective, this "man" or "bird of prey" refers to Cyrus, king of Persia (Isa 45:1,13) who became God's vessel to conquer the nations and fulfill His will to rebuild Jerusalem, laying the temple's foundations (Isa 44:28). From a spiritual perspective, the prophecy was not only about Cyrus, but a more significant salvation plan.

God will establish the true church in the end time to fulfill His righteous will, to give "the righteousness of God" to the unworthy from the east. The "bird of prey" or "man" is a prophecy concerning the true church from the east in the last days. It is God's intention to fulfill His salvation plan—a plan determined from the beginning of time.

In the original text, the bird of prey is a ravenous bird, like a fowl or hawk, a bird considered as unclean (Lev 11:13–19). The true church from the east would have comprised the "unclean" Gentiles, called by God's righteousness (Rom 3:21–26) to be victorious over the world. The church has been commissioned to liberate man from the bondage of sin and to help him to triumph over death through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. This has been God's plan from the beginning: "Who has performed and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, am the first; and with the last I am He" (Isa 41:4).

God is the first, and He is with "the last": Eden, in the east. ★



The Suffering of Christ

Jachin—Singapore

When Romania was under Communist rule, Christians were severely persecuted by the authorities. Some of them were beaten up and then thrown into cells. Rats released into these cells would gather around these prisoners and gnaw at the latter's wounds. Many persevered through such torture. But there was a particular priest who was tortured and then forced to desecrate the Holy Communion by serving human waste as communion to his fellow Christian inmates. When another inmate asked him why he eventually complied, he replied, "Do not judge me, please. I have suffered more than Christ."¹

Is it possible for an individual to suffer more than Christ? Perhaps the priest thought that Christ had only suffered hours on the cross, whereas he had been tortured over a very long period of time. Thinking this way is wrong and dangerous because if anyone thinks that he has suffered more than Christ, his faith breaks down. The whole point of Christian faith is to suffer with Christ. We are only partakers of Christ's sufferings.

“We have often heard that Christ died for us, leading to a misconception that Christ's sacrifice only took place at the cross. In fact, His very birth was a great sacrifice.”

We could never suffer more than Christ. To better appreciate this, we must understand how much Christ has sacrificed and suffered for us.

THE INTENSITY OF CHRIST'S SUFFERING

Birth of Jesus

All of us have sacrificed things for the sake of Christ. Many of us give up our time to attend services. Or we give up part of our earnings as offering to God. There are clearly different degrees of sacrifice; and the extent of sacrifice is not always measured in absolute quantities. On one occasion, Jesus sat, observing people making their offerings to the Holy Temple. He praised a poor widow who had given two copper mites (Lk 21:1–4). Although the rich had given more money, they had given out of their abundance. They had sacrificed only a fraction of what they had. In contrast, the widow gave out of her poverty and sacrificed all she owned.

We have often heard that Christ died for us, leading to a misconception that Christ's sacrifice only took place at the cross. In fact, His very birth was a great sacrifice.

Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. (Phil 2:6–7)

Jesus was God Himself. But He did not hold on to His form as God. He gave up what only God could give up—the form of God. From this angle, His sacrifice was the greatest of all. No rich man had given so much till he became as poor as the poor widow. Christ was the richest ever. He was God—the Creator and Giver of Life. Yet, for our sake, He became a poor mortal.

Life of Jesus

As mentioned, the Romanian priest

¹ Wurmbrand, Richard. Tortured for Christ.

erroneously thought that he had sacrificed much more than Christ because he had been in the prison cell longer than Christ had been on the cross. He did not realize that Christ had actually suffered throughout His life. Psalm 22—a prophetic psalm about the sufferings of Christ—reveals that, from birth, the entire life of our Lord was a sacrifice to God. Jesus did not live a single second for Himself.

I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother's womb You have been My God. (Ps 22:10)

Jesus had been given up to God from His birth. At twelve, He already knew that He had to be about His Father's business. He knew that His purpose on earth was to give up His life. In His three-year ministry, Jesus underwent both physical and mental deprivation. He had no place to lay His head (Mt 8:20), often sacrificed rest to teach the people (Mk 6:30–44), and went without sleep in order to pray (Lk 5:16).

The ideal human life is a happy one. No-one wants to be sorrowful. If we are grieved, we hope to quickly get over and become happy again. But the whole life of our Lord was characterized by sorrow – the Scripture describes Him as a “Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Is 53:3).

Unfortunately, the people of His time did not appreciate all these sacrifices and even ridiculed Him (Jn 10:20).

Death of Jesus

Christ's ultimate sacrifice was the cross. The history of Christianity is replete with examples of people who have undergone decades of torment or severe physical persecution for their belief, but no human could have endured Christ's suffering on the cross.

The gospels describe the actual physical affliction of Christ on the cross. But Psalm 22 tells us of His state of mind. In this psalm, God used David's experience to reflect on what Christ would experience.

HE WAS SURROUNDED BY FEROCIOUS PERSECUTORS

Jesus' persecutors were like ferocious beasts—the strongest bulls of Bashan (Ps 22:12), a raging and roaring lion (Ps 22:13), and dogs (Ps 22:16a). He was put through separate trials by Annas the high priest, Caiaphas the high priest, Pilate, and Herod. Our Lord's enemies had so much hatred for Him that they spared no effort in trying to destroy Him.

“The history of Christianity is replete with examples of people who have undergone decades of torment or severe physical persecution for their belief, but no human could have endured Christ's suffering on the cross.”

HE WAS MOCKED

At every point, he was mocked—by the men who arrested Him, officers at the courts, the chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, and the high priest. The servants of the high priest not only mocked Him, but even spat on His face and beat Him. Other bystanders struck Him with the palm of their hand, taunting, “Prophecy to us Christ! Who is the one who struck you?” Herod and his men of war mocked him. The Roman soldiers put a scarlet robe on Him, twisted a crown of thorns, and put it on His head. After placing a reed as a sceptre in His hands, the whole garrison knelt down, sarcastically shouting, “Hail King of the Jews!”

Jesus was in fact God who became flesh. But at that point of His torment, He was even lower than man. As human, Jesus had emotions; so He would have keenly felt the prophesied humiliation.

But I am a worm, and no man; A reproach of men, and despised by the people. All those who see Me ridicule Me; They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, “He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue Him; Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!”

(Ps 22:6–8)

This prophecy in Psalm 22 was fulfilled (cf. Mt 27:40–44). At Calvary, the baying crowd shouted their taunts, which aimed to hurt Jesus in several ways.

First, they threw words Jesus had previously spoken back in His face, i.e., “You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself” (Mt 27:40; Jn 2:19). Second, they aimed for His soft spot. The one constant and most precious thing

in His life on earth was His close communion with God. To provoke Him, the Jews sniped, “He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God’” (Mt 27:43). Their barb that God should save His son implied that if Jesus was not delivered, then clearly He was not the Son of God. Third, even convicted criminals – people clearly inferior to the Lord in character – joined in the taunting (Mt 27:44).

Despite this severe provocation, Jesus did not give in. He said, “The ruler of the world is coming, but he has nothing in Me” (Jn 14:30). Though they taunted Him, it was useless.

HE WAS SCOURGED

The plowers plowed on my back; They made their furrows long. (Ps 129:3)

Being beaten with a cane leaves a line or mark on the flesh; the flesh swells up. Jesus was not just beaten, but flayed till his flesh resembled furrows in the field. So horrific is such scourging that it has been said that some criminals sentenced to crucifixion did not even make it to the crucifixion site because they had already died from the scourging. Jesus

was so badly scourged that He barely had strength to carry His cross up to Golgotha (cf. Mk 15:21–22).

HIS HANDS AND FEET WERE PIERCED

*They pierced My hands and My feet
(Ps 22:16b)*

Crucifixion was a gruesome form of capital punishment designed by the Romans to inflict maximum pain on those sentenced to it, chiefly slaves and the worst criminals. In the process of crucifixion, the victim would first be nailed to the cross laid horizontally. All the nerves in a man's hands and feet are connected. So when the first nail was hammered into his hand, the victim would feel an intense pain spearing through his whole body.

The Old Testament describes Jesus as the One who was pierced. Not only did nails pierce His hands and His feet, thorns also pierced His head (Mk 15:17).

HE WAS IN INDESCRIBABLE PHYSICAL AGONY

I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; It has melted within Me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death. (Ps 22:14–15)

When the cross was raised from its horizontal position, the victim's entire body weight was supported by the nails that had been driven through the hands. A massive strain is placed on the wrists, arms and shoulders often resulting in a dislocation of the shoulder and elbow joints. The rib cage was constrained, making it extremely difficult to exhale, and impossible to take a full breath. With blood slowly draining from his body, the victim would feel extreme thirst.

Hence Jesus was clearly pushed to His physical limits on the cross. Although we may think there are moments in life when we are being put through suffering beyond human limits, Scripture assures us that no one will be tried more than what he can

endure (1 Cor 13:10). God ensures this.

Jesus had no such respite. During His capture, Jesus had already identified the “power of darkness” that was working through human instruments against Him (Lk 22:53). His tormentors would show Him no mercy because the power of darkness was at work.

HE WAS COMPLETELY ALONE

My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning? (Ps 22:1)

”Amidst our suffering, we must continue to trust in God's faithfulness.

This phrase—“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”—is cited in the gospels, indicating how intense this trial was for Jesus. No human suffering comes close. Sometimes words are used to provoke and hurt us but we do not suffer bloodshed. Sometimes our sickness brings unbearable pain, but we are nourished by the love, concern, and intercession of brethren. There may be people who have actually suffered abandonment by every person they know. For example, Apostle Paul said that he had been forsaken by everyone. But he goes on to qualify that “The Lord stood by me” (2 Tim 4:16–17). In contrast, Christ was completely forsaken by all; even by God His Father.

THE STEADFASTNESS OF CHRIST'S TRUST

Christ's sacrifice was total. To come to this world, He had to be stripped of His divine form. During His ministry, He was stripped of His sleep. During His arrest and trial, He was stripped of His disciples—Judas betrayed Him, Peter denied Him, the others had long fled. On the way to Calvary, He was stripped of His dignity—they mocked and taunted Him. He was stripped of His flesh—they scourged and pierced Him; he could even count His bones. He was stripped of all His clothes—He hung on the cross almost naked.

*I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me. They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.
(Ps 22:17–18)*

And finally, God even stripped Him of the Father's presence. He who knew no sin was made to be sin for us (2 Cor 5:21). Because He had to bear our sin, Jesus had to forego the help and abidance of the Father.

Some people wonder whether Jesus' cry of “Eloi eloi lama sabachthani” was akin to questioning or blaming God. It could not have been, because Jesus was completely submissive to the Father's will. Jesus' cry was actually a plea to His Father to return to Him.

In fact, the entire Psalm 22 is a single prayer and a cry for God to return to Him. He starts with recalling God's faithfulness:

*Our fathers trusted in You; They trusted, and You delivered them.
(Ps 22:4)*

He then goes on to supplicate:
Be not far from Me. (Ps 22:11a)





But You, O Lord, do not be far from Me; O My Strength, hasten to help Me! (Ps 22:19)

Then from verse 21, there is a change in the tone of Psalm 22. There is absolute conviction that God has already answered Him.

All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You." (Ps 22:27)

Christ had seen the fruit of His sufferings, i.e., the salvation of the nations. This indicates that Jesus did not die in anguish and bitterness of heart on the cross. Unlike the priest who gave up on Christ, Christ never gave up on the Father. Jesus' last two sentences on the cross were "It is finished," and "Father, into Thy hands I commit My Spirit." Even the cruelest trial on earth was limited by time. Finally, Jesus returned to the bosom and love of the Father.

COME TO THE CROSS

Understanding the complete and total sacrifice and suffering of Christ leaves us with two key lessons. First, we must not try to run away from suffering because the latter is inextricably linked with future glory. The Old Testament prophets diligently

sought to know the salvation grace that would come upon the believers in the New Testament (1 Pet 1:10–11). Specifically, they were looking forward to two things—the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that would follow. These two are inseparable. Had Jesus not undergone His great suffering, glories would not have followed. This is why Apostle Paul made it his life goal to understand the sufferings of Christ; this would thus enable him to have fellowship in Christ's sufferings (Phil 3:10).

Therefore, when we partake of Christ's sufferings, we shall also partake of His glory (1 Pet 4:13). Wanting only the glory without the sufferings is like desiring only the good times in a marriage, and rejecting the bad. Conversely, sufferings without the glory are meaningless. What would have been the point of persevering through the pain? Hence, Peter reminds us that our suffering is meaningful—since we partake of Christ's sufferings, we shall partake of His glory.

Second, amidst our suffering, we must continue to trust in God's faithfulness. There will definitely be moments in our lives when we feel that everything is working against us and that our suffering knows no bounds. In moments like these, we need to come to the cross. We need to

recall the sufferings Christ underwent. If God had loved us so much that He did not spare His beloved Son (Rom 8:32), what would He not do for us?

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:2)

Jesus is truly the most excellent exemplar for our journey of faith. He unwaveringly submitted to and trusted in His Father's will. He despised the shame of suffering. He saw the joy that was before Him (cf. Psalm 22). He saw what would happen when He had completed His sufferings. By enduring the greatest suffering, He went on to enjoy the greatest glory—sitting down at the right hand of God.

Therefore, whenever we are at the breaking point of our lives, unable to endure anymore, we should always come to the cross. And when we do so, we shall have fellowship both in the sufferings and in the glory of Christ. This is the power of the cross. ★

“There will definitely be moments in our lives when we feel that everything is working against us and that our suffering knows no bounds. In moments like these, we need to come to the cross. We need to recall the sufferings Christ underwent. If God had loved us so much that He did not spare His beloved Son (Rom 8:32), what would He not do for us?



Living for the Lord (II): In the Home

Adapted from a sermon series by Simon Chin—Singapore

In part one, we learned we have been purchased with a great price; so we need to live our life aligned with Apostle Paul's exhortation: For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's (Rom 14:7–8). In part two, we learn that living for the Lord also extends to our family life.

When we live for ourselves or even for our family, life can still feel empty. Solomon once lamented, "Vanity of vanities" (Eccl 1:2). Indeed, everything conducted under the sun can feel like vanity. In contrast, everything done above the sun—for a higher purpose and according to God's will—brings meaning to life and a future reward in the kingdom of heaven. In the conclusion to the Book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon defines that higher purpose: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Eccl 12:13–14).

Today, by the grace of God, we come to know the word of God and understand that we can live a meaningful life because God loves us and has redeemed us from a life of hopelessness. If we continue to live for ourselves even with such knowledge, we are the most foolish of people.

Let us start with our home, where we should live our life for the Lord. What must we do to achieve this?

HONOR (RESPECT AND OBEY) OUR PARENTS

Apostle Paul warns that in the last days, sinful behavior will be prevalent (2 Tim 3:1). This is very evident today, where it is commonplace to hear of news on the lack of morality in society, where children are capable of even murdering their parents. One wonders what has happened to filial piety. For Christians who fear God, honoring our parents is our basic duty.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother," which is the first commandment with promise: "that it

may be well with you and you may live long on the earth."

(Eph 6:1–3)

Here, Paul quotes the Fifth Commandment; the first commandment with a promise, where those who honor their parents will be blessed with longevity. Some may think that such obedience is conditional, "If my parents treat me well, then I will obey them. If my parents do not take good care of me, I do not need to obey them." But this is not what the Bible teaches. As long as we have parents who are with us, our duty is to respect and obey them.

Biblical examples of those who obeyed their parents and were blessed would be Joseph (Gen 37:13–14; 47:11–12) and David (1 Sam 17:15–

”*At its most basic, living for Christ at home means obeying and respecting our parents. When we do so, God will bless us.*

20). Conversely, we see the two sons of Eli, who, despite growing up in the temple, were disrespectful and disobedient to their father. In the end, God let the enemies kill them in battle. Samson was another person who did not heed his parents' advice. He insisted that they helped to arrange his marriage to a beautiful Gentile woman. Despite being a judge and a Nazarite with a special gift of physical strength from the Lord, Samson came to a calamitous end—because he disobeyed his parents and married a Gentile woman.

“When we live for Christ, we use the word of God to cultivate ourselves in our marriage so that we can be holy and know how to respect one another, just as we honor and respect God.”

At its most basic, living for Christ at home means obeying and respecting our parents. When we do so, God will bless us. When Solomon succeeded his father David as king, his mother, Bathsheba, approached him. Despite being the most important person in the land, Solomon arose and bowed to her. He also made sure she had a throne by his side. Such was his filial piety. As a result, God blessed Solomon.

Honoring our parents is something we must learn. However, filial piety is not always easy to practice, as we may find it difficult to get along with our parents; but the fact remains that they are our parents, and as children, we need to honor, which is to respect and obey, them.

UPHOLD HOLINESS IN MARRIAGE

One of modern society's ills is the lack of holiness in marriage. Some choose to marry multiple times; others divorce when they fall out of love. Fornication and adultery are rife. But the author of Hebrews reminds us, “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Heb 13:4).

In church, marriage is to be treated

with honor and conducted in a manner blessed by God. Before marriage, we uphold holiness by refraining from sexual intimacy; after marriage, we are faithful to our spouse: upholding the one man, one wife principle. God blesses such marriages, since, by respecting the sanctity of the relationship, we are honoring God and acknowledging that He has brought us together.

The Bible says, “Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mk 10:9). Sadly, society no longer heeds these words. Instead,

*And this is the second thing you do:
You cover the altar of the LORD
with tears,
With weeping and crying;
So He does not regard the offering
anymore,
Nor receive it with goodwill from
your hands.
Yet you say, “For what reason?”
Because the LORD has been witness
Between you and the wife of your
youth,
With whom you have dealt
treacherously;*

*Yet she is your companion
And your wife by covenant.
But did He not make them one,
Having a remnant of the Spirit?
And why one?
He seeks godly offspring.
Therefore take heed to your spirit,
And let none deal treacherously with
the wife of his youth.
“For the LORD God of Israel says
That He hates divorce,
For it covers one's garment with
violence,”
Says the LORD of hosts.
“Therefore take heed to your spirit,
That you do not deal treacherously.”
(Mal 2:13–16)*

Prophet Malachi ministered around 400 B.C., after the rebuilding of the temple and the city walls. By right, the people's faith should have been restored by then, but we note that God, through Malachi, rebuked them for a number of transgressions, including men's relationship with their wives: instead of honoring and respecting their spouse, they had oppressed them. Hence, God rejected their offerings.

A Christian marriage can be compared with the relationship that Jesus has with His church. Just as Jesus loves the church, we need to have this type of love for our spouse—sharing respect and honor, and helping each other to walk on the path to the kingdom of heaven—with godliness and holiness.

We must ensure that our marriage is holy and that we are faithful to each other (1 Thess 4:3–8). This

couples take the marriage vows lightly. We have seen young couples who divorce after a few years of marriage, and even couples, despite decades of marriage, divorce when their children have grown up; citing the absence of feelings, sentiments or obligations towards each other.

Apostle Paul says, “Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband” (Eph 5:33). Marriage is a reciprocal relationship: a husband should love (treasure) his wife and a wife should respect and yield to her husband. A marriage is not conforming to biblical teachings if it lacks either love or respect.

In today's society, many find it difficult to accept these biblical teachings, mistaking them for gender inequality and thinking that they give men the license to oppress their wives. On the contrary, these teachings mean that a husband has to make sacrifices for his wife, to love and treasure her just as Christ gave Himself for the church. In turn, a wife is to respect her husband. When we apply such principles in a marriage, the relationship will grow and blossom.

In history, God's people had ignored His will concerning marriage:

stems from the understanding that we are children of God, and that we must honor Him as the Lord of our household. This is very important.

When we live for Christ, we use the word of God to cultivate ourselves in our marriage so that we can be holy and know how to respect one another, just as we honor and respect God.

ESTABLISH THE CHURCH IN OUR HOME

Next, we build our homes to become like a church. In the apostolic times, many homes were churches. One such home was that of Aquila and Priscilla.

The churches of Asia greet you.

Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. (1 Cor 16:19)

Aquila and Priscilla lived in Corinth. They received Paul into their home when he spent eighteen months preaching the gospel in Corinth. Their reception was in contrast with many others who doubted his apostleship, as they could not forget that Paul was once a persecutor of Christians. When Paul left Corinth to continue his ministry, Aquila and Priscilla accompanied him to Ephesus. There, they met Apollos, an eloquent speaker who knew only the baptism of John. Aquila and Priscilla took him aside to explain the gospel of salvation more accurately. Later, Apollos travelled from Ephesus to Corinth to pastor the church there.

Because Aquila and Priscilla were willing to use their home as a church, they could nurture key workers such as Apollos and Paul for the ministry. Had Aquila and Priscilla not been devout Christians, their home would never be a church. (For a home to be a church, that home must have godliness and holiness, a place where people like to gather for worship.)

This is what we should establish in our homes, a place of worship. We can set up a family altar, when family members gather to read the Bible and to pray, even if it is only for five to ten minutes each day. Let us not become

so busy with secular matters that we no longer place importance on family worship. If we want God's blessings on our home—for our children to understand their faith, grow up in the Lord, live for Christ, and rely on Him—we must establish our family altar while they are young.

SERVE AS A FAMILY

It is also important that we serve the Lord as a family. We are familiar with the biblical account of Abraham and Isaac who climbed Mount Moriah together. Had Isaac not agreed to walk with his father, carrying the fire and the firewood, or had he struggled on the altar, Abraham would not be able to demonstrate his willingness to offer his beloved son to God. In their joint service, we are left with this legacy of Abraham's great faith—a testament why he became the father of faith, someone who brought God's blessings to his son Isaac, his grandson Jacob, and to his descendants, including David and Jesus Christ.

Let us not become so busy with secular matters that we no longer place importance on family worship. If we want God's blessings on our home—for our children to understand their faith, grow up in the Lord, live for Christ, and rely on Him—we must establish our family altar while they are young.

Acts 21:8–9 relates how Philip's family served God together: "On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied."

Earlier in Acts chapter 8, we learn of Philip's preaching in Samaria. Afterwards, he preached to the Ethiopian eunuch, before the Holy Spirit transported him to Azotus. Later Philip moved to Caesarea and settled down. He had four daughters who were prophetesses; in short, the whole family served the Lord. What a beautiful picture!

Today, it is the same. The entire family must be ready to serve God.

If we had to decide whether our son should be a preacher or a doctor, many of us may choose the latter because we deem this will give him a better future; serving God would be a secondary priority. If Christians raise their children with such secular values, it is difficult to nurture them to have a robust faith and reliance on God. We can see this trend in church: members who are successful in society have drifted away from church, no longer living their lives for Christ. While they could be fervent during their tertiary years, having been taught by their

families to seek the world first before seeking God, they turned away from their faith after their studies to seek their fortune in the world.

In order for parents to establish a home where family members love and serve God, these parents must uphold the right values and understand that serving the Lord is a grace and





encourage their children to serve God always.

In our lives, we have to make many choices—on our marriage, our career, our place of residence, and our way of life. If we want to live for Christ, we must set correct priorities: serving Him must be of utmost importance. If church members can have this mindset, the church will not lack workers. We will be able to fulfill the duties that God has given us and serve Him joyfully together.

”*In order for parents to establish a home where family members love and serve God, these parents must uphold the right values and understand that serving the Lord is a grace and encourage their children to serve God always.*

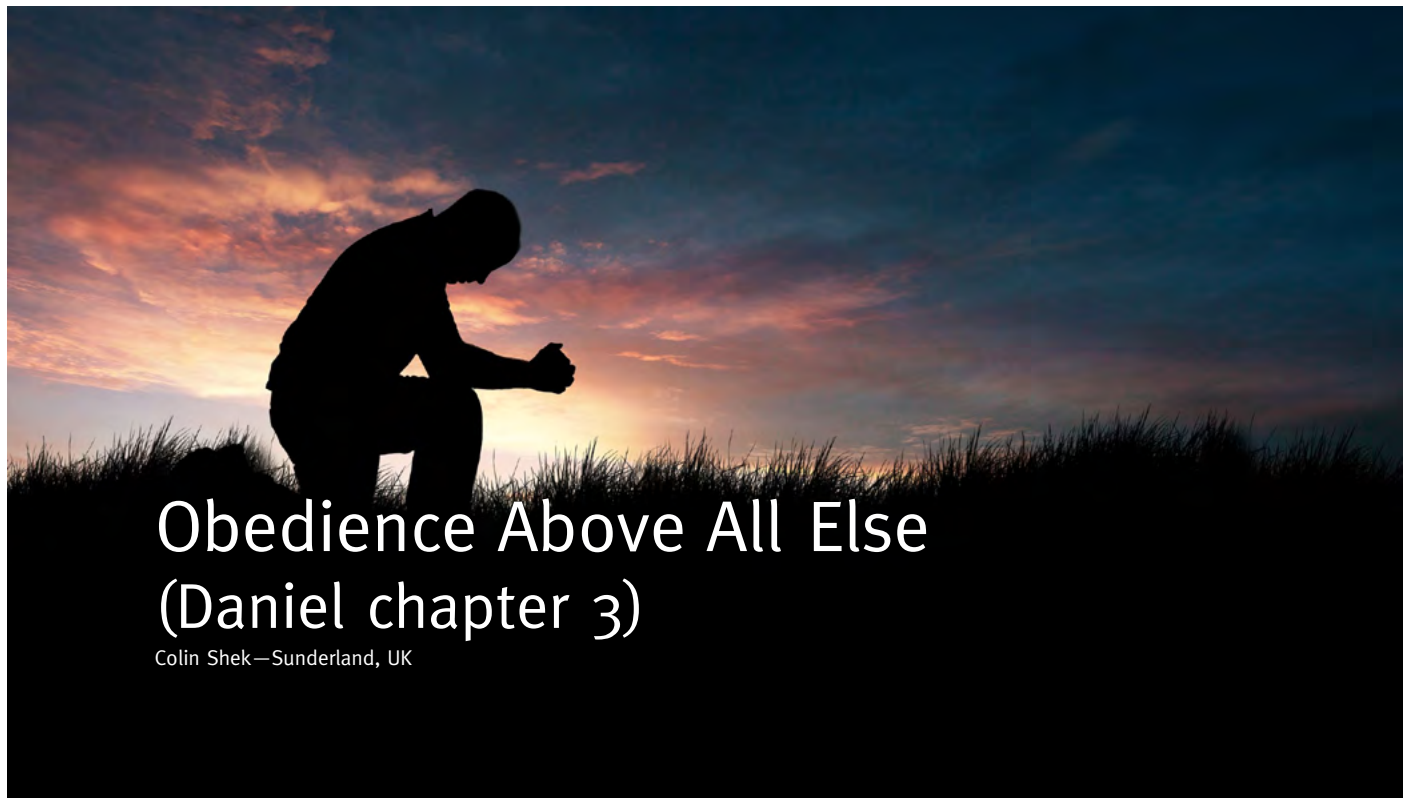
Sadly, the reality is that many of us do not give God priority; rather, we prefer to live for ourselves. It is not surprising, then, that we raise children who grow up to become talented people, but who withhold their gifts from God. Over time, “Living for Christ” becomes an empty catchphrase.

In church, we are witnessing a decreasing number of full-time preachers; a trend that suggests our resolve of living for Christ is declining with each generation of believers. Our predecessors had a strong sense of what it meant to live for Christ. Many offered themselves for full-time ministry. We need to review once

again, how we can truly live for Christ and serve Him.

CONCLUSION

If we can be certain of our reward in heaven when our life ends, we will sing praises to the Lord. This means we have done our duty as a human being, as a parent or grandparent, and at the same time, we have fulfilled our duty as the Lord’s disciple. We have laid up for ourselves abundant treasure in heaven and left a legacy of faith for our children so that they, knowing God, will keep His word and also enter His kingdom, where we can be together forever, in the presence of our Lord. ★



Obedience Above All Else (Daniel chapter 3)

Colin Shek—Sunderland, UK

As Christians, we are blessed if we obey God. The Bible teaches us to overcome the tides of the world through our obedience—to resist the secular norms of pursuing money, satisfying our lusts, and fulfilling our dreams.

At times, such obedience seems to come at a cost. You may do your best to shine for God at work and yet be passed over for promotion. Instead, the person that parties every night or spends Friday afternoons surfing the Internet is promoted. While firmly maintaining godly values, speech, and conduct at school, you may find yourself as the class loner or the butt of every joke. You may offer as much time and money as you can manage to God, yet you constantly struggle to balance your family schedules or finances. Why do Christians encounter such things? Why can't the lives of good and obedient Christians be smooth sailing?

While God promises blessings in return for obedience, He does not bubble wrap us from life's hard knocks. Although God allows us to experience pressures and challenges in life, He is always there for us. This is the encouragement and promise

“While God promises blessings in return for obedience, He does not bubble wrap us from life's hard knocks. Although God allows us to experience pressures and challenges in life, He is always there for us.

given to us in the Bible. Daniel's three friends served God wholeheartedly, shunning the ways of the world, yet they met with dire consequences. Their experience has been penned for us today, to remind us that obedient Christians have to withstand the pressures of the world.

TRIALS ARE PART OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

Having been assimilated into the Babylonian regime, Daniel and his three friends passed the training expected of them with flying colors (Dan 1:19,20). God's intervention in Babylonian affairs and His constant abidance with these Jews also led to their promotions within the Chaldean government (Dan 2:46–49).

However, Daniel chapter 3 records how Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego found themselves in a sticky situation—obeying the first commandment (Ex 20:3) became

socially and politically challenging. Pressures mounted against them to abandon their loyalty and obedience to God.

First, they encountered pressure from authority, namely, King Nebuchadnezzar whose image of gold was to be dedicated by all workers of the government (Dan 3:1–2). Next, they faced peer pressure from their fellow civil servants from around the region, who were willing to abandon their own gods at the blow of a horn to pledge allegiance to the god of Babylon (Dan 3:2–7). Finally, not only did the three Jews have to stand firm against the idol and peer pressure, they also had to deal with the Chaldean workers plotting against them: “There are certain Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego; these men, O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your

gods or worship the gold image which you have set up" (Dan 3:12).

The king became furious at Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego and gave them an ultimatum:

"Now if you are ready at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, and you fall down and worship the image which I have made, good! But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?" (Dan 3:15)

Bow down to the image or prepare to be killed; all because they chose to obey their God and refused to take part in some "office ritual" or "official engagement." It seems that the best thing they could have done was to dutifully nod-along, accept the king's grace, and seemingly bow down to the idol. After all, why should they not compromise? Why obey God and incur the wrath of the king when the consequences of doing so would be disastrous?

The Bible tells us that we may encounter sticky situations in life when we choose to obey God (1 Pet 3:14–17; 4:1–2, 12–14). We will find ourselves in circumstances where we are pressured into compromising our faith. If we feel isolated from school friends or work colleagues, we will undoubtedly feel the pressure to join in with the odd rude joke or add some swearwords to flavor our speech. What is wrong with joining in occasionally and getting accepted, even if it means momentarily dropping our godliness down a level? Doing so may mean not missing out on the next promotion.

Perhaps you feel the pressure to "keep up with the Joneses." Why have less than others? Why not spend a little less time with the family and with God to pursue more wealth? With more money, we can buy bigger and better things. Why should we not reduce our Sabbath worship and attendance by enrolling our children in weekend tutoring to improve their

success? By doing so, we are following the societal model to improve our children's future.

However, what does God expect from us in such circumstances? How did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego respond to the pressure put on them to momentarily abandon their faith?

GOD DESIRES OBEDIENCE DURING TRIALS

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."

(Dan 3:16–18)

Their answer was clear, even if it was suicidal. *Our God can deliver us, but even if He does not, we would rather die than bow down to your gods.* They believed that God was

“God wants to see us hold fast to Him at all costs. To have the attitude that says, “I will shun the ungodliness of the world, the vain pursuit of money at all costs, even if it means less job security and less digits in my bank account. I will hold fast to my godly conduct and speech, even if it means missing out on all the office in-jokes, and having fewer Facebook ‘likes’.”

more than able to save them, but their obedience did not rest on Him doing so. It was a case of honoring the first commandment or nothing: obedience above deliverance. What was most important to them was standing by the law of the one true God. "But if not" This statement revealed their great reverence towards God and their faith in Him.

And so, what about us? What is our response when the odds are stacked against us? Are we willing to obey the commandments of God above all else? Even if it means we will lose out?

Some may wonder, "Why should I believe in a God who does not protect or deliver me in my time of need? I have a career to think about. I have a family to take care of. I have my bank balance to maintain." The issue is not that God cannot deliver. In fact, He is able (Dan 3:17), and more often than not, He does.

However, God wants to see us hold fast to Him at all costs. To have the attitude that says, "I will shun the ungodliness of the world, the vain pursuit of money at all costs, even if it means less job security and less digits in my bank account. I will hold fast to my godly conduct and speech, even if it means missing out on all the office in-jokes, and having fewer Facebook 'likes'." The godly attitude that says, "I don't need to be super rich. I don't need to be popular. But I need to obey Christ. I need to follow Him." That, after all, is the faith described in the Bible (Heb 11–12); the faith that pleases God (Heb 11:6).

GOD MEETS US IN THE FLAMES

In response to the Jews' steadfastness in God, the Babylonian king commanded that the furnace be heated up seven times more intense than usual (Dan 3:19), the three men be bound and cast in (Dan 3:20). The king was astonished at what he saw next:

"Look!" he answered, "I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God." (Dan 3:25)

”What is our response when the odds are stacked against us? Are we willing to obey the commandments of God above all else? Even if it means we will lose out?

A fourth man like the Son of God? All of them unbound and walking about? Against all laws of physics and biology, they were unharmed inside the furnace. The king called them out and the workers gathered for a quick assessment. Miraculously, no hair or clothing was singed (Dan 3:27). The chapter concludes with the pagan king, who had built a pagan idol, praising the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego (Dan 3:28–29). It was impossible to dispute the sovereignty of the one true God preserving His people. The king even acknowledged that there was no other God who could do such a thing (Dan 3:29).

It is notable that God did not prevent the furnace from being heated up, nor did He prevent His loyal followers from being bound or from being thrown into the furnace. While He allowed them to experience the struggle and challenges, He abided with them and met them in the midst of their trials.

This is the same for us today. God may not always prevent us from experiencing the struggles of life, such as dipping into our overdraft to make ends meet, but He always sustains our lives, in that we will have food on the table. He does not always prevent us from being isolated in our pursuit of godliness, but He does abide with us and builds us up to be stronger and godlier. Even if not immediately, He will provide us with godly friends to support and walk with us. God may not prevent us from going into the operating theatre but He does help us throughout the procedure and the recuperation. He does not always stop us getting burned in life, but He does have a tendency of meeting us in the flames. In such moments of trials, is it not a blessing to have a great God who promises to be with us (Deut

31:6)?

CONCLUSION

Life as a Christian may not be easy or smooth sailing at all times. Often, our obedience to God seems to come at a cost. Obeying the first commandment means having to make tough choices from time to time, demonstrating our willingness, devotion, and faithfulness to God. By doing so, we will likely be forced out of our comfort zone, lose our sense of security, and even our popularity. Despite these, God desires our obedience above all else. In return, He will abide with us and meet us amidst our pressures and challenges.

May we courageously stand firm and willingly follow Christ. By doing so, we will know and experience that above all else, God Himself is our most precious blessing. ★





Straying and Returning to the True Jesus Church

A. Boivin—Vancouver, Canada

I am often asked, “Did you grow up in the church?” And I never really know how to answer that question. Like every testimony, there are many versions of the story. It continues to build over time, piece by piece, grace by grace. But in every version, the constant thread that binds them all is the life-altering grace and redemptive love that God poured into my life when I least deserved it.

THE EARLY YEARS

I was baptized into the True Jesus Church (TJC) as a baby. From an early age, my mother read the Bible to me every night and we prayed together as a family before we went to sleep. From the stories my mother told me and what I learned at church, the foundation of my childhood faith was built on the simple fact that God loved me. That the very same God who protected Daniel from the lions and parted the Red Sea for Moses and the Israelites, was high up in the sky, loving me. That very thought was enough to convince me that I was very blessed.

However, as I grew up and life became complicated, the greatest thing that fuelled my simple

faith, God’s love, became the most challenging part for me to understand. On the pulpit, pastors would tell stories about God’s power flowing into people’s lives, drastically changing their circumstances and filling their lives with meaning. I heard testimonies of incomplete hearts that had been transformed and healed by a loving God. I would peek during prayers and watch others praying so earnestly, tears running down their cheeks as they poured out their deepest hurts to the Lord. And looking back, I remember no longer being able to recognize *that* God in my life—the God they talked about in those stories, the God whom those heartfelt prayers around me seemed to be reaching out to. Somewhere along the way, I had decided that I could not possibly be worthy of that kind of love—not from God, or from anyone. And slowly, the foundation of my faith began to fall apart. The

God in my life began to seem so silent and so small—merely the sum of powerless rituals and rules. Eventually, this turned into a total rejection of Christianity, of church, and of God.

LEAVING HOME

I began to rebel around the age of fourteen. The nagging emptiness in my heart became my evidence that the God in my life was not good. I decided that there was more to life than going through all the motions, praying for happiness, and waiting for God to come through. I decided to stop waiting and set out to find that missing piece on my own.

I travelled everywhere and anywhere I could, attending camps and programs promising “the time of your life!” on their promotional websites filled with images of smiling children. Eventually, I even left my home in Vancouver for two years to attend boarding school in California

“The God in my life began to seem so silent and so small—merely the sum of powerless rituals and rules. Eventually, this turned into a total rejection of Christianity, of church, and of God.”

during my sophomore and junior years of high school. I was desperately chasing after feelings of fulfillment and belonging, convinced I was always just one more plane ride away from finding what I was looking for.

After those years of traveling, I eventually returned home at seventeen years of age, with incredible experiences and great stories to tell. Those years had been full of friendship, affection, and every other good thing this world had to offer that was supposed to heal a broken spirit. But at home, when the quiet routines of normal life resumed, I still felt the weight of brokenness in my life. I had tried to escape, but my adventures had only been a distraction from the intense sadness that had taken root in my heart.

“Finally, during one prayer, I surrendered everything to God. I summoned up courage to push away my fear of being rejected by God, and I laid my sins and my burdens at His feet. ... I told Him that I knew there was not one person on this earth who was less worthy than me, but if He wanted me back, I was His.

I decided that perhaps the key to bringing meaning into my life was to stop thinking about myself and to start serving others. So I changed course and for the next two years, I dedicated my life to working with a non-profit organization aiding orphaned children affected by HIV and AIDS in Harare, Zimbabwe. I spent two winters sitting in a run-down orphanage in Harare, cradling little ones in my arms, some disfigured by abuse and illness, holding back tears and praying to my silent God that He would send someone to love them. Surrounded by these children, my heart had no choice but to ache, to love and to change—for the first time in a very long time, I found myself wondering about God.

THE TURNING POINT

During my last trip to Harare, the winter after I graduated from high school, I heard a story about the faithfulness of an ancient Christian



martyr. While travelling to an orphanage, a youth pastor from another Christian denomination told me about a Christian man taken hostage by men who were torturing him to make him deny Christ. The torturers gouged out his eyes, and after they did, the man responded, “My eyes have no meaning to me, for I have already seen the glory of my God.” The torturers cut off his hands,

and he responded, “I have no need for my hands, for I have already felt the love of God.” And with each part of him that they took away, this man responded that each piece had already fulfilled its purpose by knowing the Lord. There was nothing they could take away from him.

I remember my eyes filling with tears as I stood in that driveway listening to this story. I felt like the man in the story—as though I had been giving myself away to the world, piece by piece. Except I did not have what this man had, which was the peace and assurance that persisted in the midst of his pain. Although I had not yet begun to allow my faithless heart to open itself up to the possibility of God, I felt that the God who had seemed so silent in my life had begun to whisper to me.

RETURNING HOME

For many years my mother had been asking me to consider joining a TJC

seminar. A year after I returned home from Zimbabwe, I finally agreed. At that time, the only seminar open was the 2011 College Youth Spiritual Convocation (CYSC) in Cerritos, California. It was at a place I had never been to, and in a region where I did not know a single person. However, despite my doubts, a few months later, I found myself on a plane to southern California for this event. During the days leading up to my trip, I had told God, “Okay, listen, God. I’m going to do this one last thing. I’m going to attend this seminar, and if I don’t find you there, then that’s it. I will come to peace with my decision to walk away.” I was twenty years old, and I had spent the past six years running away from God. One way or another, this was going to be my last adventure.

I will never forget walking into the chapel at Cerritos for the first time. When the congregation sang the hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” it was the most beautiful hymn I had ever heard. Every single note was in perfect harmony, and I remember looking around me and being so distracted by the beauty of the hymn that I forgot to sing. I remember that the voices of doubt in my mind quieted, and my heart began to open.

Throughout the seminar, the words shared by the pastors and speakers rooted themselves deeply into my heart and I was cut to the core. I felt as though God was speaking directly to me. I had long prided myself on being quite cool and collected, however, I found myself overcome with emotions. Try as I might, I could not stop the tears. I felt as though God was shattering all my misconceptions and finally standing before me as who He was—so mighty, so powerful,



and so good. For the first time, I began to feel the weight of sins I had committed in the years I had spent away from Him.

Because this was a seminar for college youths, many of the messages and teachings were rightfully geared towards a more advanced group with a strong foundation of Biblical knowledge. However, I was coming from years of absence and was nowhere near on the same level as my peers—and all I wanted to know was whether God still loved me. The topics and format of our lessons meant that the preachers never directly addressed the love of God, because it was likely that everyone sitting around me already knew quite well that God loved them. However, as I carried the burden of my conviction, the only thing I wanted to know was whether or not it was too late for me to be loved.

Finally, during one prayer, I surrendered everything to God. I summoned up courage to push away my fear of being rejected by God, and I laid my sins and my burdens at His feet. I brought all these years of defeat, sorrow and brokenness to Him, and I told Him I was so sorry for hurting Him. I told Him that I knew there was not one person on this earth who was less worthy than me, but if He wanted me back, I was His.

Within moments of praying those words, I felt enveloped by comfort, as though arms were pulling me into an embrace. I was filled with the Holy Spirit, and I felt a still small voice repeating over and over again as I prayed, telling me “I love you, I love you, I love you” This prayer and this voice have been the beginning of a lifelong love story that God has been writing, and continues to write,

in my life.

Knowing and experiencing God's love have been the greatest catalyst in my life thus far. It has truly been my saving grace. Although I have faced hardships, hurts, and challenges since I returned to God, these years have been the most joyful of my life. The long journey to that little chapel was, indeed, my last adventure. I finally met my loving and faithful Savior, and when He asked me to give Him my heart, I said yes. Every other thing in my life pales in comparison.

REFLECTIONS

Even though I believe in God's redeeming grace and forgiveness in my life, threaded throughout my journey of faith are still inklings of the broken road that led me here. I have prayed many prayers wishing I could have all those years I lost to give them back to God. But I know that without walking through the broken parts of my journey, I would never have been able to experience the restoration and redemption that come from a complete surrender to the grace of God. I would have never known what it really felt like to need a Savior. This journey has been as much about loss as it has been about hope.

If there is anything that God has taught me, it is that it is never too

late to turn around and take that first step towards home. It is so easy for us to feel as though we are too far and too long gone. So often, we minimize the power of the cross. We buy into the lie that the blood that was shed for us is not enough to redeem the most broken parts of our lives. What a tragedy it would be if we missed out on the gift of grace because we forgot the price He paid, if we missed out on the gift of love because we forgot why He paid it.

We serve a God who sees us, even from a long way off. A God who is filled with compassion, who runs to us and celebrates when we have been found. Just as I believed when I was a child, the very same God who protected Daniel from the lions and parted the Red Sea for Moses and the Israelites, is high up in the sky, loving me and loving you. Amazing grace!

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38–39)

May all the glory, honor and praise be unto His holy name. ★

“Without walking through the broken parts of my journey, I would never have been able to experience the restoration and redemption that come from a complete surrender to the grace of God. I would have never known what it really felt like to need a Savior.



My Eyes Have Seen God (II): Journey to Full-Time Ministry

From the book "My Eyes Have Seen God" by Sun Tao Hsieh — Taichung, Taiwan

In the previous installment of this testimony, Elder Sun Tao Hsieh relates how he came to know and believe in the true God. Soon after his baptism, the Holy Spirit moved him to make a vow to the Lord read on to learn how this eventually led him onto the path of full-time ministry.

On August 2, 1947, which was a Sabbath day, I attended the spiritual convocation at the church in Chiayi, Taiwan. After the service, I went to pray in the prayer room. The Holy Spirit filled me and, in my prayer, I made a vow to God that I would one day become a pastor. Afterwards, I went to find Elder Yichen Chien, who had been sent to help with the spiritual convocation.

When I told him I wanted to be a pastor, he asked me, "How long have you been baptized?"

I replied, "I studied the gospel for one month and received baptism almost a month ago."

After he heard my answer, he could not stop laughing. But, at the same time, he did not want to discourage me in what he must have seen as my extreme naivety.

Despite his vow, Elder Hsieh did not immediately become a pastor. Instead, he became a school teacher in Tungshih, an urban township in eastern Taichung County, where

there was no True Jesus Church. There he met his future wife. They married in 1950, and had two daughters soon after. Both children became ill soon after birth, and both could not be healed by medical doctors. By the mercy of God, Elder Hsieh's eldest daughter was eventually healed through intercessory prayers. However, his second daughter, diagnosed with a congenital heart disease, remained fever-stricken and underdeveloped, despite many intercessory prayers. Before the summer break in 1952, it occurred to Elder Hsieh during a prayer that perhaps God did not want him to live in Tungshih. There was no church in Tungshih, and because of the traffic and distance, he could not regularly attend church services at a nearby town. Elder Hsieh recalled how God had never ceased to have mercy on him in the past five years since his baptism. Perhaps, through this long period of trials, God was compelling him to leave this town to keep his faith

alive. So he applied for transfer to a school in Huwei, where there was a True Jesus Church. Through God's guidance, Elder Hsieh's transfer was granted and the family moved to Huwei in September 1952, where his wife and children eventually received baptism.

HONORING MY VOW

During a prayer in June 1954, I recalled a Bible verse: "When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you" (Deut 23:21). This verse reminded me of the time when I first got baptized: whilst attending an evangelistic service at the church in Chiayi, I had vowed to God that I would dedicate myself as a pastor.

I told my wife of my vow, the Scriptures' teaching, and how God would demand its fulfillment. I said, "I believe our daughter's affliction must be God's doing. Otherwise, how can we explain that our first

daughter became well through the laying on of hands and prayer, but the same method has not worked for our younger daughter, even with the ministers' help? If this is the case, I must fulfill my vow; otherwise God will hold me accountable."

My wife and I prayed together. I told God, "O Lord! If you are holding me to account for the vow I made, I will surely make good on it. Please grant us clear, unambiguous proof by lowering my daughter's temperature. If her temperature does not go down by tomorrow, then I will take this as a 'no.' O Lord! If there is some other reason for the illness, give us some time so we may examine ourselves further. O Lord! Please look upon our affliction with compassion and hear our prayer. Amen!"

Miraculously, my daughter's temperature immediately dropped. In over two years since her birth, this was the very first time her body temperature had been normal. I said to my wife, "This is a sign, beyond the shadow of a doubt. I'm awestruck with fear. The God we worship is truly a genuine, living and awesome God. If I don't follow through with my vow and God's anger flares up again, where can we possibly hide? I must dedicate myself as a minister."

My daughter was healed. She recovered her health extremely quickly. She was transformed from being skinny to looking plump, from being bedridden all day long to sitting, crawling, squatting, standing and walking. All of her organs began to develop normally. Praise the Lord for extending His merciful hand to save our beloved daughter from the verge of death! I shall never forget His abundant favor and wondrous grace.

When I was still teaching at Huwei Elementary, my colleague's eldest daughter suffered from postnatal heart-valve failure. Her condition was less serious than my daughter's. She did not suffer from a constant fever so she could sit and walk. By the time she turned twelve, she was malnourished and stunted. She looked as if she were only seven or eight years old. In comparison, my daughter's congenital heart failure was more severe and

gave rise to worse symptoms; yet, after the Lord's healing, she was able to develop normally.

A few years later, I watched as my daughter ran back from school, and recalled the doctor's earlier warning about not letting her run in her condition. After she regained her health, I did not see the need to forbid her from running. Since then, she has grown up, married, and given birth to three healthy children, without experiencing any problems. These events remind me once again that God's power of healing goes beyond any doctor's clinical experience. I am grateful to God for being so compassionate towards us, and not letting our daughter become a lifelong heartache.

“My wife and I prayed together. I told God, “O Lord! If you are holding me to account for the vow I made, I will surely make good on it. Please grant us clear, unambiguous proof by lowering my daughter’s temperature.” ... Miraculously, my daughter’s temperature immediately dropped.”

ENROLMENT INTO THE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

According to the public school regulations of the day, if an employee wished to resign during the semester, they had to submit a resignation letter six months in advance. I submitted my resignation accordingly, and it was promptly accepted. So I only received half a month's pay during July and no salary in August.

Coincidentally, this was also the time when the General Assembly in Taiwan started to enroll its very first batch of students for its theological seminary. The two-year program consisted of theological training in the first year and practical training in the second. I submitted my application immediately. I did not notify my mother, nor did I discuss the matter with my in-laws. Since God had already made His wishes plain, I did not hesitate and no one could dissuade me. Rather than informing them and facing stiff opposition, I

thought it would be better to act first and let them know afterwards. As expected, as soon as they found out, they were completely opposed to my decision, arguing that my children were still young.

I took the entrance examination in early August. First came the written part, followed by several short sermons, and lastly, an oral interview conducted by fifteen examiners.

The chief examiner, Elder Yichen Chien, asked, "In the first year of the theological seminary, students are paid a stipend of only NT\$200 each month. Will that be enough for you?"

At first I thought, *Why bother asking? Obviously this is not enough.* But I figured that if I told him this, he would tell me to go home. I was

already past the point of no return, so I answered, "God will provide." My answer did not mean I had other sources of income. Perhaps this response sprang from the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Deacon Chungtao Lin was moved by my answer and shouted, "Hallelujah!" as if to encourage me.

My monthly salary as a public school teacher had been NT\$500 a month, with additional subsidies in the form of rice, cooking oil, salt, coal and other necessities. Though it did not provide a rich life by any means, it offered an adequate livelihood. Once I became a theological seminary student, my monthly pay dropped to less than half of my previous income. Taking into account the loss in food subsidies and the NT\$20 of tithes I needed to offer, how could we possibly survive on NT\$180 per month? But thank God, we managed by relying on His grace and holding firm to our belief that He would always provide.

“My monthly salary as a public school teacher ... offered an adequate livelihood. Once I became a theological seminary student, my monthly pay dropped to less than half of my previous income. Taking into account the loss in food subsidies and the ... tithes I needed to offer, how could we possibly survive? But thank God, we managed by relying on His grace and holding firm to our belief that He would always provide.

EVERYTHING HAS ITS TIME

*To everything there is a season,
A time for every purpose under
heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to pluck
what is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal;
A time to break down, and a time to
build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to
dance;
A time to cast away stones, and a
time to gather stones;
A time to embrace, and a time to
refrain from embracing;
A time to gain, and a time to lose;
A time to keep, and a time to throw
away;
A time to tear, and a time to sew;
A time to keep silence, and a time to
speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate;
A time of war, and a time of peace.
(Eccl 3:1–8)*

Looking back on the various events that unfolded over the journey of my faith, I find this passage quite fitting to my own experiences. Had I resigned from Nanshi Teaching Academy earlier, my older sister, who brought me to church, would not yet have believed in the Lord when I visited her. If I had visited later, her initial evangelistic fervor could have grown cold and she might not have preached the gospel to me. As for fulfilling my vow to become a minister of God, had I done so earlier, there would have been no theological program for me to enroll in. If I had waited until later, the next seminary enrollment

did not happen for another five years, and that enrolment targeted rural students, rather than city-folks such as myself. Just imagine, at the time, I was familiar with less than half of the Bible and lacked pastoral knowledge and related skills. If I had not undergone full-time theological training, how could I have met the challenges of being a minister?

When we ponder why the people of Israel were willing to leave Egypt and why their desire was granted, we read in the Bible:

Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage...

And the LORD said: “I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey.”

(Ex 2:23b; 3:7–8a)

If the golden age inaugurated by Joseph had continued, such that the Israelites remained in a position of privilege in Egypt, they would surely have become comfortable in their situation and would never have dreamt of leaving. However, God’s will was to lead them to the land flowing with milk and honey, to fulfill the promise He had made to Abraham. Thus, God allowed the Egyptians to persecute the Israelites, and He listened to the cries of the Israelites, stretching out

His mighty hand to save them.

The fact that I could decide to leave Tungshih and give up a career in teaching have much in common with the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt. Every time I think about this, I cry out, “Hallelujah!” and breathe a sigh of amazement at the wondrous nature of God’s plan.

If I had enjoyed a smooth life in Tungshih, I would never have been willing to move to Huwei. I would have gradually indulged in worldly pleasures, acted according to my desires and over time, completely abandoned my faith. Another scenario is if we had moved to Huwei and God answered my prayer to heal my daughter immediately, I might have been grateful for a while, but would not have remembered my initial vow to the Lord. If that had happened, I would not have been willing to leave the field of education and the warmth of my family for the seminary. I would have lived an utterly ordinary and unremarkable life.

As the psalmist says, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes” (Ps 119:71). Also, in Romans we read: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom 8:28). These two verses express my own experiences perfectly. Praise God! ★



CURRENT STATUS

True Jesus Church (TJC) in India is located in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka in South India. Presently, there are thirteen churches, four prayer houses, and six places of worship, with a total membership of around 1110.

THE MILESTONES

1980s: South East Asia Evangelical Center

In order to enhance the work in India, the International Assembly tasked the South East Asia Evangelical Center (SEAEC), headquartered in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, to look into church development in India.

1994: India Mission Committee

In October 1994, at the 14th SEAEC councilors' meeting, the ministry in India was entrusted to the General Assembly (GA) of Malaysia and Singapore. The India Mission Committee (IMC) was formed to manage this work and it formulated a master development plan to turn the Indian churches into "self-administering, self-propagating, and self-financing" churches.

"The India Mission Committee (IMC) ... formulated a master development plan to turn the Indian churches into "self-administering, self-propagating, and self-financing" churches."

The IMC is headed by the Chairman of GA Malaysia and comprises eight other committee members, with some holding portfolios such as secretary, treasurer, pioneering in charge, and education in charge. They are appointed by the Executive Committee of GA Malaysia for a term of three years, and they hold their meetings bi-annually.

Since 1996, the IMC has been making three missionary visits to India annually, in the months of January/February, April/May, and September/October.

1996: India Working Committee

The India Working Committee (IWC) was set up in 1996. The committee, consisting of local representatives from the then Pammal Center and Ambatur Center, initiated and supervised the work in India, in order to reach the goal of "self-administration, self-propagation, and self-financing."

1997: Resident Preacher Stationed in India

In 1997 and 1998, the IMC stationed Malaysia GA preachers as resident preachers in India, with each preacher serving a term of around ten months. The preachers were to direct and align the IWC work with the IMC policies. Together with local ministers, they also led the pastoral and evangelistic work in India. This decision greatly enhanced the work in India.

2001: India Coordination Board

In early 2000, the IMC saw the need to reorganize the churches in India. The IWC was only a working committee that implemented the IMC's decisions. In order to progress, the churches in India needed to have its own organization. Hence, the IMC started to review and revise the India church constitution. Next, it worked with the IWC to confirm the status of the churches and prayer houses. With



these done, the restructuring could take place.

The year 2001 marked a new chapter in the history of the churches in India. The organization “True Jesus Church Coordination Board in India” (ICB) was formed. At its first church delegates conference, delegates from local churches were briefed on the reorganization, the constitution, and the organizational structure of the ICB. Elections for the ICB executive committee members took place. The churches under the ICB were to work towards “self-administration, self-propagation, and self-financing.”



India Theological Training Center in Ambatur, Chennai

FOCUS ON TRAINING

India Theological Training Center

As the churches in India comprise mostly Tamilians, it is only right and apt that they preach and pastor to their own countrymen. As such, the IMC sees the importance of providing training to develop the local members.

With this goal in mind, the India Theological Training Center (ITTC) was built to provide better facilities and learning environment. By the grace of God, and with the financial contributions and prayers of our brethren world-wide, the ITTC was dedicated to the Lord on September 12, 1999. This was another important milestone in the work in India.

Religious Education

When the IMC took over the work in India, one main focus was to set up proper religious education (RE) units within the churches. In 2001, the IMC introduced the RE system in India. It planned training courses and translated TJC's RE handbooks and texts into local languages and distributed them to the churches.



The RE system in India is now fully operational, with the formation of the National Education Affairs Council (NEAC) in 2004. The NEAC looks after the RE affairs of the children, teenagers, tertiary students, and youths, and systematically conducts RE classes. It trains teachers and conducts refresher courses. This work is done “All for Jesus and the Next Generation.”

Short-Term Theological Courses

The Short-Term Theological Training Course started in 1996, with the objective of imparting the pure teachings of the True Jesus Church to the participants. Through these courses, it enables the participants to:

- Build up their faith in the word of God and in the beliefs of the True Jesus Church.
- Cultivate the spiritual character of a true Christian and a life of Bible reading and of prayers.
- Pray for the Holy Spirit and for spiritual power and gifts.
- Have detailed knowledge of the gospel, and serve the Lord Jesus in their local churches.

Full-time Preachers' Training

Training for full-time preachers started in 2000 with an intake of three students. They graduated and were ordained in 2002. The second preachers training course started in 2002 with four students and they graduated and were ordained in 2005.

As part of the restructuring in 2002, the IMC also retired local workers¹ paid by the International Assembly (IA), replacing them with newly ordained deacons and preachers.

¹ When the IMC took over the work, India had seven IA paid workers.



Members at True Jesus Church in Ambatur, Chennai



Training Conducted in India

The IMC is a strong advocate of religious training and over time, has conducted numerous courses, as listed in the table below, and those with asterisks are conducted annually.

Administrative
Seminar on Church Government and Administration
Pastoral
Preachers' Training
Preachers' and Full-Time Workers' Spiritual Nurture / Coordination Board EXCO Spiritual Nurture*
Ministers' Post Systematic Training
Local Church Board Spiritual Nurture
Spiritual Meeting*
Seminar for Parents
Youths
Short Term Theological Training Course*
Youth Ministry Training Course
Youth Spiritual Meeting*
Seminar for Unmarried Youths
Music Seminar
Keyboard Course
Religious Education Unit
Religious Education Teachers' Basic Training Course
Religious Education Teachers' Refresher Course
Education Affairs Department Personnel Training
Bible Camps (Junior and Intermediate)
Summer Vacation Bible School and Children Evangelical Day

SEEKING LOST SHEEP

True Jesus Mission

The Lord is guiding the work of restoring the deviated True Jesus Mission (TJM) members, an initiative which began in 1999.

The TJM was set up by a Tamilian from India who was ordained as a deacon after he had accepted the truth in Ipoh, Malaya, in 1930. He brought the gospel to India in 1932 but, because of World War II, the church lost contact with the Malaya churches. This group of believers also attempted to contact our churches in China, but they were unsuccessful due to the border war between China and India. Without grounding in the truth, over time, some of their teachings changed. They did not have any communication with the TJC until 1999 when one of their members happened to pass by the True Jesus Church in Pammal and made contact.

Up to now, five churches with the total membership of around three to four hundred have returned to the fold. Praise the Lord.

REACHING OUT

Evangelism and Pioneering

With assistance from the Eastern Hemisphere Voluntary Members Team (EHVMT), the IMC established contact with the Chinese community (mainly

of the Hakka dialect) in the cities of Chennai and Kolkata in 2006. The IMC is presently evangelizing to them.

Also in 2006, the IMC started pioneering work in the states of West Bengal and Manipur in North East India, evangelizing to the Bengalis, the largest ethnic group in the state of West Bengal, and the locals, some of whom were pastors from other denominations. In the near future, the IMC hopes to reach out to the cities of Mumbai and Delhi where some of our members work and reside.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Leadership Issues

The ICB has yet to be able to garner strong support from the local churches. Development of the local churches also depends on the quality of local workers. As such, the pace of growth of each church is different: some churches are developing well but others are not. Pastoral work in India is also constrained by differences between preachers and ministers, limitations in the system of sending workers, and weak pulpit ministry.

Our church in India is in serious need of workers with good spiritual quality and foresight. This absence has hindered church growth, as local members do not receive adequate spiritual nourishment, and they neither support nor respect existing stewards. Over the years, the IMC has invested much effort in cultivating and training a new generation of spiritual leaders. This work will continue.

Financial Issues

Financial support from the local churches to the ICB is lacking. Local churches are able to support their own divine work, but the ICB faces financial difficulties. The IMC will continue to strengthen the local churches' offerings and members' contribution to the ICB.

Evangelism and Pioneering in North-East India

The IMC has invested much effort and money in India's pioneering work. However, as there is no permanent



local presence of the IMC personnel, evangelistic work in India remains at its infancy. Many truth-seekers have come and gone; only a few are still in contact with the church. The IMC will utilize more volunteers for this work.

CONCLUSION

The IMC looks forward to see the churches in India turning into "self-administering, self-propagating, and self-financing" churches. It continues to pray that there will be "Two Generations Working Together" and that efforts invested by the workers are "All for Jesus and the Next Generation." ★

Overview of churches in India

No	Status	Established	State	Members
True Jesus Church – Zone One				
1	Ambattur Church	1969	Tamil Nadu	132
2	Chengalput Church	1975		146
3	Tirunilai Church	1982		37
4	Tiruvothiyur Church	1984		60
5	Bangalore Church	1992	Karnataka	60
6	Muthamizh Nagar Church	2011	Tamil Nadu	35
7	Redhills Prayer House	2010		22
8	Perambakkam Prayer House	2010		44
9	Ariyalur Prayer House	2014		22
10	Karunkuzhi Place of Worship	2014		7
11	Kuvathor Place of Worship	2014		7
True Jesus Church – Zone Two				
12	Pammal Church	1969	Tamil Nadu	125
13	Paduvancherry Church	1994		60
14	Otteri Prayer House	1971		18
15	Veppur Place of Worship	1970		About 15
16	Pillur Place of Worship	2001		About 10
True Jesus Church – Zone Three				
17	Dymock Church	2005	Kerala	75
18	Vedikuzhi Church	2005		48
19	Lonetree Church	2005		73
20	Thenkasi Church	2011		45
21	Munnar Church	2014		29
22	Cheenthalar Place of Worship	2005		25
23	Anakuzhi Place of Worship	2005		15

Location of churches in India





Preparing for a Life of Full-Time Service

Lois Kuo—Pacifica, California, USA

A QUESTION-FILLED TIME

The Bible records the many different ways that God directly called His workers. However, for some of us, such a call to full-time service may not be immediately obvious.

The desire to offer our best to God may have been sparked when we were reflecting upon a sermon or attending a seminar. Perhaps, in personal reflection and prayer, we found ourselves aspiring to devote ourselves to full-time service. During such moments, it is natural to also wonder, among other things, if it were really God's will for us to take this path.

For many years, I asked pastors what I should do to prepare myself. I cherished the idea of full-time service, but I had no idea how to work toward it. *Was I acting upon God's will or my own? What is the right way to go about finding out?*

One thing I was absolutely certain of, however, was that I was not worthy. Well aware of my weaknesses, I wondered: *Will God accept my service? Will I really be able to make it on this path?*

Then, when I wanted to take the step to serve full-time, there were no suitable available positions. Perhaps I

had misunderstood God's intent for me, or perhaps the time wasn't right yet. *Does God still want me to serve Him? If so, when is the right time to make this switch?*

WAITING FOR THE ANSWER IN HIS TIME

Full-time service to the Lord is a very important life choice. It is not wrong to question whether this is indeed God's intended path for us. While we pray to God for guidance, it may be some time before a clear answer comes. Being human, this uncertainty can be difficult for us to bear.

However, waiting can be beneficial because time will show whether our desire to serve is a true call to service or just a momentary stirring of emotions. Since this waiting period is inevitable, instead of fretting anxiously, we can use it to deepen our understanding of ourselves and God.

Knowing Ourselves

While we cannot foresee how and when God will use us (like Moses, cf. Ex 2–3), we should put in every effort to know ourselves. Our character and habits have the potential to significantly enhance or become breaches in our faith and service.

Therefore, on our journey towards salvation, we must continually work to become more aware of our shortcomings and improve in these areas. We are then well-equipped to fit into whatever future God has planned for us.

Examining ourselves is no easy task. We can humbly ask our friends and family to help us identify our strengths and weaknesses. Tackling multiple areas at once may be overwhelming, so start with one or two. Working through these various issues helps prepare us not only for full-time service, but also for our marriage, family, and career.

Getting to Know Me: Practical Questions for Self-Knowledge

Managing myself

- What are my greatest strengths and weaknesses? What have I done to enhance these strengths and overcome these weaknesses?
- Am I grateful and content? How should I cultivate a thankful heart and simple life?
- In what areas do I need more self-control? How can I be more watchful in these areas?



- What drives my day-to-day choices? How does the well-being of others impact my decision-making?

Managing relationships

- What is my main communication style? How do I adapt my style to effectively communicate with different types of people?
- With whom do I not get along and why? How should I change to improve my relationship with others?
- How do I respond to criticism or suggestions for improvement? How can I learn to be more focused on introspection and not on the critics?
- What should I do to improve conflict management? How can I avoid combative thoughts or behavior and instead be more peaceable?
- Do I feel bitterness toward certain family or church members? How can I overcome any resentment with past events or circumstances?

Managing work and stress

- In my local church, what holy work am I willing or unwilling to do and why?
- How should I improve my work ethic? What should I do to be more productive, efficient, and effective?
- How do I handle stressful situations? What methods can I use to overcome intense stress?

Many of these questions reveal thoughts and deeply-rooted concepts that we were probably unaware of. God will guide us to see our imperfections if our hearts are pure and willing to change. After humbly confessing our weakness to the Lord, continue to think through each shortcoming in prayer. Look to the word of God to cleanse and align our thoughts and actions with God's standard. Keep track of any progress or setbacks in each area, while continuing to humbly yield to God's instruction. When we feel discouraged about overcoming old habits, God is our reason not to give up.



For Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a lamp that burns. (Isa 62:1)

God desires to see us as bright shining lights without shadow or taint. Though the goal feels unattainable, particularly in man's eyes, with God, nothing is impossible. God is ever willing and committed to helping us overcome our weaknesses. He does not stop working toward our righteousness, so we should not give up on ourselves.

In my own journey, the process of seeing and grappling with my weaknesses changed my life completely. I came to see that my behavior and choices often stemmed from my doubts of God's protection. As I dug deeper into what I based my identity on, God helped me to see many unhealthy and ungodly values. During this period of deep introspection, God was my greatest supporter who never turned away from the ugliness I needed Him to heal. As I confessed my need for others' approval and my self-idolatry, this new self-awareness changed my interactions with my family and my friends. I began experiencing true joy when serving at my local church. The process of facing myself not only prepared me for full-time service, but also led to a deeper experience of God, a happier life, and more fulfilling relationships with others.

Knowing God

A deep recognition of God's attributes is indispensable to a life of service. Knowing the beauty of God's character is an unending source of motivation to improve ourselves when working with different types of personalities.

Knowing God's omniscience reassures us that our efforts are not in vain though our tasks are unseen or bear no results. Knowing God is trustworthy allows us to willingly submit when we ourselves do not understand a particular assignment of the church. Knowing God's goodness allows us to fully trust Him with our lives, even in the face of obstacles.

We need to serve God for who He is and because of whom He has made us to be. It is not wrong to seek personal fulfillment and meaning in serving God, but these are insufficient to keep us motivated when work is tedious, unglamorous, and unappreciated by

Getting to Know God: Practical Questions for Enhancing Our Relationship with Him

God's Nature

- Do I express appreciation for God's attributes?
- How confident am I of God's love? What were the moments that I felt His love most?
- How large of a part does God play in my identity?

Communion with God

- What drives me to pursue knowing God more?
- Is my spiritual cultivation characterized by consistency?
- Are there situations in which I am less likely to want to think about or draw close to God?
- How can I retain the fear of God in my daily life?

Experience of God

- In what ways do I find joy in the Lord?
- Have I experienced victory gained by relying on God's mercy rather



than my own ability?

- What words of God do I hold onto in times of difficulty?
- When I feel unmotivated or tired in service, what do I do to recharge and obtain strength from God?

Spiritual companions

- Who are the spiritual friends and family members to whom I can turn to for spiritual advice and prayers?

others. What we view as meaningful may also change as time passes, but God's character remains steadfast.

Besides a deep understanding of God's unchanging character, a clear conviction and understanding of God's plan for our lives can keep us motivated through difficult times. Do we know how our lives fit into God's plan? What is God's purpose in our lives? The answer, which requires time and God's revelation, is one that we must eventually find an answer to. Knowing that we are carrying out God's intended role for us is vital for an unwavering commitment.

I had a direct experience of this when I first began to work full-time for God. On the outside, I appeared committed as I had quit my previous job and left behind friends and familiarity to move to a new city. But in my heart, I knew

I was not fully engaged; part of me was afraid of fully accepting full-time service. Doubts that I was suitable for this path gnawed at me, and anxiety about failing prevented me from full commitment.

This internal struggle made me unhappy and I lost motivation. I was always trying to get out of doing things that were difficult or were out of my comfort zone. I complained and blamed others for making my life and job difficult. I could not imagine staying in this job for the rest of my days.

However, thanks to God's mercy and intervention, my personal answer came unexpectedly during a prayer. I saw that everything in my life had been leading up to and preparing me for this work; even stages in my life that I had felt were failures were actually training periods. There were other people whom I had thought were better suited to this work—those kinder, better at communication, more patient—yet they had found their callings elsewhere. I realized that this part in God's workforce had long been prepared, even before I myself was aware. It was up to me, however, to embrace it.

Understanding how God had been molding me throughout my life gave me strength to embrace this path. In that moment, everything changed.

Nothing changed externally but everything changed within me! The fear that I was not the right one for this job disappeared. Since this was the path that God had prepared, I knew that He would continue to provide and guide. He would complete the work He had begun (Phil 1:6). Though I still had much to improve in my character, submission, and service, I was no longer afraid of my weaknesses.

While God's workers may not appear to be the best in man's eyes, they are His, so He Himself will build them up and equip them (cf. 2 Cor 12:8–10). Fears and doubts will still arise, but we can overcome each obstacle with God by our side.

HE MAKES ALL THINGS BEAUTIFUL

When it comes to serving God and His church, we do not have to worry that we might be overlooked or forgotten by Him. The good works we are to do have already been prepared by God (Eph 2:10). No matter what our role is, when God's predetermined time comes, He will call us to His work. What is critical, however, is our willingness to cleanse and prepare ourselves for service to Him (2 Tim 2:20–21).

As we embark on this journey of intentional preparation, we will find out increasingly how inadequate we are. If it is God's will for you to be a full-time worker, it will be a lifelong lesson on denying oneself and following Jesus' example. God's calling will come at His appointed time, not because we have become complete, but because full-time service is part of His way to further purify us and grow in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 1:4, 4:23–24). God has a plan for each of us. Let us have faith that His knowledge is above anything we could imagine, and accept and trust that whatever God has arranged for us is the best. ★

“We need to serve God for who He is and because of whom He has made us to be. It is not wrong to seek personal fulfillment and meaning in serving God, but these are insufficient to keep us motivated when work is tedious, unglamorous, and unappreciated by others. What we view as meaningful may also change as time passes, but God's character remains steadfast.”



Thanks to the guidance of our Lord Jesus, the International Youth Fellowship (IYF) was smoothly held at the True Jesus Church Olive Garden Training Centre in Port Dickson, Malaysia from June 4 to 7, 2015. The theme of this IYF was "Equip Oneself, Succeed the Ministry." Youths from many countries attended and they were greatly edified through this precious gathering.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 215 participants attended, consisting of 115 from the host country and 100 from overseas. The table below shows the breakdown of where participants came from:

West Malaysia	115
East Malaysia	26
Singapore	14
Indonesia	18
India	11
Taiwan	9
China	2
Hong Kong	1
United Kingdom	14
United States	4
New Zealand	1
Total	215

THE SPIRITUAL THEME

The four-day program at Olive Garden included a series of sermon topics and fellowship activities. The topics centered on the theme of equipping oneself to succeed the ministry and explored:

- The importance of and areas of equipping oneself
- Ways and examples of equipping oneself
- The importance of and areas of succeeding the ministry
- To be girded with the truth
- Faith is the victory
- Let the Holy Spirit guide you
- The spirit of servitude
- A mission-driven life

Messages from these topics were reinforced through subsequent discussion sessions and group activities. The program also included hymnal and testimony sessions.

POST IYF ACTIVITIES

After the formal program, some participants joined the IYF tour from June 8 to 12. The tour included a two-day medical mission, as part of an evangelistic outreach program to the indigenous population (*orang asli*) of West Malaysia.

The Tour

The youths who joined the tour had great fun and fellowship with one another as they visited famous places in Malaysia. Our Lord Jesus provided fantastic weather, which enhanced the experience of enjoying the diverse beauty of Malaysia: they visited Malacca with its rich culture and history, and Kuala Lumpur with its multi-racial heritage, took an adventurous five-hour journey through *Gua Tempurung* ("Coconut Shell Cave"), and savored the famous food of Penang Island. The tour also included visits to churches in West Malaysia along with fulfilling fellowships with local brethren from churches in Petaling Jaya, Malacca, Ipoh, Penang, and Sungai Petani.

The Medical Mission

The medical mission, a highlight of the IYF, aimed to provide attendees with practical experience in service, in line with the International Youth Ministry Committee's (IYMC) vision of "equipping and succeeding the ministry." For many participants, joining this type of mission was a first—to serve by engaging and reaching out to the *orang asli*. This

Although the theme, “Equip Oneself, Succeed the Ministry,” is often discussed in church, it was a timely reminder of what our Father in heaven expects from us; sometimes, it is easy to lose sight of our spiritual path, especially when we live in a decadent world filled with tough spiritual battles.

experience enabled participants to not only be hearers of the Word, but active workers of the gospel.

PARTICIPANTS’ GENERAL FEEDBACK

In order to appreciate the experience of the IYF, here are two accounts from brothers who participated. After reading their testimonies, may the Lord continue encouraging our youths to attend future IYFs, strengthening the unity and evangelistic spirit of our church.

Bro. Gavin Li, Forest Hill, London, UK:

This was a very memorable trip for me, as this was the first time I attended a TJC event outside of the UK. While I did not know what to expect, to my surprise, the trip was very relaxing and edifying.

Although the theme, “Equip Oneself, Succeed the Ministry,” is often discussed in church, it was a timely reminder of what our Father in heaven expects from us; sometimes, it is easy to lose sight of our spiritual path, especially when we live in a decadent world filled with tough spiritual battles.

During the first few days of the IYF, it was an honor to have fellowship with brothers and sisters from different parts of the world. Despite cultural differences, we were united in one faith, under one Father, as recorded in Ephesians 4:5. It was heartening to hear experiences of faith and testimonies from around the world. Indeed, we are never alone in this journey of faith.

One memorable part of the trip was the medical mission, which really taught us how we should show love and care to the poor and sick, just

as Jesus did. It was very touching to see how the local villagers who came to the medical center also accepted our invitation to attend the evening service held at a nearby church. The majority of the villagers kept their word and joined the service. It was amazing to see how God’s grace opened their hearts.

I wondered, if these villagers were rich and healthy, would they have accepted our invitation so easily? As it is mentioned in Mark 10:25, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” I realized that the most important thing we can have is Christ and not our worldly possessions.

The rest of the trip was also very well organized. From natural cave climbing to delicious food and beautiful scenery, we thoroughly enjoyed the tour.

I would highly recommend this type of event to anyone—it is an excellent opportunity to meet brothers and sisters in Christ from different parts of the world.

Bro. Kevin Yiin, Phoenix, USA:

The IYF was not discussed much in Phoenix, my home church. When I first heard, in November 2014, that the IYF would be held at Olive Garden, I thought it was simply a fellowship meal because the Olive Garden is a popular restaurant chain in the United States!

Even when I learned more about the event, I was not interested. It was far away, it would cost me money and come registration closing time in 2015, not many US youths had registered.

I then realized that the start of the IYF program coincided with the end of our family’s trip to Taiwan. I pondered: perhaps it was God’s will for me to attend the IYF. Even though I did not know what to expect, I knew that I could at least receive spiritual encouragement and support; I registered.

Looking back, I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed the IYF. Although different to the US National Youth Training Course, I gained much. Every sermon emphasized the importance of equipping oneself and succeeding the ministry. This clearly indicated to me what I needed to work on and what my future duties would be. For example, marriage within the church is crucial for the succession of the ministry. Also, I gained even more during leisure time when I could have fellowship with the brethren, without thoughts of assignments! We shared our lives with one another



IYF 2015 Activity Session

“Seeing different participants working for the Lord in this medical mission made me think of the phrase “one body in Christ.” Together, we were working towards the same goal: to preach the name of God. Even though many of us could not communicate with the villagers, we supported the ministry by doing what we could, to allow the gospel to be preached more effectively.

and exchanged what we had learned. Through this sharing, I discovered that there is true unity in Christ. Even though we grew up in different backgrounds, had different struggles, and were in different stages of our lives, everyone gathered to have fellowship and to draw closer to God. Because of this, I witnessed the love of God all around. Whether it was our counselors personally serving us food, brethren testifying their experiences during missionary trips, or members providing exotic foods such as durians for foreigners like us to try, I could see the love of God through the actions of every member.

The most memorable part of the trip was the medical mission. Essentially, the medical mission is another approach to preaching the gospel. The TJC mission team congregated in one area and set up stations for different activities such as registration, medical consultation, and pharmaceutical distribution. While patients waited for their turn, our brethren would testify to them. There was also a special station for spiritual consultation for all patients. There, ordained workers would ask if the patients were interested in the gospel. They discussed doctrines with them and arranged for follow-up visitations. Seeing different participants working for the Lord in this medical mission made me think of the phrase “one body in Christ.” Together, we were working towards the same goal: to preach the name of God. Even though many of us could not communicate with the villagers, we supported the ministry by doing what we could, to allow the gospel to be preached more effectively.

Despite linguistic and cultural barriers, we strived to be one family in Christ. After attending the IYF, I have made more spiritual friends. I have experienced the love of God manifested through others. I have absolutely no regrets attending this event. I have personally witnessed that there is unity in the Lord. All over the world, there are brethren walking the same path we walk, upholding the same principles we hold, working as we work for the Lord. This encouraged me greatly because I realized no region, no member in any part of the world is truly alone. Our church extends beyond political boundaries because of God’s love and God’s spirit.

Thank God for this memorable and edifying experience, and may future IYFs be continually filled with the love of God and His spirit. ★





Some Notes on Christmas and Easter

Adapted from sermon notes by Aun-Quek Chin and lecture notes—Singapore

CHRISTMAS

Its Pagan Origin

- December 25 was the birthday of the sun god, worshipped by ancient pagans. Being farmers, these pagans worshipped the sun because it made their crops grow and provided warmth and light. During the winter solstice, it appeared to these pagans that their god was in demise. However on December 25, the sun begins its ascent at noontime, which the pagans interpreted as the rebirth of the sun god. The day was one of celebration for sun-worshippers all over the northern hemisphere.

- The Romans celebrated the winter festival, Saturnalia, from December 17–24 (or as some sources suggest, December 17–23). It was dedicated to Saturn, the god of agriculture, and to the renewed power of the sun. December 25 was the “Day of the Invincible Sun” (*Dies Invicti Solis*), possibly introduced by Emperor Aurelian in 274 A.D.

- Since Christmas is an adaptation of pagan festivals, many of its customs are also associated with pagan legends. Take the Christmas tree as an example. Legend has linked this

tree to Nimrod (Gen 10:8) of ancient Babylon. After his death, a full-grown evergreen tree sprang out of the roots of a dead tree stump, symbolizing new life for him; legend also relates how Nimrod would visit the evergreen tree and leave gifts under it on the anniversary of his birth (on the winter solstice). The Roman version of this myth tells of the mother of Adonis, the sun god, who mystically changed into a tree and, in that state, brought forth her divine son.

The Druids¹ decorated oak trees with fruits and candles in honor of their god of harvest during the winter solstice. The Vikings regarded evergreen coniferous trees as symbolic of the end of the darkness of winter and the return of the light of spring.

Who Established Christmas?

- Neither the apostles nor the early church celebrated the birthday of Christ.

- There is no mention of such a practice in the writings of second century Christian leaders such as Irenaeus (c.130-200 A.D.). However, in this era, there was evidence that segments of the church were flirting with the assimilation of pagan practices into Christianity, setting

auspicious dates for the birth and death of Christ. However, nobody had yet put forward December 25 as the date of Christ's birth.

- For Christians living in the Roman Empire, some were either influenced to join in the celebrations of Saturnalia, or failed to abstain from the festivities after conversion. But the church stalwarts were still strongly opposed to the assimilation of paganism.

- In the fourth century, things changed and the Roman Catholic Church adopted Saturnalia and *Dies Invicti Solis* in order to conciliate the heathen populace, and assigned Christian meanings to these festivals. It became Christmas, the birthday of Christ.

Why We Should Not Observe Christmas

- Despite the Christian masquerade and appellations, Christmas is essentially a pagan festival. Christians should have nothing to do with it. To claim that the birthday of the pagan sun god is a day for remembering the birth of Jesus is an untruth that is not pleasing to God.

- Neither the Bible nor historical documents record the precise date of Christ's birth. Whichever day it

was, it could not be December 25. In Judea (present day Israel), there are two important seasons of rain: the autumnal rain and the spring rain (also called the early rain and the latter rain). The autumnal rain starts in November and continues till January. The combination of the incessant downpour and the chilly winter winds makes the cold of the night piercing. Shepherds could hardly be watching their flocks by night in the plains (Lk 2:8–11). The celebration of Christmas perpetuates the lie that Christ was born on December 25.

- The commemoration of the birthday of Jesus demeans Him because it is tantamount to treating Him, who is God having no “beginning of days” (Heb 7:3), as a mere mortal born at a certain point in time.

- There is no record of the celebration of Jesus’ birthday in the Bible. Whatever is not instructed in the Bible, we shall not add. Whoever adds to or subtracts from the words of God shall be punished (Rev 22:18–19).

The custom of setting and decorating the Christmas tree was condemned by God in Jeremiah 10:2–4:

“There is no record of the celebration of Jesus’ birthday in the Bible. Whatever is not instructed in the Bible, we shall not add.

“Thus says the LORD: ‘Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the peoples are futile; for one cuts a tree from the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the ax. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with nails and hammers so that it will not topple.’”

EASTER

Its Pagan Origin

- Easter is linked to a festival of the ancient pagans who celebrated the return of spring and a new lease of life, and is also associated with deities of fertility:



- › The goddess Eostre was worshipped by the Anglo-Saxons¹ and the Teutonics² in Europe.

- › She was known as “Ostara” among the Norse peoples in Scandinavia, “Ausra” in Lithuania, and “Austri” in Norway.

- › In the Mediterranean, the goddess of fertility was “Aphrodite” in Cyprus, “Demeter” in Greece, “Hathor” in Egypt, “Cybele” in Phrygia (now Turkey), and “Ishtar” in Assyria (today’s Iraq).

- › Among the Canaanites³, Ishtar was known as “Astarte” or “Ashtoreth.”

- The symbols of Easter were adopted from pagan traditions to celebrate the return of spring. Eggs symbolized the return of life at the

- Jewish Christians in the early church continued to celebrate the Passover, regarding Christ as the true paschal lamb, but the predominantly gentile church in the west had no festival. In springtime, their societies celebrated the spring fertility festival in honour of the Cybele cult, linked with Attis, the god of agriculture who supposedly died and was reborn each March.

Since this festival of fertility coincided somewhat in time (springtime) and motif (resurrection/newness of life) with an evolved version of the Passover observed by Jewish Christians in the east, some historians have shown that in the later part of the second century, the church in the west adopted it to commemorate the resurrection of Christ in its attempt to garner conversions. The church felt it would be easier for pagans to embrace Christianity if they were permitted to continue with practices they had been accustomed to. Some sources suggest that the Anglo-Saxon Christians subsequently gave this adopted festival the name “Easter” after the Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic spring goddess of fertility, Eostre.

- There was no consensus within the second century church on when to celebrate Easter. The early Christians followed the Jewish calendar and observed Easter on the Jewish Passover, which is fourteenth of Nisan, regardless of the day of the week. Others celebrated Easter on the nearest Sunday after the Passover. It is said that in his attempt to syncretize the prevalent pagan practices and the Christian religion, Emperor Constantine, at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., set the date for the celebration of Easter on the first Sunday after the full moon that

beginning of spring. The rabbit was a pagan symbol of productivity. An early form of hot cross buns was used in the worship of the queen of heaven 1,500 years before the Christian era.

How Did a Pagan Spring Festival Come to Be Associated with Christianity?

- According to references such as Encyclopaedia Britannica, there is no indication of the observance of the Easter festival in the New Testament or in the writings of the apostolic fathers.

- Although some church historians claim that Easter observance began in the first century, the first evidence comes from the second century.



follows the spring equinox.

- Easter supplanted the Jewish Passover and became one of the most important festivals of the Roman Catholic Church. Some early reformers were aware of the pagan origin of Easter and tried to curb its celebration. For example, John Knox (c.1513–1572), a Protestant Scottish leader, decreed that all pagan festivals kept by the Catholic Church, including Christmas, Easter, All Souls Day, Candlemas, and Halloween were “heretofore superstitiously used” and were not to be observed by the Protestant church. He and others ultimately failed in their mission.

Why We Should Not Observe Easter

- As in the case of Christmas, the Lord Jesus never instructed us to observe Easter. Rather, He commanded us to commemorate His death often, but without any fixed time: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes” (1 Cor 11:26).

- The observance of Easter is not found in the Bible. The King James Version of the English Bible incorrectly renders the Greek word *pascha* in Acts 12:4 as “Easter.” However, elsewhere in the Bible where the same word is used, (e.g., Mt 26:2; Mk 14:1; Lk 2:41, 22:1; Jn 2:13, 23 etc.), it is always faithfully translated as “Passover.”

- Christians should not observe Easter because it is essentially a pagan festival dedicated to the spring goddess of fertility, Ashtoreth. In the Bible, God unequivocally condemns the worship of this false deity (Judg 2:11–13; 1 Sam 12:10–11; 1 Kgs 11:4–6, 33; 2 Kgs 23:13).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, True Jesus Church members should not celebrate Christmas and Easter. Apostle Paul says:

And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” Therefore “Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.” “I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.”

(2 Cor 6:15-18)

Indeed, what agreement has the temple of God with idols? We are the temple of God, how then can we be involved in the celebration and observance of these festivals that are associated with these idols? This is definitely not pleasing to God. Instead, we should set ourselves apart and not follow the world in keeping these festivals.

Some have argued that, while Christmas and Easter have pagan origins, the festivals have evolved into Christian festivals. Therefore, as long as Christians worship the Lord

Jesus sincerely, there is nothing wrong observing them.

However, the Bible is clear that God does not only forbid the worship of false gods, but He also detests any attempt on the part of believers to worship Him after the forms and manners of the pagans. Hence, He gave detailed instructions to Moses on the manner He wanted His children to worship Him. Copying pagan forms and manners is abhorrent to Him:

“Observe and obey all these words which I command you ... When ... you ... dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them ... and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way; for every abomination to the Lord which He hates they have done to their gods ... Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.”

(Deut 12:28–32) ★

1 Priests of the Celts who occupied the present day United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Ireland.

2 The Angles and Saxon tribes who migrated from Germany to live in England before the Norman Conquest.

3 The Teuton tribe in Germany

4 The various tribes living in today’s Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria before the invasion of the Hebrews under Joshua.

”As in the case of Christmas, the Lord Jesus never instructed us to observe Easter. Rather, He commanded us to commemorate His death often, but without any fixed time.

Why Can't the Clock Stop Ticking?

ACquila Anon—Malaysia

The second hand of the clock in the study moves on steadily and inexorably, tick, tick, tick ... as the seconds roll by in the wee hours

As non-spiritual thoughts crowd and cloud my mind, I make a feeble attempt to snap myself out of this reverie, trying to salvage what little time is left in the day. How did the time that I had so carefully set aside to do God's things once again slip away? Suddenly, the words of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 3:1–15 flood my mind. This passage is particularly poignant for those of us who have to battle the crushing pressures of the hectic twenty-first century. Time is a precious commodity that seems to be very easily “eaten up,” especially the time we have set aside for productive and spiritual things.

Everything today seems to move at what Bill Gates called “the speed of thought.” So much has to be crammed into twenty-four hours—our careers, business development, social appointments, the children's punishing schedules, and some “me” or down time. Technology has helped speed up some tasks for us, but it has also stirred our seemingly insatiable appetites for social networking and the corresponding tasks to be “updated” or to garner “likes,” as well as for mindless hours of Internet trawling. In the construct of our little worlds, ever increasing numbers of activities jostle for priority. Sadly, one constant always seems to lose out in the battle for our time—a time for God.

REGAIN THE SIMPLE FAITH LOST IN A COMPLEX WORLD

Have we ever wondered why, in our journey of faith today, we seem to lack the purpose and conviction of our forefathers? Or why we are so easily distracted from focusing on what is important for our spiritual life? Ironically, amidst the complexity of our daily secular routines, we have lost the simplicity of faith and implicit entrustment in God, essential to building up our spirituality.

For example, as our friends send their children for a myriad of enrichment classes, we worry that we would be depriving our children of a good future if we do not do the same. So Sabbath keeping, church camps or even Religious Education classes get lower priority than tuition, enrichment activities and piano/ballet/computer classes. How many of us have sacrificed and staked the importance of religious upbringing in place of some secular activity, which we justify will advance the paths of our children? Unknowingly, we have staked our children's spiritual well-being and bartered away time that was to be set aside for God in a nonchalant fashion. Will the Lord indeed bless such endeavors?

Cunning old Satan jumps straight on to these insecurities of ours, causing us to feel that we have to plan and spend our time to achieve all those markers of success that our peers have. Even more ironically, we always charge our smartphones and tablets to keep them topped

up and running, yet we cannot seem to find the equivalent time to recharge our spiritual life. We just comfort ourselves with the aphorism that “God helps those who help themselves.”

In fact, the presence of these so called “smart devices” is yet another diabolical plan to suck up and waste this precious commodity of God's time for time-consuming activities such as social networking and Internet trawling. As we attend services, while using our Bible and hymn apps on our devices (convenience we say), have we “inadvertently” tapped on Facebook or WhatsApp? How many of us have “wandered” into the realm of cyberspace in the midst of observing one hour of service time?

TO EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON

But the Preacher, with a lifetime of experience and wisdom from God, firmly declares:

*To everything there is a season,
a time for every purpose under
heaven. A time to be born, ... a time
to plant, ... a time to break down,
and a time to build up, ... a time to
keep silence, and a time to speak.*

(Eccl 3:1–3, 7)

A time for every purpose under heaven is a timely reminder that we must always find time for God; time to seek things everlasting, work on our spirituality, and mend the breaches in our wall of faith. Amidst the pressures of twenty-first century living, which often leave us floundering like a fish out of water, we need to regain and maintain the simple belief that we must seek first the kingdom of God. Jesus' promise that “all these things will be added to you” will naturally follow. Remember

“In the construct of our little worlds, ever increasing numbers of activities jostle for priority. Sadly, one constant always seems to lose out in the battle for our time—a time for God.”

that in His love, God gives us all the things we need, not all the things we want (cf. Rom 8:28; Jas 1:17).

TREASURE TIME

While time is beyond the control of any man, the use of time isn't. We have lengthened our bucket list of materialistic things to acquire and worldly dreams to fulfill for a better tomorrow, which is why we find our time for spiritual pursuit ever-shrinking. Often exhausted by this incessant secular marathon, we seek to recharge through even more time-wasting and spirit-draining worldly leisure.

In the midst of a busy life, find time to seek God in quiet solitude, meditation, and prayer to recharge, as Jesus Christ did. Let the clock stand still, in our moments of seeking, reflection and prayer, as we gain the strength and the means to overcome this testy trial of time that has descended on us in this age.

At this point, we must reflect on Ecclesiastes 3:9—

“What profit has the worker from that in which he labors?”

Endeavoring to be the masters of our own destiny, we strategize and toil. But what do we have to show for the expended time and effort? Even if we lived to a hundred, dying in the luxury of our palatial homes, with the best healthcare that money can buy and surrounded by a multitude of family, what can we make of our life on earth? Let us refer to the wise men from the Old Testament:

- Jacob, patriarch of Israel, who had spent much of his life scheming and strategizing, declared to Pharaoh, “The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers” (Gen 47:9).

- Moses—ex-Prince of Egypt—confirms this, saying, “Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away” (Ps 90:10).

- Solomon—famed for wisdom and wealth—breaks the bad news: “No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them” (Eccl 1:11).

The time we have wasted cannot be regained. We can only move forward and resolve to number our days to gain a heart of wisdom (Ps 90:12). Start to live our life with eternity in mind, not just the things of the materialistic world. Rekindle our first love for Him by once again putting the Lord as a priority in our life, getting rid of the distractions and time-consuming activities that sap

away our spiritual well-being.

For a start, put away our smart devices during service time; stop deceiving ourselves that these gadgets are but a tool to worship God. If anything, they put us on the path of temptation to draw us away from God. Stop giving ourselves excuses or making excuses for (or on behalf of) our children. Stand on the side of righteousness. What is wrong can never be made right by human design or justification.

To illustrate, no manner of “work requirements” for us or betterment classes for our children, taking away what little time we have left to worship God and from keeping the Holy Sabbath, will make things right in the eyes of our Lord. Choose God, and He will lead us the way. Walk in reverence and obedience in His pathway, and He will provide.

PRIORITIZE AND REDEEM TIME

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every

opportunity, because the days are evil. (Eph 5:15–16)

Apostle Paul reminds us to seize every opportunity to be wise stewards of time and keep a constant vigil on how we allocate our time. Make good use of opportune moments to advance our faith and spirituality. Look to Jesus as our role model for time management.

Most importantly, in the midst of a busy life, find time to seek God in quiet solitude, meditation, and prayer to recharge, as Jesus Christ did. Let the clock stand still, in our moments of seeking, reflection and prayer, as we gain the strength and the means to overcome this testy trial of time that has descended on us in this age.

CONCLUSION

Ecclesiastes 3:15b gives a solemn reminder that “God requires an account of what is past.” This is certainly a very sobering thought indeed. Do not think that we can escape accountability for our actions and deeds and that there is no need to answer or to pay for our past wrongdoings. Far from that, we will have to give account of ourselves and our actions.

Standing before the Lord God, will we be able to say to our master, “You gave me five talents [of time]. Here is a detailed account of what these talents have yielded for You, Lord.” Or perhaps we hang our heads in shame knowing how we have wasted our spirituality away.

Therefore, pray and ask God to help us, in making the best use of the time that we have every day. ★

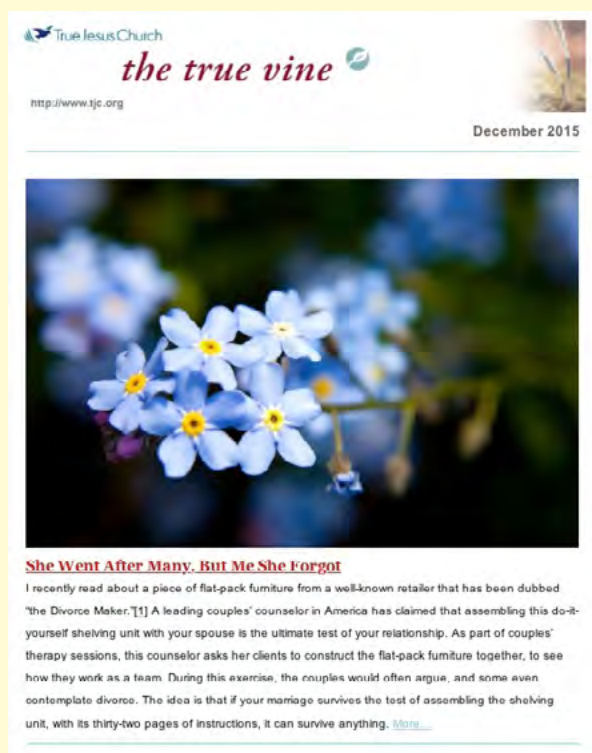


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Call for Devotionals

“I will meditate on Your precepts, And contemplate Your ways.”
(Ps 119:15)

Most of us regularly read the Bible and ponder upon God’s word and His works. However, not many of us may take time to actually pen down our thoughts. But if you do, you may actually be writing a devotional.

A devotional is a pithy article (300 to 350 words) inspired by biblical teachings.

Has a verse recently caught your attention, giving you insight on God’s love and a Christian’s relationship with Him?

Write it down and share this spiritual nourishment!

If you wish to read recent and archived devotionals written by our church members, go to www.tjc.org and members.tjc.org.

To submit your devotional, please indicate “Devotional” in the subject line and send it to manna@tjc.org.



CALL FOR ARTICLES

Manna is looking for certain types of articles, or article genres. Each genre constitutes a different subject matter and writing approach. If you are planning to write an article (regardless of topic), please try to adhere to one of the genres below.

Christian Living

A Christian Living article gives practical biblical guidance on real-life issues and how to use Jesus' teachings in our daily lives.

Article length: 1500-2000 words.

Doctrinal Study

A Doctrinal Study examines an aspect of True Jesus Church beliefs and may present it in comparison to other beliefs.

Article length: 2500-3000 words.

Testimony

A Testimony recounts an experience in the Lord that will encourage and edify the reader.

Article length: 1500-2000 words.

Bible Study

A Bible Study explores a passage or character from the Bible and draws out the teachings for readers to apply to their lives.

Article length: 2500-3000 words.

Exhortation

An Exhortation encourages and admonishes the reader in different aspects of the Christian faith.

Article length: 2000-2500 words.

Creative Writing

Creative Writing pieces include poems, parables, or short stories that illustrate a biblical teaching or idea.

Keep in mind as you're writing: how will this edify the reader?

SUBMISSION INFORMATION

Please email electronic files of articles (Microsoft Word) to manna@tjc.org.

Please direct any questions to manna@tjc.org or

Fax: +1-562-402-3190

In your submission, please include your name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number even if you wish to remain anonymous.

GENERAL WRITING GUIDELINES

CONTENT

- Content should be biblically sound and adhere to biblical principles.
- Article should be organized and have a logical flow of thought.
- The main point or teaching of the article should be clear to the reader.
- Readers should be able to apply what they have read to their daily lives.

GRAMMAR/STYLE

- Use active instead of passive voice.
- Write concisely.
- Use concrete words and ideas instead of abstract concepts.
- Use "plain old English" instead of obscure, academic language.
- Use the NKJV version when quoting Bible verses.
- Use American spelling, if possible.

True Jesus Church

Articles of Faith

Jesus the True God

Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh, died on the cross for the redemption of sinners, resurrected on the third day and ascended to heaven. He is the only Savior of mankind, the Creator of the heavens and earth, and the only true God.

Holy Bible

The Holy Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, is inspired by God, the only scriptural truth, and the standard for Christian living.

Church

The True Jesus Church, established by our Lord Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit during the time of the "latter rain," is the restored true church of the apostolic time.

Baptism

Water baptism is the sacrament for the remission of sins for regeneration. The baptism must take place in natural living water, such as the river, sea, or spring. The Baptist, who already has had received baptism of water and the Holy Spirit, conducts the baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the person receiving the baptism must be completely immersed in water with head bowed and face downward.

Holy Spirit

Receiving the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues, is the guarantee of our inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

Footwashing

The sacrament of footwashing enables one to have a part with the Lord Jesus. It also serves as a constant reminder that one should have love, holiness, humility, forgiveness, and service. Every person who has received water baptism must have his/her feet washed in the name of Jesus Christ. Mutual footwashing may be practiced whenever is appropriate.

Holy Communion

The Holy Communion is the sacrament to commemorate the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. It enables us to partake of the flesh and blood of our Lord and to be in communion with Him so that we can have eternal life and be raised on the Last Day. This sacrament shall be held as often as possible. Only one unleavened bread and grape juice shall be used.

Sabbath Day

The Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week (Saturday), is a holy day, blessed and sanctified by God. It is to be observed under the Lord's grace for the commemoration of God's creation and salvation and with the hope of eternal rest in the life to come.

Salvation

Salvation is given by the grace of God through faith. Believers must rely on the Holy Spirit to pursue holiness, to honor God, and to love humanity.

Last Day

The Lord's Second Coming will take place on the last day when He descends from heaven to judge the world: the righteous will receive eternal life, while the wicked will be eternally condemned.

TRUE JESUS CHURCH CONTACT INFORMATION

For additional information on the True Jesus Church, contact us or visit us on our website. We look forward to hearing from you!

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