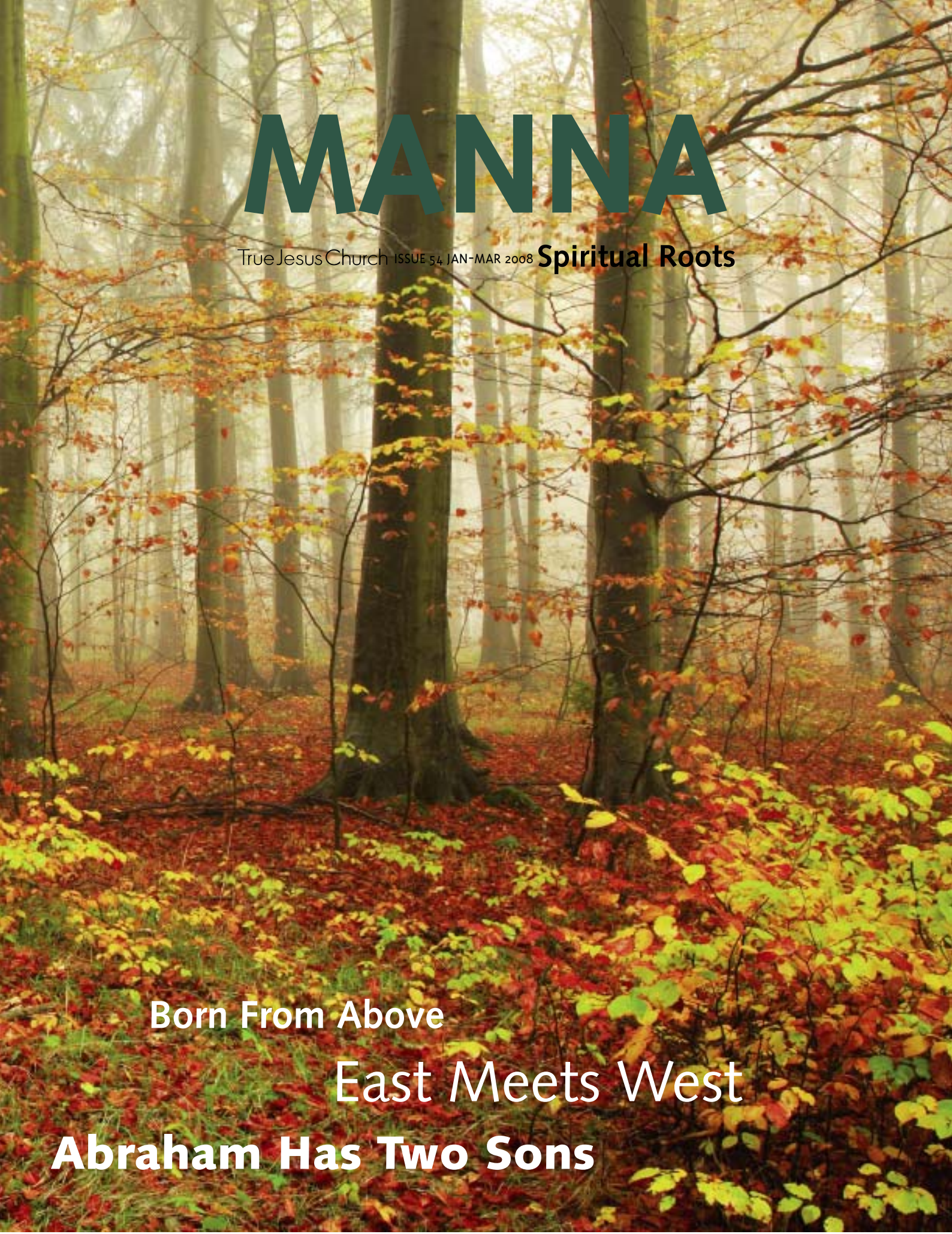

MANNA

True Jesus Church ISSUE 54 JAN-MAR 2008 **Spiritual Roots**

Born From Above

East Meets West

Abraham Has Two Sons

Dear Reader,

The end of one year and the beginning of another is a time of change and hope. Many people take the opportunity to make resolutions for personal improvement.

It seems as if our quest for growth and change never end, and this is true especially for our spiritual life. But making determinations to lengthen our daily prayers or add to our Bible reading are changes we can make any day of the year.

As we strive to grow in our understanding of the truth and to deepen our relationship with God, we inevitably encounter difficult times and have questions about our faith and beliefs. We rely on prayer and the Bible to help us during these moments, but we can also draw encouragement from the experiences of brothers and sisters.

The writers who contributed to this issue share many experiences, insights, and teachings that God has given to them. You can read about how a bad habit was overcome, what blessings that come when one seeks after God, and what the Bible teaches us about truth and salvation.

May the new year continue to bring us closer to God.

THE EDITOR

MANNA

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

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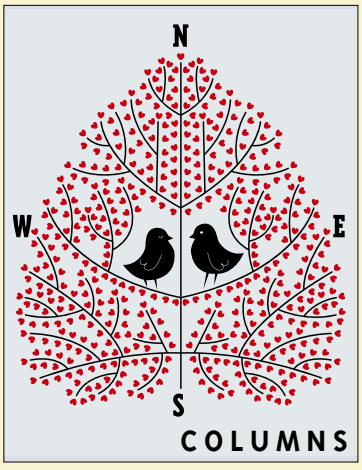

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How I Quit Video Games

Richard Fan—Irvine, California, USA

VIDEO GAMES WERE MY LIFE

I started playing video games when I was in elementary school. Back then my parents had very strict control over what kind of games I played and how long I got to play them. But as I grew up, I found ways to evade their control.

As time passed, video games slowly became the center of my life, even though I did not want to admit it. I really liked to barter with my parents about how long I could play video games. Whenever my parents left the house, I would stop whatever I was doing and go straight to my computer or X-box. It was like second nature to me. I used to evaluate the quality of my day by how many hours of video games I played—the days without video games were considered bad days.

If you have played a game called *The Sims*, you know that the characters have eight kinds of needs, or desires, which are represented by bars. If the character eats something, the bar for "hunger" fills up, and if the character plays video games, his or her "fun" bar fills up. However, reality doesn't work that way. I played video games thinking I could satisfy my "fun" desire, but after playing hours of video games, the desire was never fulfilled. Instead, I just wanted to play more.

The desire for video games was so strong that it appeared on my mind all the time. I thought about video games when I was asleep, when I was taking a test, and even when I prayed for the Holy Spirit.

After a period of time seeking after God, I received the Holy Spirit and got baptized when I was in ninth grade. But I still didn't see video games as a problem in my life, even though they wasted a lot of my precious time, made me forget to keep the Sabbath, and caused me to lie a lot to my parents.

I didn't realize video games were a problem to my spiritual life until I attended the 2003 Winter Student Spiritual Convocation (SSC) for the first time as a junior in high school. The special topic on video games was very powerful and touching. It made me realize that video games occupied so much more of my time than God. I also learned how video games subconsciously influenced me in many ways that I was not aware of,

such as affecting my temper and desensitizing me to violence.

But I didn't have enough strength to quit or even cut back on video games.

THE TURNING POINT

Before attending the 2006 National Youth Theological Seminar (NYTS) in Southern California, I had mixed feelings about going. I had heard a lot of "bad" things about the event, like people quitting video games and TV after attending NYTS. I didn't mind the TV part, because I had no habit of watching TV. But I couldn't imagine myself without video games. I thought video games were one of the most important components of my life.

As usual, video games kept on popping into my mind during prayers at NYTS. Before, when I heard pastors saying that we cannot serve two masters, I always told myself I wasn't serving two masters; that video games were only part of my leisure activities. But during the prayers I slowly realized that I had a problem.

I remembered Jesus Christ said, "'Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'" (Mt 11:28). So I decided to throw the heaviest burdens to Jesus Christ, which were video games and my parents, who were not yet baptized.

I said to the Lord Jesus, "If You let my parents, both of them, get baptized, then I will quit video games." I thought I was pretty smart by throwing the responsibility onto God, because I knew that even if my parents decided to get baptized, the next spiritual convocation and baptism was five months away, and in those five months, I could still play as many video games as I wanted. Problem solved.

I felt like video games were not a problem anymore, not because I quit video games, but because video games quit me.

However, my prayers got worse and worse. By Thursday morning, I felt that my faith was even lower than before I came to NYTS. I was ready to go home because I missed my games so much. I also felt that I didn't need to stay because I hadn't committed any major sins, so I didn't need forgiveness.

Thank God my counselor and other counselors encouraged me with Bible verses and their life experiences, and I decided to stay. That's also when I realized I needed God's forgiveness and mercy more than anyone else needed them.

EXPERIENCING GOD AND SATAN

During the evening prayer on Thursday, I had the most wonderful experience in my entire life. As I was repenting in my prayer, I felt that God touched me so much and held me so close; I even saw Him give me a new heart. Unstoppable tears of joy poured out during that prayer. After the prayer, I felt weightless, completely without burden, and I hadn't had that kind of feeling since I received the Holy Spirit.

I felt like video games were not a problem anymore, not because I quit video games, but because video games quit me. I felt I was completely free, that video games had no control over me anymore. I was so joyful, that I really wanted to share my joy with everyone around me.

That night I was so happy that I couldn't fall asleep until very late. Strangely, I had a nightmare. I was falling, falling, and I could even feel the wind blowing on my face as I was falling facedown. On my way down, I saw the devil falling down ahead of me.

The devil had a body similar to an octopus, but with a lot more legs. Its face was so hideous that I do not remember how it looked. There were many computer monitors around the devil, falling down with it. As we were approaching the ground, I could see a huge fire pit down below, blazing with lava.

The devil and the monitors fell into the pit, and they were no more. When I was about to fall in the fire pit, I suddenly woke up with a verse on my mind. When I looked up the verse in the morning, it literally took me only about five seconds (normally I am not that fast) to find it.

The verse read,

"*Then he goes and takes him seven other spirit more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first."(Mt 12:45)*

From this experience I knew I must fill up my life quickly with God's words and other meaningful things, or else I was going to end up falling into other temptations.

MAKING A DETERMINATION

I enjoyed my new freedom in the Lord for a little while. But two days later, the temptation for video games came back again—this time stronger than ever. I

could feel my spirituality diving straight down, and video games were about to take over me again. I felt just like an ungrateful Israelite; that even after experiencing God's powerful miracles full of grace and mercy, I still turned my head around to remind myself of the fish I ate in Egypt.

For the rest of NYTS, I experienced great struggles between the spirit and the flesh. I knew I couldn't let the battle go on anymore. I knew I would go back to that same old lifestyle once I left NYTS—enslaved by video games, regretting that I wasted my time, yet unable to do anything about it.

I realized I needed a strong dose of medicine in order to completely cut off video games from my life. I decided to take a vow before NYTS ended. I knew we shouldn't make vows lightly, but I knew my God is very merciful, so I decided that taking the vow would be more beneficial to me than not doing so. My vow was, "I will not touch video games anymore in my life, or else may God punish me severely, such as let me fail all my classes."

After my parents dropped me off at home from NYTS, they had to go to a friend's party. My grandmother was away and my little brother was also not home. It was an empty house. The temptation for video games appeared. I could hear it calling me, "Come on, spend the last night with me, then you can destroy me tomorrow."

Thank God that I had just come back from NYTS, and I knew what to do. I knelt down and prayed. After thirty seconds I found enough strength to turn on the computer, delete all the games I played, and resolve to wash my hands of video games.

I know if I set my goal on the final prize—going to heaven—and am determined to put God first in my life, God will lead me onto the right path.

A NEW DIRECTION

It was a little difficult to adjust at first. I suddenly had a huge chunk of free time, and I didn't know what to do with it. Gradually, I discovered the joy of working in the garden, the sense of accomplishment in helping out in the kitchen, more patience to read English books (English is not my first language), more time to spend with family, and more time to read the Bible and pray.

When I got back to college for my sophomore year, I had more time to spend with the campus fellowship, more time to focus on academics, had the desire to volunteer in the recycling club, and was more willing to attend Friday night services and join the choir. God also blessed me in many ways, such as a dramatic improvement in academics; I even received an A+ for the first time in my life, in a difficult organic chemistry class.

During Winter SSC, I discovered that there was no more emptiness after the prayers like previous years. Most importantly, I found my future path to be clearer—I had a sense of direction, a goal to press towards.

I want to be a professor in the scientific field, so in the future I can preach the truth to scientists and be a good testimony for Christ. A professor can also influence students in a good way, and help the campus fellowship. I don't know yet if this is where God is going to place me, but I know if I set my goal on the final prize—going to heaven—and am determined to put God first in my life, God will lead me onto the right path.

Quitting video games can sometimes feel like bondage, like the time last year when my dorm friends got together and played video games but I couldn't play, or when someone invited me to play video games when I went to their house. But I know true friendship is not built upon video games. Video games are a virtual world where you can shed your real identity and don't have to take any responsibility for what you do. The real world we live in is not that way at all.

Video games sometimes bring up wonderful memories, such as when my little brother and I beat a game together. But what is past is already past. Paul said in Philippians 3:13, "forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead." I am pretty sure there are many things other than video games I can do with my brother to strengthen our relationship.

Learning to Fly in Line

I saw a very encouraging short video on Taiwan's True Jesus Church website (http://www.joy.org.tw). It is about a kite that enjoys flying very much, and thinks that if she can break off from the restraint of the line, she can fly even higher than before and observe more things. So she asks the wind to blow her away.

She enjoys the freedom but soon begins to descend. She gets caught between the trees, gets away, but falls on the ground. Bullies kick her around, and she is filled with mud and full of wounds. As she is crying and regretting, the little boy who owns the kite finds her, cleans

her up, bandages her wounds, and sends her to the sky again.

The kite now enjoys the freedom of flying with the line. Tears came out when I saw this video, even though this video is intended for children. Sometimes we may view our family, our church, or even God, as a limitation that prevents us from achieving higher things. But the truth is, without them, we are nothing.

I hope my experience will encourage you to never lose hope in God. We don't need to be afraid to make determinations for our God, because our God, the Lord Jesus Christ, is indeed a very merciful God.

AFTERWARD

Since writing my testimony in the beginning of 2007, I have realized that it's not as easy as I thought to stay away from video games.

By the time summer came, I had stopped my daily Bible reading and prayer. Because of that I felt far from God, and when I started to feel overwhelmed by my classes and research work, I was not able to withstand the temptation of video games. Thank God, I stopped and repented after playing video games twice.

Once school started again in the fall, my faith and spirituality stabilized. I think this is due to Irvine Campus Fellowship. It's always good to have a lot of brothers and sisters nearby to fellowship with them consistently.

I know that I can have the determination to quit video games, but without God's help I cannot do it. If I think I can do it on my own will and own strength, it is pride and I will not be able to win.

But I know that I can still live a victorious life with God's help and the love from brothers and sisters. ★

Out of the Bondage of Satan unto Christ

Clement Titus Adede—Ogongo, Kenya

EXPERIENCING GOD'S INTERVENTION

I was born a Catholic, but my family joined a Charismatic church in the 1980s. At that time I was still a child but my heart was thirsting for a higher, divine purpose to life.

My mother did not permit me to go to church because I had to take care of things at home. But thank God that through my earnest desire, I was allowed to attend church service at the Charismatic church, although irregularly.

By 1992, I had left home and was staying with my aunt because my family was very poor and could not afford my school fees. My aunt, on the other hand, ran a brewery in her home. At the time, I could not continue going to church because I had to help my aunt with her business.

Without support in my faith, I felt hopeless and developed a bad drinking habit. The drinking gave me multiple stomach ulcers, which made it very difficult for me to eat or drink because the ulcers would act up—causing a lot of pain whenever I ate.

During this time I fought with a man who had stolen some of my possessions, and he had to be hospitalized because of the fight. I was subsequently charged with assault, with a pending court appearance once the man had recovered. The man's family collected money to sue me.

These two incidents made me remember what I read from the book of Luke. In 1990, my brother had given me a part of the Bible containing the Gospel of Luke, but I didn't read it through properly until two years later.

Through the Gospel of Luke I came to know Jesus in a more personal way. I believed that just as Jesus healed those who were sick and released those who were in the bondage of Satan (the sinners), I, too, could be released. Back at home, there was no one who could rescue me.

The faith of the woman with the hemorrhage (Mk 5:25-34) motivated me very much and I began to seek God at home on my own, confessing my sins in prayer.

One day, I attended a church service within the village. Before the service, everyone got down on their knees to pray and I mentioned my problems to God.

Thank God that when I came back from the church, I discovered the pain from my ulcers had gone. From that day onward, by God's power, I was able to stop drinking alcohol.

Even though friends and relatives drank in front of me, I did not find it difficult to stop drinking because I felt a divine power working in me. I also testified to them about how Jesus helped me.

I continued to pray to God about the ensuing court case with the man whom I had injured. Miraculously, the Lord intervened. The man's family became divided over contributing money for the court case. The case ended without going to court.

This built up my faith and encouraged me to love the Lord more.

LOOKING FOR THE COMPLETE TRUTH

By 1995, I began to read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. I was diligently searching for the truth. At the time, I was only able to attend a particular church on either a Saturday or Sunday.

Through studying the Bible, I learned about the Holy Spirit, footwashing, water baptism, the Holy Sabbath, and Holy Communion, and how all these were related to salvation. I could not find complete teachings of these sacraments from any of the churches I visited. But I felt that these were important doctrines within the word of God.

I fasted and prayed for God to lead me to a church that preached the whole truth according to the Bible. I believed that only by knowing the complete truth can one enter the kingdom of God. Just as the Lord Jesus Himself said, "*Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven*" *(Mt 7:21).*

I also promised God that in the same way that He leads someone to share the truth with me, I would also share His truth with others.

During that period of fasting prayers, God showed me three visions.

In the first vision, I had a Bible and was in a radio-broadcasting studio on top of a very high mountain, and I was preaching. My message was transmitted like a radio broadcast to all of Kenya.

In the second vision, I saw a mountain range where I stood on the highest mountain. I had a microphone in my hand and I was preaching as though to everyone in the country.

In the last vision, I was fishing with other people on a very big lake. We were all in the same boat, and when we cast out the net we caught many fish of different sizes. After catching the fish, we brought them out to sell.

I only realized the meaning behind these visions after I joined the True Jesus Church. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I understood that, according to Isaiah chapter 2, the Lord will establish His temple on the highest mountain and the truth will be preached from the temple to all nations. Casting the net is like preaching to people. The one boat in my vision refers to one true church and the one net refers to one faith.

COMING TO THE TRUE CHURCH

In October 1997, I visited one of the Pentecostal churches at Kamwala on a Saturday. That visit confirmed to me that they observed the Sabbath day and also preached the Holy Spirit. So I visited that church again on the following Sabbath to see whether they also preached about the Holy Communion, footwashing, and water baptism.

I fasted and prayed for God to lead me to a church that preached the whole truth according to the Bible. I believed that only by knowing the complete truth can one enter the kingdom of God.

However, the church member who had answered my questions on the previous Sabbath was not present. I decided to go back a third time the following Saturday. Since I did not normally return to the same church more than twice, I specifically prayed to God on this occasion.

In my prayer, I resolved to question the church members, even if the member with whom I had become acquainted was absent again. I decided that I would not return to that church if they did not preach the complete truth.

Miraculously, just as the church service was about to begin, Pastor Ko and two brothers, Cornell and Silvanus, from True Jesus Church arrived for the first time in Kamwala. When Pastor Ko stood up to preach, he began by questioning the members about the five basic beliefs of True Jesus Church.

As Pastor Ko was addressing the questions to the congregation, it felt as though I was the one asking those questions. After finishing his questions, Pastor Ko began teaching about the Holy Sabbath as well as covering the other four doctrines—the Holy Spirit, Holy Communion, water baptism, and footwashing.

By God's grace, as we knelt down to pray, I received the Holy Spirit. After coming back for more teachings that Sabbath afternoon and the following Sunday morning, I realized that I had only received a small part of the truth before coming to this church.

The following Sabbath—the fourth consecutive Sabbath that I attended—I saw that the entire church congregation had fully accepted the complete truth, so I decided to join them for regular services. On July 19, 1998 I received water baptism.

I was truly thankful that God had guided me to His true church.

PREACHING THE GOSPEL

I continued to pray in tongues and, being joyful in the Spirit, I shared with others the truth that I had received. But at the same time, I faced some harsh persecution from my aunt's Catholic family.

For example, there would be no food for me on Saturdays because I upheld the teaching of not working on the Sabbath. Even though I was not allowed any food, I did not feel hungry; in fact, I even felt full, as though I had already eaten.

During this period, I was encouraged by a passage in the Gospel of Matthew: "'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'" (Mt 5:10). So this reassured me further about the importance of maintaining my relationship with God more than my relationship with man.

I also remembered my promise to God to share the truth with others, so I was determined to help preach the gospel.

In November 1998, I went to preach to those in Awendo with another brother. The man who stole from me, whom I had injured, just happened to be there. So we shared the truth with him. Both he and his wife came to join our church services.

However, he did not continue in his faith—he went on to steal someone else's bicycle. He was arrested and later died in jail. Although the man chose not to continue in the truth, I am humbled that I had the opportunity to fulfill my duty to God by sharing the truth with him and practicing the teaching of forgiveness.

By the year 2000, I had returned to my hometown to preach the truth. On March 25, 2000, four people accepted the truth, and we started to fellowship together. One of these four included my mother, who had previously been determined not to forsake her belief in the Charismatic church.

On June 13, 2000, she was one of the first to be baptized in Ogongo. The following year, on May 19, a new place of worship was stationed out in Kibanga. In these two places, sixty-two members received water baptism.

The Bible says that Jesus laid down His life for His sheep (Jn 10:15). I felt that Jesus had saved my life and released me from all my struggles and from illness. He also guided me to know what I should do for Him. Whoever abides with Christ will have to walk as Christ walked, which is to pursue righteousness and justice (1 Jn 2:6).

I need to always be thankful to God and, while I am still on this earth, I need to be determined to preach His truth to all people because there are so many sheep who have not yet been brought to His fold (Jn 10:16). From now on, I set my mind on Christ and look forward to His return on the last day.

May all glory and power be to God, and may all people come to know His name. Amen. ★

God Showed Me His Love and Power

Maggie Tsou—Garden Grove, California, USA

A BROKEN LEG

Before we came to believe in Christ, my family was Buddhist. When I was young, we lived in Taipei where my father, who is a traditional Chinese medicine physician, had his own practice.

In 1991 I turned seven and started first grade. After the third day of school, my sister and I were doing homework in one of the examination rooms at my father's clinic. I was mischievous, and I started to jump up and down on the chair.

Unexpectedly, the chair turned over while I was jumping and I fell. I knew that I should have gotten up from the ground, but I couldn't because everything was spinning in front of my eyes.

My father heard the chair turn over, so he came to see what had happened. He helped me up, and noticed that while my right leg was supporting me, my left leg was unable to do so. He knew that my left leg was broken.

I was sent immediately to the hospital. The X-rays revealed that my femur was broken. But because the hospital was full, I couldn't be admitted as a patient.

My father remembered that there was a hospital that combined Eastern and Western medical practices in treating patients. Not long before, a relative had been in a car accident and his many broken bones, which were in worse condition than my break, were healed at this hospital.

So my parents took me to this other hospital for treatment. The doctor told us that my bone would start growing back together within two weeks, and that within three months my wounds would be closed and I would be completely healed. So my parents felt reassured and I was admitted as a patient there.

COMPLICATIONS FROM TREATMENT

But many things in life are unexpected. The doctor misdiagnosed my injury and the resulting treatment caused my condition to worsen. I was treated using Eastern medicine, so after my bones were set in the correct position, instead of putting on a cast (which is the Western way) they bound my leg with elastic bandages to maintain the position.

However, my bandages were redone twice because the doctor felt that the

setting was incorrect. The third time they bound my leg, they tightened the elastic to make sure the position was stable. But because the bindings were so tight, the blood circulation in my leg dropped, and my tissues and muscles started to die.

My parents had noticed that my left leg wasn't moving, and my mother notified the nurse. But the nurse said that this was probably because I was afraid to move because of pain, and it wasn't something to worry about.

The next morning, as my mother was washing my leg with a warm towel, she asked me if the temperature was too hot. My response shocked her, because I asked, "Are you washing my leg?" I couldn't feel anything. I was sent to another hospital right away.

In the emergency room, the doctor removed the elastic wrapping around my leg and discovered that it was completely bruised and blackened, and covered with blisters. The doctor immediately sent me to surgery.

In the operating room, the doctor put screws into my knee and ankle to stabilize the bones. But because of the bruises and blisters, he couldn't put plaster on my leg to make a cast.

After two weeks of close observation, my situation hadn't improved. My left leg couldn't move at all, so the doctor recommended another surgery to see the actual condition.

> "Why don't you try praying to God? There are many signs and miracles in my church, and there are many testimonies that you could consult."

The wounds in my leg from the surgeries were so large and deep they became infected. The situation was very dangerous as there seemed to be no sign of recovery. The dead muscles and tissues in my leg had been removed during my surgeries so that all that remained was skin and bone. I had lost all sensation in my nerves.

Although I had an infection I felt fine during the day. But at night I started to have high fevers. For nineteen days my temperature was around 104°F. I lost so much weight that I was down to twenty-five pounds.

No matter what treatment I was given, my fever did not go down. In addition, the medication gave me side effects. But they couldn't stop giving me medicine because my life would have been in danger.

INTRODUCED TO THE TRUTH

One day, I underwent another surgery. My father was hopeful that there would be good news. The surgeon asked my father to come into the operating room because he needed to explain my situation.

He told my father that it was impossible for my leg to heal. The muscles could no longer function. After such a long period of observation and treatment, and after much discussion among the doctors, they concluded that the only course of action was to amputate my leg.

My parents had to make a decision within the next three days. Because of the infection in my leg, my life would be in danger beyond that time.

When I awoke and was back in my room, I remember seeing my parents crying. My father blamed himself for taking me to the hospital where the doctor had misdiagnosed my condition. He felt despair that even though he was a doctor, he couldn't even help his own daughter. Their sorrow that day is something that I can never forget. It was as if there was no hope left.

Since my family was Buddhist, my seventy-year-old grandfather went around to many temples to burn incense and pray for me. Even though he tried so hard to help me through these prayers, my condition didn't improve. It became worse and worse. My whole family was sad and worried.

At this time, when we were hopeless, thank God my aunt came to preach the gospel to us. She was a member of True Jesus Church and told my dad how the end of man's ways is the beginning of God. She said, "Why don't you try praying to God? There are many signs and miracles in my church, and there are many testimonies that you could consult."

She gave us a copy of *Youth Communion*,* which had a testimony that was very similar to my situation. Through the mercy of God, that person was healed.

So through this introduction to True Jesus Church, my father came to know Elder Chang. He and his wife, as well as the visitation team from church, came constantly to the hospital to visit me and pray for me. This is how my parents began to have a deeper understanding of the truth.

SAVED THROUGH GOD'S GRACE

At this time it happened to be Taipei church's spiritual convocation, so my father attended service the second night. Miraculously, when the nurse took my

*Editor's note: A publication of the Taiwan GA, now merged into *Holy Spirit Monthly*.

temperature that same night, it was down to 100°F—even though the medication had not been changed.

The next day, when the doctor changed my bandages and was putting on medicine, there was a lot of discharge from my wounds. This was a good sign, because the presence of fluids meant that there was hope for recovery, and that my tissues and muscles were not all dead. God had heard the prayers of my father and the brothers and sisters in church.

My condition started to improve steadily after my father went to church, and there was no more talk of amputating my leg. The doctors were amazed by this. I had recovered and my leg had been saved.

Under the arrangement of God, there was a sister from church who introduced us to a neurosurgeon at the National Taiwan University hospital. After he operated on me, I started to improve until I was well enough to be discharged from the hospital.

God manifested His power to me and I escaped from death. If my father hadn't gone to church, I would not have received mercy or healing from God. In True Jesus Church, we truly have the grace of God and the love of brothers and sisters.

God let my family know Him through my situation, so that I truly experienced His grace and blessings. God's love is great. Not only did he give me peace, he gave my family faith.

In April of the next year, my whole family was baptized at Taipei church and became His children. I thank the almighty God that at the time of my despair and hopelessness that He stretched out His hand to me and saved me. Now, I can walk everywhere with both my legs.

Under God's protection, my whole family received peace and joy, and we came to know Him. This is the greatest joy that I have experienced. May all the glory be unto the true God in heaven. Amen. ★

English Writers' Retreat

Elizabeth Church, USA • June 29 - July 5, 2008

"Either write things worth reading or do things worth the writing," my English teacher used to tell me.

At the English Writers' Retreat (EWR), you get to do both to the greatest satisfaction. From my experiences of EWR, I was thankfully reminded that, far from secular writing, the passion to write for God must spring from the inside—a response to God's greatness and a heart set on fire for Him. Are you thinking about writing for God? This is your chance to dedicate yourself and be His pen for a week in a care-free, chilled-out hideaway. Come join us and find some quiet time to reflect and challenge your faith to new heights, and to search deeper into those priceless biblical gems. Now these are definitely things worth writing about.

—Chuny

Interested? Email lm@tjc.org for event information and updates. Event registration will begin on May 1, 2008 at http://events.tjc.org.

EWR 2008

How to be an Effective Religious Education **Teacher**

Patricia Chen—Irvine, California, USA

RE Teachers: Always look for opportunities to give to the lives of others!

Our children are the future of the growth and development of the church. That is why we look for ways to nurture them in the words of God. And as we come up with creative and effective means to reach our children, we realize that the RE ministry is challenging work. Sometimes, it stretches us to the limit. But RE teachers are the vessels God uses to touch His young followers. We are the building blocks of the RE ministry. We have been given the task of bringing our students to know our Lord and to help them build a solid relationship with Him.

By improving the way we interact with and present ourselves to the students, we can build ourselves up to be a more effective RE teacher.

I. Genuinely Hear

As RE teachers, we often think of our job as imparting the words of God through Bible stories. While that is crucial, we also need to think about other ways we can reach out to our students. For example, can more be accomplished at a certain moment by lending a willing ear and connecting to a needy soul? In other words, do we take time to listen to our students? Do we take the time to genuinely hear their concerns and questions?

Sometimes, our students are searching for answers to a deeper need. And if we are faithful, God will give us the right words at the right time—healing words, or words of wisdom just when our students need it most. But in order for those moments to happen, we need to genuinely hear what our students are saying to us today. We can only accomplish this if we have a relationship with our students that goes beyond just lecturing them during class time.

We need to demonstrate our concern and care both inside and outside of class, whether it is through a casual conversation or through structured fellowships. And when any one of our students shares his thoughts and ideas with us, be ready to listen.

Practice Good Listening

1. Look at the person while he or she is speaking
2. Put your hands on your lap
3. Nod and smile to signal you're listening
4. Do not interrupt

II. Set an Example for the Students by the Quality of our Speech

Wisdom is often measured in words. As teachers, we should be ready to listen, but we should also be ready to speak truthfully in love and choose our words wisely. Saying the right words is important. The right words can empower, redirect, and build up one's soul.

The timing is also vital. We can say the right words but at the wrong time. Or we can say the wrong words, though the timing is right. Therefore, we need to ask God to help us discern the right timing and the choice of words. And sometimes, it may be wise to not say anything at all but to just be there for our students and pray with them.

Proverbs 17:28 says, "Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; When he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive." More often than not, leaving things unsaid can be the wisest course of all. "He who heeds the word wisely will find good, And whoever trusts in the LORD, happy is he" (Prov 16:20). The first half of this verse is about words in speech and the things we do. If we speak wisely and do wise things, we will find good. When we speak or act wisely, we are careful to consider all related circumstances before acting, judging, or deciding.

When we are careful—considering and pondering before we speak to our students or do things with them—then we will find the abidance of God. The truth is, acting wisely will make us draw closer to God. If we trust, have confidence, and are secure in the Lord, we will be happy and blessed.

As we teach in the coming weeks, listen to what comes out of our mouths. Are we speaking encouraging and uplifting words to others that are seasoned with the salt of God's love and truth? Do our words have the capacity to direct our students towards Jesus? Let us remember the words of Paul: "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one" (Col 4:6).

Although the work of an RE teacher is challenging, we can prepare ourselves by asking some reflective questions:

Do we spend enough time getting on our knees to pray?

Are we spiritually cultivating our lives?

What are we doing to prepare our lessons?

Are we doing visitations, making phone calls, or emailing our students in order to reach out to every child?

Is our servitude a sweet-smelling sacrifice to the Lord?

Questions and **Answers**

Can infants or children receive baptism since they do not understand the truth, do not have faith, and cannot repent?

Infants and children are born from sin (Ps 51:5). Therefore they also need to be born again. The promise of baptism for the remission of sins is also given to children (Acts 2:38, 39). Children were never excluded from God's covenant with His people (Gen 17:9-14).

We must not forbid children from receiving salvation since the Lord Jesus Himself does not reject little children but instead loves them (Lk 18:15-17). Children were healed of their diseases through their parents' faith (Mt 15:28). By the same token, children and infants may be baptized based on the faith of their parents (Jn 4:49-51). However, we must also keep in mind that it is the grace of God and the cross of Christ, not the conscious choice of humans, which gives baptism its effect. So even if children cannot make a conscious choice to receive God's grace, they should not be excluded from God's grace.

In the early church, entire households were baptized (Acts 16:15, 32-34, 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16). Children and infants are, of course, part of the household.

Circumcision prefigures baptism (Col 2:11, 12). In the Old Testament male infants of the chosen people were circumcised on the eighth day (Lev 12:2, 3), prefiguring infant baptism.

The crossing of the Red Sea also prefigures the New Testament baptism (1 Cor 10:1, 2). The Israelites, including the children and infants, crossed the Red Sea (Ex 10:9, 10, 24, 12:31). The children and infants were not left in the land of bondage. In the same way, children and infants must also be baptized to be cleansed of their sins and be released from the bondage of Satan.

Is it possible to receive an evil spirit when praying for the Holy Spirit?

A person who sincerely yearns for the Holy Spirit must accept the true church—the body of Christ, which is established by the Holy Spirit. Anyone who wishes to receive the Holy Spirit must obey the true gospel taught by the church and pray in the way that the church instructs. The believers in Samaria (Acts 8:14-17), Paul (Acts 9:3-17), Cornelius and his relatives and friends (Acts 10:1-8, 44-46), and the disciples in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7) received the Holy Spirit only when they came into contact with and obeyed the disciples of the Lord. Similarly, those who yearn to be baptized by the Holy Spirit must also seek the true church and accept the true gospel.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:15-17). A person must believe and obey the truth to receive the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:15, 16, 21, 23; Acts 5:32). Those who reject the truth or refuse to accept the true church that preaches the truth might receive evil spirits even if they pray for the Holy Spirit.

If a person prays with wrong motives or an unrepentant heart, he allows room for evil spirits to work. But anyone who accepts the truth, follows the way of prayer instructed by the church, and prays sincerely for the Holy Spirit will not receive an evil spirit. The heavenly Father will not allow evil spirits to possess those who sincerely ask him (Lk 11:11-13).

Facts, Stats and **Syntax**

Polls and Statistics

Top 10 countries containing the largest percentage of people who are atheist, agnostic, or non-believers in God

1. Sweden: 85%
2. Vietnam: 81%
3. Denmark: 80%
4. Norway: 72%
5. Japan: 65%
6. Czech Republic: 61%
7. Finland: 60%
8. France: 54%
9. South Korea: 52%
10. Estonia: 49%

(Highest estimate taken. From http://www.adherents.com/largecom/com_atheist.html)

Word Study

Elohim (אלוהים) is the Hebrew word for God or gods in the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible). Even though the word has a plural structure in the Hebrew language, it is often used with singular verbs to express God with a capital "G" to mean the singular God of Israel. When Elohim is used with a plural verb, it is referring to foreign or false gods. The first two letters of the word Elohim, El (אל), also refers to "God." There are numerous names in the Bible that have El (אל) as part of its construction, such as Elijah and Elisha. Elijah means "my God is Yah" and Elisha means "my God is salvation." The word Immanuel, which also has El in its construction, means "God with us."

Did you know?

The word Christian is first mentioned in the Bible in Acts 11:26.
The word Christian is found in only two other places in the Bible: Acts 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16.

News

True Jesus Church in Myanmar 2007

Since 2000, the holy work of True Jesus Church in Myanmar has been under the care of the Singapore Coordination Board (SCB). The Myanmar Ministry Committee (MMC), formed as a sub-committee of the SCB, plans the annual program for the church in Myanmar. MMC carries out work such as pastoral visits, training seminars, spiritual meetings, and Bible camps. Every year five to six missionary visits are made by IA ministers, preachers, and deacons from Sabah, Taiwan, West Malaysia, and Singapore (which also sends volunteer workers).

There are currently five church buildings where services are held: Yangon, Sanmyo, Nutgyikong, Tedim, and Lamzang. In Swabuayesin and Letpanchaung, Sabbath worship takes place in the homes of members. The total membership is approximately 210. There are two ordained fulltime preachers and two deacons assisting the ministry of MMC.

Praise the Lord Jesus Christ, the work of the Myanmar True Jesus Church in 2007 was carried out according to the following plan:

Jan. 28 to Feb. 5: Ordained Ministers Spiritual Nurture Seminar at Yangon (Pr. Thomas Kam and Bro. Shee Tse Loong).
Mar. 13 to Mar. 22: RE Teachers' Seminar at Sanmyo (Pr. Wu Hao, Dns. Lee Sew En, Sis. Jane Ho).
May 6 to May 22: Student Bible Camp, Youth Bible Course, and RE Camp at Sanmyo (Pr. Simon Chin, Pr. Ezra Chong, Sis Lam Wai Leng).
Aug. 5 to Aug. 14: Church Workers Seminar and Evangelistic Seminar at Sanmyo (Dn. Jason Hsieh and Bro. Shee Tse Loong).
Nov. 11 to Nov.20: Church Workers Seminar at Sanmyo (Pr. Simon Chin).
Dec. 21 to Dec. 30: Annual Spiritual Meeting at Yangon and Sanmyo (Dn. Stephen Shee and Dn. Philip Shee).

May God continue to guide and bless the brethren in Myanmar and the workers who minister to them.

Born from Above

Jason Hsu—Baldwin Park, California, USA

A NEW CREATION IN CHRIST

At the beginning of God's creation, man was formed from the dust of the ground.[1] Dust has no value but man does. For God created man, both male and female, in His own image.

After the fall, man fell short of God's image. But God never de-valued man. He never considered man as mere dust. Man would thereafter be separated from God, but God had a plan to redeem him.

After the fall, God cursed the ground, and it bore thorns and thistles—reflecting man's need for a redeemer. God then sent man out of the garden to cultivate the very earth from which he was taken.[2]

Today, we each have this task: to cultivate the ground from which we were taken and renew God's image in ourselves. Apart from Christ, however, this task is impossible.[3] But God has called us to be partakers of His divine nature and, through His divine power, this is made possible.[4]

The Bible says, "[I]f anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor 5:17). In Christ, we have the opportunity for spiritual renewal.[5]

God's redemptive work is accomplished through Christ. And man becomes a new creation through Christ's work.

Both creation and John's gospel begin with light.[6] John 1:9 tells us: Jesus was the true light which, coming into the world, gives light to every man. This light was in the world and, for those of us who believed, we beheld His glory.[7]

Christ has already ascended back to heaven. But the light of Christ still needs to be revealed in the world today. For this reason our spiritual renewal is important. For if we are truly born from above, the light of His life and His witness should live in and within and through us.

THE MAN WHO CAME TO JESUS BY NIGHT

Three passages in John's gospel speak of Nicodemus. He is specifically described at least two or three times as the man who came to Jesus by night.[8]

"Night," of course, can be interpreted on different levels. Viewed negatively, "night" can be viewed as a symbol of spiritual darkness.[9] However, the fact that John describes Nicodemus as coming "by night" is not to suggest John is specifically condemning Nicodemus. Rather, the "darkness" of the night in John 3:2 is probably more a token of the darkness we all face apart from Christ.[10] All of us once

had need of the light of God's grace. And so to be in the dark is not something unique to Nicodemus; instead, it reflects a "need" applicable to every person in this world.

Superficially, Nicodemus had no need. The Bible implies Nicodemus was a man of good social standing, high education, and substantial wealth.[11] What "need" could he possibly have? But Nicodemus' story teaches us otherwise. For Nicodemus needed the light of Christ.

In John's gospel, the light of Christ gives life, witnesses to Christ's work in us, reveals the truth, restores spiritual sight to the blind, and gives man a much-needed direction and purpose. But oftentimes, we cannot see the light of Christ in our life.

We cannot see it in our life because our faith in Him is incomplete. Faith begins our journey to becoming a new creation in Christ, and faith must carry us to the end of that journey.

Man cannot be reborn by entering into his mother's womb twice, as Nicodemus once suggested, but he can be "born from above" through faith in Jesus Christ. Let us, therefore, examine Nicodemus' faith and journey with him from that first night to the revelation of the risen Christ.

ACKNOWLEDGE OUR LACK

"*Are you the teacher of Israel, and [you] do not know these things?*" *(Jn 3:10)*

It may seem odd that "to know" sometimes requires us to first acknowledge how little we know. "If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know" (1 Cor 8:2). Nicodemus must have recognized that he didn't know something. Because, if he thought he knew, he never would have sought out Christ.

Nicodemus was a ruler.[12] He represents the "best of Israel" and the upper echelons of his people. Usually, if we wish to know the top people in society we need great wealth or social standing. But to know Christ depends upon neither of these.

All of us, at one point or another, needed to know. To know Him, God often just wants us to acknowledge our needs and weaknesses before Him. Jesus once said, "I praise You, Father…that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants" (Mt 11:25, NASB). Infants have no pride because they do not know anything significant. Yet, for this very reason, in God's kingdom, they can know the most important truths.

When we feel we already know, God is often hidden away from us.[13] God once asked Job, as he cried out at the injustice of his sufferings, "Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2). Later, Job understood how very little he himself knew before the Almighty God, and so he said, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You" (Job 42:5).

As we come to know God, we will also come to realize how little we know.

Nicodemus was "the teacher" of Israel. Although he acknowledged Jesus as a teacher come from God, Nicodemus most likely did not fully understand Christ initially. If we are harsh, we might call it "blindness."

Jesus specifically told Nicodemus: "you all" do not receive our witness.[14] But if Nicodemus somehow failed to receive Christ's witness, he was not alone. Many Jewish rulers failed to do so. To be unable to receive Christ's witness is a type of spiritual blindness.

As many Jewish authorities in Jesus' day exhibited, spiritual blindness often reflects a greater ignorance within. One source of this "inner darkness" is pride, because pride prevents us from assessing ourselves accurately.[15] So Scripture teaches: "The pride of your heart has deceived you…" (Obad 3).

To combat our pride, God often sends hardships and trials our way. Hardships instill humility in us and help us view ourselves more clearly. Because when we acknowledge our lack, we no longer seek solutions from our own resources. Instead, we seek solutions from a source greater than ourselves.

Sometimes God strips away that part we consider most valuable about our "self" to renew us into something greater. The Bible says in baptism we "die with Christ." A person may enter the military with a lot of self will. Yet, after undergoing the harsh rigors of military training, the soldier is instilled with a value greater than himself.

Jesus' words to Nicodemus may have sounded harsh, but Jesus truly loved Nicodemus. And Jesus shared many important truths with Nicodemus because He wanted him to know and understand. But before Nicodemus could understand Christ, he first had to acknowledge what he did not possess.

Sometimes God strips away that part we consider most valuable about our "self" to renew us into something greater.

SEEING WHAT IS ABOVE

If becoming a new creation means reflecting God's image, we must realize we cannot reflect what we do not possess. Just as an actor must do a proper character study before acting out his character, we too must come to know Christ to reflect Christ.

In John, signs lead us to see Christ the King.[16] However, signs also signify the weakness of our faith, because they represent what we can see.[17] But faith is often defined by what we cannot see.[18] As limited beings, we often only focus on what we can see. "If I see it, then I will believe it," to paraphrase Thomas.[19]

Nicodemus' faith was initially limited by what he could see. Jesus, however, wanted to take his faith to a place where he could see what he previously could not.

Nicodemus called Jesus rabbi. As respectful as this designation was, Nicodemus himself was a rabbi.[20] Nicodemus saw in Jesus the signs of God's kingdom. As good as this may seem, to see something (like signs) and then believe cannot define true faith in what is above.[21]

Faith allows us to see what we would not normally see. Jesus told Nicodemus, "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"[22] The heavenly things are the unseen source of the earthly things.[23]

For someone to see into the things of heaven, therefore, requires faith. So the renewal of our spirit requires a renewal of our eyesight. Just as nobody witnessed the foundations of the earth being laid, no one has ever witnessed heaven except the One who came down from there. Therefore, without faith we can neither see what is above nor be born from above.

> *By faith we see the surpassing value of what is above. And, through faith, we receive strength to leave both what is below and our old life apart from Christ.*

When we see what is above, we'll begin to view the value of the things on earth differently. A believer's values will often diverge from an unbeliever's values, and the actions that flow from this difference will also diverge. So it often seems an unbeliever and believer travel on very different paths. This is because an unbeliever and believer have a different degree of insight into the values of life. Faith gives the believer insight into the value of a man's life.

Nicodemus Begins to See What is Above

The second passage in John concerning Nicodemus is found in John 7:45-52.

Nicodemus' colleagues distinguish themselves against the common masses, and demean them as not knowing the law because they tend to believe in Christ.[24] Nicodemus, however, says: "Does our law judge a man unless it first hears Him and knows what He is doing?" (Jn 7:51). From this statement we can get a clearer picture of the progression of Nicodemus' faith.

Although it's quite subtle in English translations of John 7:45-52, there are two important references to "first" or "before":

(a) "Nicodemus…came to Him *first*" in John 7:50 (NASB);[25] and

(b) "Our law does not judge…unless it *first* hears Him…" in John 7:51.[26]

As a ruler, Nicodemus wanted to hear first.

In John, Jesus is "first" and "before" all.[27] In fact, we could loosely translate "born from above" as "born from the first."[28] "First" reminds us of the "first" day of God's creation and first light.[29] For the beloved disciple who came to the tomb "first," "first" represents the "first to faith" in the risen Lord.[30]

Before we came to faith in the risen Christ, our faith was in the dark. We might compare this to the "first" day of the week, after the Lord's resurrection, where John described the scene as "still dark," even though Christ had already resurrected.[31] In John, this "darkness" could point to a number of things: the disciples' unbelief, their fear of witnessing for the risen Lord, or their inability to recognize the Lord who walks above the tempests of the sea.[32]

Although we may have been in the dark before, after our eyes have been opened, we need to live our life according to the faith God has given us, because God has allowed us to see first, and we know the One who walks above the tempests of the world. Because we are born of Him—from above—our life should be different. Therefore, our life should possess a different value, because our eyes have seen what is above.

By faith we see the surpassing value of what is above. And, through faith, we receive strength to leave both what is below and our old life apart from Christ.

When our vision is renewed, we'll begin to reflect what we see and hear and know to be true. Only then can we begin to daily renew God's image in our life.

RECEIVE THE LORD'S WITNESS

Most assuredly, I say to you, we speak what we know and testify what we have seen, and you do not receive our witness. (Jn 3:11)

Initially, Nicodemus could not understand Jesus' teachings about being born again. Like Nicodemus, even though we believe, many times we cannot receive the Lord's witness. Although we know all of God's words by heart, many times we still cannot comprehend them.

Receiving the Lord's witness in our life, therefore, means something more than simple belief. To receive the Lord's witness is to receive God's witness.[33] God's witness is of His Son, in whom is eternal life.[34] The authority to be called God's children is reserved for those who receive the Son.[35] And those who receive the Son can become God's children—reflecting His image—just like Adam before the fall.

Now the Lord's "witness" should not be viewed as a mere word. True, a testimony is a word. But a testimony is more than a word, it involves the one testifying. If a jury in court receives a witness's testimony, they don't just receive the testimony, they receive the witness. This is important for us to remember today because Jesus comes to us now, not as a mere lifeless testimony given thousands of years ago, but as an ever-present reality in the Spirit.[36]

And so for us to receive the Lord's witness today, we need to receive the work of God's Spirit. God's Spirit is what renews us and allows us to be spiritually regenerated.

We should realize that the witness of the Spirit is not something limited to the moment we receive water baptism or receive the downpour of the Holy Spirit; rather, it's a testimony that abides with us just like the promised Holy Spirit abides with us or like God's life abides in the life of a believer.[37]

Many people think that spiritual renewal depends heavily upon our own efforts. This is a complex issue. We cannot negate man's part in the process of faith, which is critical, but we must also remember spiritual renewal is a work of the Spirit. This is God's work of grace in us.

But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. (Tit 3:4, 5)

Ultimately, God's mercy is what allows us to be daily renewed and fruitful.[38] For God makes the sun to rise upon the earth, and He sends down the rain from heaven. His grace is what makes it grow.

In this world, people may believe a baby is born through the will of man and becomes part of a family through blood.[39] But to be born from above is different, for it is a work of the Spirit; yet, it still requires us to receive this testimony of Christ in faith.

So the work of spiritual renewal must be viewed from two important perspectives: (a) our "work" of faith and (b) God's promise and work of grace. Our "work" stems from faith. "[B]y [faith] the [men of old] obtained a good testimony" (Heb 11:2).

Nicodemus' story teaches us a lot about spiritual renewal: how we must acknowledge our lack, how we must see what is above, and, ultimately, how we must receive Christ's witness in our lives.

However, the testimony of our faith is not something we can boast about, as if we have accomplished something great. For our work or action of faith never exceeds God's promise and work of grace.

But a person who truly receives the Lord's witness in their life will change because the testimony of God's word and Spirit are more than words and concepts; God's word and Spirit are alive and work in our life on a practical level. When the Spirit's witness is alive in our life, it means we have truly received the witness of Christ in our life, and others will surely see it.[40]

To understand how a person can receive the Lord's witness in their life practically, let's complete our study of Nicodemus' story.

THE FINAL ACT

Nicodemus' final act is recorded in John 19:38-42.

After Jesus was condemned and crucified, Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, like Nicodemus, gathered up the courage to ask Pilate for the Lord's dead body.[41] Although Joseph was a secret disciple of Jesus, he came to receive Jesus' dead body. Nicodemus came with him bearing a hundred pounds of mixed spices to embalm Jesus' body.[42]

In those days, only the very wealthy could afford to bring a hundred pounds of mixed spices. Few people would willingly risk their lives or reputation for a condemned criminal; fewer still would bring a hundred pounds of expensive spices to bury one.

Jesus was dead. He was condemned by the Roman authorities and the other rulers. There was no political gain for Nicodemus to receive by taking Jesus' dead body. So we might ask, "If Nicodemus did not receive Christ's testimony, why would he put himself out for a condemned man?"

One interpretation is: Nicodemus did ultimately receive Christ's testimony. And Nicodemus' eyes were finally opened to what he could not see or hear or receive before concerning Christ's witness. His act of receiving Jesus' dead body, in spite of the challenges, could be interpreted as his receiving of Christ's testimony.[43]

It's easy to receive Jesus when we see miraculous signs being performed by the Lord left and right. But if, like Nicodemus, all we saw before us was a dead, lifeless, and bloodied King of the Jews, would we still embrace Him as our king?[44] Would we embalm Him? Would we lay down our most expensive treasures before Him?

We may have different views on how Nicodemus' story ends. John 19:39 said Nicodemus came to Jesus by night at first. But I believe the end of Nicodemus' story shows a very different man—one who came to understand Jesus was more than a criminal or a teacher. Jesus was a king. And so, at the end of his story, Nicodemus gives Jesus a king's burial, in a garden with a new tomb.[45]

There in that garden, there would be new life.

Nicodemus' story teaches us a lot about spiritual renewal: how we must acknowledge our lack, how we must see what is above, and, ultimately, how we must receive Christ's witness in our lives. When we receive His witness in our lives, our life and our actions will become the true testimony of the new life we have received because of Him. Because we have Him, we have life. Amen. ★

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[1]Gen 2:7; cf. Job 10:9; Isa 64:8
[2]Gen 3:23
[3]1 Cor 15:47-49; Rom 8:29
[4]2 Pet 3, 4
[5]Col 3:9-11
[6]Gen 1:3-5; Jn 1:1-5
[7]Jn 1:10, 14
[8]Jn 3:2, 7:50, 19:39
[9]Jn 9:4, 13:30
[10]cf. Jn 1:9, 3:19-21
[11]cf. Jn 3:1, 10, 19:39
[12]Jn 7:50
[13]Jn 9:39-41; cf. 1 Cor 1:18-29
[14]Jn 3:11; cf. Jn 7:50
[15]Jas 1:13-16
[16]Jn 1:48, 49, 5:36, 9:30-33, 12:9-11, 20:30, 31
[17]cf. Jn 4:48, 6:26, 20:25, 29
[18]2 Cor 5:7
[19]Jn 20:25; cf. Jn 4:48
[20]Jn 3:2, 10
[21]Jn 2:23, 24
[22]Jn 3:12
[23]Jn 1:3, 10, 18
[24]Jn 7:48, 49
[25]cf. Jn 19:39
[26]cf. Jn 3:8, "…you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from…"
[27]Jn 1:15; cf. 6:62
[28]Jn 3:3; cf. Lk 1:2-3
[29]Gen 1:3-5
[30]Jn 20:4, 8
[31]Jn 20:1
[32]cf. Jn 20:19, 26, 6:16-20
[33]Jn 3:27
[34]Jn 3:32-34; cf. 1 Jn 5:9-11; Jn 5:37-43
[35]Jn 1:12
[36]Jn 14:18; 1 Jn 2:20, 27
[37]1 Jn 4:13
[38]Jn 15:1-5
[39]Jn 1:13
[40]Jn 1:4, 5:25-29
[41]Mk 15:43; Note: that it took courage shows it was not an easy action to take
[42]Jn 19:39
[43]Jn 12:42, 43
[44]Jn 19:19-22
[45]Jn 19:41

Spiritual Roots

We often hear our faith compared to the growth of a plant. As a seed grows, its roots grow deeper into the soil while the plant pushes up through the ground—becoming larger as it feeds off of the nutrients provided by the roots.

As the analogy goes, our spiritual life depends upon our roots—if they have grown and spread out underground, we will be able to support a mature faith. However, shallow or corrupted roots cannot sustain a faith that must endure trials and suffering to be complete. Only a strong, unshakeable foundation in our doctrines and beliefs will keep us to the end.

The theme articles remind us that our beliefs come from God and are supported by the Bible. Though they may not be popular, what we believe in is true. When we study the Bible closely and reflect upon our experiences with the Holy Spirit, we are assured of our faith in the true church.

Abraham Has Two Sons

Based on a sermon by HH Ko—Heidelberg, Germany

For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. (Gal 4:22)

Typically, the fact that an individual has two sons is unremarkable. However, in the case of Abraham, his two sons Ishmael and Isaac are very remarkable. The actions and consequences of this particular family transcend time and are significant to us even now. They illustrate an important understanding concerning the family of God and the issue of salvation, which is the inheritance given to children of the promise.

Ishmael and Isaac were borne to Abraham under special circumstances. God promised Abraham (then called Abram) that his descendents would be as numerous as the dust of the earth and the stars in the sky.

In Genesis 15:4, God reiterated to Abram the promise that He would give him an heir from his own body. Abram was almost eighty years old at this time. For as long as he was married to Sarah (then called Sarai), she was barren. How could God give him children?

After Abram had lived in Canaan for ten years, he was still childless, so Sarai gave him her maidservant Hagar, so that through her, he could have offspring.[1] Indeed, Hagar conceived and gave birth to Ishmael.

Thirteen years later, God appeared to Abraham, and told him that Sarah would bear him a son. When Abraham was one hundred years old, Sarah gave birth to Isaac. When Isaac was born, Ishmael was fourteen years old.

COMPARING ISHMAEL AND ISAAC

Immediately, we notice differences in the births of Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac was anticipated with patience for twenty-five years; Ishmael was conceived as an impatient impulse. God named both children before they were born, but Isaac was named before he was even conceived,[2] while Ishmael was named in his mother's womb.[3]

While Hagar was pregnant with Ishmael, the family was in turmoil and she ran away from her abusive mistress. On the contrary, the birth of Isaac was surrounded with laughter: Sarah laughed when angels told her about it,[4] and all who heard of this matter laughed as well.[5]

Ishmael was born to Abram; Isaac was born to Abraham. Isaac was circumcised when he was eight days old, while Ishmael was circumcised when he was thirteen years old. As for their mothers, Ishmael was born of a fertile bondwoman, while Isaac was born of a barren freewoman. Ishmael was born of human willfulness, Isaac was born of God's promise.

In both cases, God showed mercy and love towards the sons because they were of Abraham.

Two Sons, but Only One Heir

After his sons were born, Abraham's family grew up. When Isaac was weaned, Abraham held a great feast. At this time, Sarah saw that Ishmael scoffed at Isaac and demanded that Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael:

"*Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac.*" *(Gen 21:10)*

Initially, it appears that in a moment of maternal anger, Sarah demanded that Ishmael be cast out because he mocked little Isaac. If we read more carefully, Sarah's main concern was the matter of inheritance, and not that her son was being bullied. She wanted Isaac to be the sole heir.

> *Abraham was in quite a predicament: he loved [Ishmael], and yet, God confirmed that it would be through Isaac that His promise would be fulfilled.*

As cruel as Sarah's demand was, God agreed with her, saying "'Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called'" (Gen 21:12).

Sarah's demand displeased Abraham, because Ishmael was his son. For more than thirteen years, whenever Ishmael called out for his father, Abraham was there, responding to his son's needs. Now, Sarah wanted Ishmael to be sent away, and God agreed with this course of action.

Abraham was in quite a predicament: he loved his son, and yet, God confirmed that it would be through Isaac that His promise would be fulfilled.

Was there an alternative course of action that Abraham could have taken? He was a rich man. It was within his power to build a separate maid quarter for Hagar and Ishmael, and not have to cast them away. Why was this not a viable option?

In this incident, we see both the justice and mercy of God. Isaac was the son of promise, born of Abraham's wife Sarah, and in keeping with the promise, Isaac was to be the sole heir. In this sense, Ishmael, born outside of God's promise, had to be sent away. Yet, out of mercy to Ishmael, God reassured Abraham that he would be taken care of:

"*Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed.*" *(Gen 21:12, 13)*

With this assurance, Abraham obediently did as God asked. He gave Hagar and Ishmael bread and water and sent them away. Abraham did not cast them away as Sarah had demanded, but sent them away.[6]

These two methods of departure are drastically different. To be sent away is to depart with goodwill and with a purpose, in the same way God sent prophets to the people bearing a message. To be cast away is as if you are chasing out a stray animal from your home.

Abraham personally prepared bread and water, set the provisions on Hagar's shoulders, and sent her away with Ishmael. In these gestures, we can see how Abraham cared for Hagar and Ishmael. Although he cared greatly for his son, and his son's mother, he abided by God's command to send them away from Isaac, the son of the promise.

Indeed, God did take care of and provide for Ishmael and Hagar.[7] We can see that although Ishmael was born outside of God's promise, God accepted the fact that he existed, and showed mercy towards him. Despite this, Ishmael had no part in his father's inheritance.

PAUL ANALYZES THIS SITUATION

In Galatians, Paul writes that Abraham had two sons; yet in God's eyes, Abraham

had only one son:

"*Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love…*" *(Gen 22:2)*

However, in total, Abraham had more than two sons: he had six other sons with Keturah, the wife he took after Sarah died.[8] Even though he had these other sons, he sent them away from Isaac, and the Bible records that these six sons were Keturah's sons, and not Abraham's: "All these were the children of Keturah" (Gen 25:4b).

In the same passage, the Bible records unequivocally that while Abraham gave gifts to his other sons, he gave all that he had to Isaac. Even though Abraham showed concern and generosity towards his other children, Isaac was the sole heir.

In Galatians 4:21-31, however, Paul is making a comparison between the sons of Abraham according to the law: Isaac and Ishmael. Abraham is the father of both Isaac and Ishmael; their differences lie in the identity of their mothers. One was born of the freewoman through promise, and the other was born of the bondwoman according to the flesh; these things are an allegory for something spiritual.

These two births symbolize two covenants—one from Mt. Sinai, which bears children to bondage, the other from the Jerusalem above that is free. Just as Ishmael scoffed at Isaac, so those born according to the flesh persecute those born according to the Spirit.

[F]or this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. (Gal 4:25, 26)

There are two Jerusalem's, one that is physical and the other that is above. In the same way, there are two mothers. The Jews who did not believe in Christ were born of Hagar, represented by the Jerusalem at that time. Those born of Sarah, represented by the Jerusalem above, comprised the church at that time.

When Sarah gave birth to Isaac, she was not fertile, while Ishmael was born through Hagar's fertility. In the same way, children born of the gospel are born through extraordinary means:

"*Rejoice, O barren, You who do not bear! Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children Than she who has a husband.*" *(Gal 4:27)*

In this extraordinary way, Paul, who had no wife, could bear children in the gospel, "for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel" (1 Cor 4:15).

Those born through extraordinary means, born of those who do not appear to be fertile, are children of promise. "Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise" (Gal 4:28).

The Mother of Promise: the Church

It is clear from this passage that the critical determining factor of whether we are of promise or of the flesh is the identity of our mother. Paul writes that the Jerusalem above is the mother of promise.[9] What characterizes the mother who bears the children of promise?

"*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.*" *(Heb 12:22-24)*

The heavenly Jerusalem is also Mount Zion, the city of the living God; she is the mother of the promised children. This place contains six things: angels, the general assembly, church of the firstborn, God the Judge of all, spirits of perfect men, Jesus the mediator, and the blood.

From this passage, the mother that bears children according to promise is the church of the firstborn, containing the general assembly of saints, chosen before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blame.[10] She is the bride of Christ.[11]

For us today, Mount Zion, the city of the living God, is the church.

IS THERE ONLY ONE CHURCH OF THE PROMISE?

However, if we look around, we will see that there isn't just one church. In fact, there are many different Christian denominations. There are many churches. Is there just one church that will lead to salvation, or will all these churches lead us to salvation? Why can't we agree to disagree, and let things be?

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:22, 23)

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling: one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (Eph 4.4-6)

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:12, 13)

These passages tell us that the church is the body of Christ, and that there is only one body. This body is composed of many members—each member is a Christian who has been baptized into the body, drinking of one Spirit. God declares in the Bible, unequivocally and indisputably, that the body of Christ is the church, and that Christ has only one body. As such, we simply believe in God's words.

Inconveniently, this poses a problem for us: there are many churches who profess Jesus Christ as their savior and head, yet, the Bible tells us there is only one body. This brings us back to the story of Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac.

Abraham had a similar conflict: he had two sons, and God chose only one son. He loved Ishmael, but God made it clear that He would be establishing his covenant exclusively with Isaac.[12]

Even though Abraham, as Ishmael's father, may not have understood the reasons why God chose Isaac and not Ishmael, he still obeyed God, and sent Ishmael away.

Likewise, although there are many Christian churches, there is only one true church according to God's promise that will inherit salvation. We may feel that it is more Christian to agree to disagree and just say that every church is of God's promise and will lead us to salvation. This is a temporary fix that will optimize harmony, yet no amount of harmonizing can distract from the Bible's words: the church is the body of Christ, and He has only one body.

Only the true church will bear children according to promise and inherit eternal life. Just as in the story of Abraham, the reason why Ishmael was sent away wasn't because he was mocking Isaac; the reason Ishmael was sent away was because he was not to have any part in Isaac's inheritance.

Just as this confounded Abraham's paternal instinct, it confounds our inclusive instinct to believe in one true church. Yet, just as Abraham submitted to God's word, we ought to submit as well.

Let us not be mistaken, though. Did Abraham love Ishmael? Yes, he did. Does God love all the Christians in the world? Yes, He does.

In fact, God loves everyone in the world, because fundamentally, we are all His children. We are all descendants of Adam, who is the son of God.[13] God causes the sun to shine on the righteous and the wicked; He does not withhold sunshine and air from anyone, even sinners.

God loved Ishmael, even though he was not born according to God's promise, because he was Abraham's son. We can see later on that God took very good care of Ishmael, and made him the father of nations.[14] Abraham was Ishmael's father, and if Ishmael called out "Father!" then Abraham would reply.

In the same way, today there are many churches who call God their Father, and indeed, God hears everyone's prayers. God's love is not limited solely to the one true church. The difference is,

not all the churches are born of promise. Some are born of the ordinary way, from the bondwoman, yet only one is born of the Spirit.

> *God's love is not limited solely to the one true church. The difference is, not all the churches are born of promise. Some are born of the ordinary way, from the bondwoman, yet only one is born of the Spirit.*

FINDING THE CHURCH OF PROMISE

How can we discern which church is the one born of the promise? Whether a church is born of promise is not something the church can self-proclaim; such a claim needs to be approved by God. The Bible tells us how to discern the church of those born of promise.

Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (Jn 3:3)

Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (Jn 3:5)

Jesus tells us that if a person is not born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. He further says that if a person is not born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. It is of utmost importance to be born of water and the Spirit. What does that actually mean?

Born of the Spirit

The kingdom of God is in this world, and is comprised of those who are born again of water and the Spirit. The prophet Joel wrote that God will pour out His Spirit to those in the flesh.

"*And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughter shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days." (Joel 2:28, 29)*

Jesus instructed His disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they were baptized with the Holy Spirit.[15] They prayed in Jerusalem and received the promised Holy Spirit, described in detail in Acts chapter 2. This is the baptism of the Spirit.[16]

Paul writes that the Holy Spirit bears witness that we are the children of God,[17] and is the guarantee of our habitation in heaven.[18] In the same way that we demand a deed when we come into possession of a property, the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance:

In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory. (Eph 1:13, 14)

The Holy Spirit verifies that we are the promised children of God, and thus heirs to the inheritance that is prepared for us. The baptism and rebirth through the Holy Spirit is something that each and every one of us can experience, just as the apostles did on the day of Pentecost.

Born of Water

After the apostles received the Holy Spirit, Peter got up and preached the gospel. The word of God pierced the hearts of all the listeners. They were determined to embrace Jesus as the Lord and Christ. What happened then?

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2:37-39)

Peter did not indicate that when the people believed, their sins were forgiven. Our sins are not forgiven when we believe. When we believe, we begin the process by accepting Jesus as our Savior.

As Peter indicated above, our sins are cleansed after we are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. This is what it means to be born of water. When our sins are washed away, we are reborn as sons of God:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:26-29)

THE CHURCH OF PROMISE

Thus, a church is of the promise if it is

comprised of people who are born of water and the Spirit; that is, they have received baptism for the remission of sins and received the Holy Spirit to prove that they are the children of God.

Some churches do not believe that baptism has the power for the remission of sins. Many people believe that simply believing in Christ is enough to be saved. While simply believing is a good start, it is not complete.

We need to seek out the church that has the complete truth, with the baptism for the remission of sins, with the abidance of the Holy Spirit. Only such a church will lead you completely to the Lord.[19]

The True Jesus Church is such a church. The baptism in the True Jesus Church has the power to cleanse sins, because the church has received the promised Spirit, who has the authority to forgive sins. Signs and miracles during baptism confirm the efficacy of water baptism for the remission of sins.

The promised Holy Spirit abides in the True Jesus Church, just as it is described in Acts 2. Our members have the promised Holy Spirit, experiencing it in the same way the apostles did on the day of Pentecost. In the True Jesus Church, we can be born of water and the Spirit, enabling us to see and enter the kingdom of God. There is one Spirit, one baptism,[20] and both are contained in the True Jesus Church.

To receive baptism in the True Jesus Church is to be born of the mother of promise. She is the freewoman, Sarah, whose offspring are the heirs to God's promise. Other churches who do not baptize with the baptism that washes away sin, and do not have the promised Holy Spirit, bear the children of the bondwoman. She is Hagar, who gives birth by ordinary means.

The children borne by Sarah and Hagar are all loved and cared for by Abraham, and despite how well they may harmonize with one another, in the end, only the children borne of Sarah will be the heirs of Abraham's inheritance.

God showers His love and blessings on all the followers of Christ, but only the children born of promise, born of water and the Spirit, will ultimately inherit eternal life.

Now, only one question remains: which mother are we born from? If we are children born in the True Jesus Church, we must have a heart of thanksgiving. Like Isaac, it is not by any doing of our own that we are born as an heir to God's promise. It is purely by God's choosing and mercy.

If we have not yet been born in the True Jesus Church, let us humbly seek to understand the correct path of salvation so lovingly laid down by our Lord Jesus Christ. Then, being borne of God our Father, and the True Church our Mother, we can be heirs to His great and mighty promise. ★

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[1]Gen 16:3
[2]Gen 17:19
[3]Gen 16:11
[4]Gen 18:13
[5]Gen 21:6
[6]Gen 21:14
[7]Gen 21:20, 21
[8]Gen 25:1, 2
[9]Gal 4:26
[10]Eph 1:3, 4
[11]Rev 21:2
[12]Gen 17:18, 19
[13]Lk 3:38
[14]Gen 21:13
[15]Acts 1:5
[16]cf Acts 11:15, 16
[17]Rom 8:15-17
[18]2 Cor 5:4, 5
[19]Jn 20:22, 23
[20]Eph 4:4, 5

The Truth Never Changes

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"Truth," what a wonderful word! Who wouldn't want to have his or her theories, ideas, speeches, beliefs, inventions, or creations be everlasting truths that never change? Therefore, humans have employed all sorts of methods, whether by establishing educational institutes or by using human influences, to uphold their theories as universal laws.

But which of the –isms and schools of thought—whether of science, philosophy, or even religion—can remain relevant through every generation? The belief that the earth was the center of the universe was widely accepted as true for over 1,000 years, beginning from the time of ancient Greece. Yet it was proven to be incorrect during the Renaissance.

What is accepted in a certain period of time is called the truth or law. However, this kind of knowledge changes over the years, so how can it be called the truth?

WHAT IS TRUTH?

When the Lord Jesus was on trial before Pilate, He said,

"*My kingdom is not of this world…For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.*" *Pilate said to Him,* "*What is truth?*" *(Jn 18:36-38)*

If Pilate—a prefect whose status, education, knowledge, and experience surpassed that of the average citizen—did not know what truth is, what chance do ordinary people like us have to know the truth? Not many people are like Pilate, who sought the truth with a straightforward and direct question.

Instead, we see unceasing debates about the truth among those who regard evil as good, righteous as wicked, and right as wrong. There is no conclusion from such arguments on what the truth is.

What exactly is the truth?

Jesus told His sorrowful disciples: "'And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper…the Spirit of truth'" (Jn 14:16, 17). In this prayer, Jesus asked for the sanctification of His disciples by the Spirit of truth because no one can go to the Father without being sanctified by the truth. This request is fulfilled by the prayer Jesus gave before His crucifixion: "'Sanctify them by your truth, [for] your word is truth'" (Jn 17:17).

From the two verses, we see that sanctification by the truth is sanctification by the Spirit. In other words, the Holy Spirit is Truth (Jn 14:17).

When Jesus said in John chapter 17, "Your word is truth," what word is He referring to? The word refers to the word of God, which is the true God that has existed since the beginning of time (Jn 1:1). So we see that God is Truth.

Because Jesus is the Word in flesh who dwelled among us (Jn 1:14), He said, "'I am the way, the truth, and the life'" (Jn 14:6). Jesus is Truth.

The Holy Spirit, God, and Jesus are one, and they are the Truth. Therefore, John says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14).

We must look at where the Holy Spirit abides—the church that has the abidance of the Spirit is a church that belongs to God.

WHERE IS TRUTH?

We know that Jesus is Truth and that He ascended to heaven after the completion of the work of salvation. So where can we go to search for the truth? Scripture says, "In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you" (Ex 20:24)—meaning a church that is erected by the name of God has the abidance of God (the truth).

Today, there are innumerable Christian churches, so how do we know which one is erected by God? According to the Bible, such a church must have the four qualities below:

Raises the Holy Name of God on High

A church must raise God's holy name on high, proclaiming the Lord Jesus as true and great because there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Numerous denominations exist today, but do their churches' names truly honor the Lord and identify themselves as God's temple?

It is rare to find another church whose name honors God. Most churches are named after people or places and have therefore changed God's church to "man's church" or "earth's church."

Behold! Here is a unique church, one of its kind—True Jesus Church, where God's name has made its dwelling; those who belong to Him are forever under His name. Amen!

Abidance of the Holy Spirit

As previously discussed, the Holy Spirit is Truth. A church that has the Holy Spirit has the truth, as well as God's constant abidance.

When the Lord became flesh and dwelled in the world, few knew that He was the Holy Lamb of the Highest One. Even John the Baptist, who came for the purpose of preparing the way for the Lord, did not know who Jesus was.

"*I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.*" *(Jn 1:33, 34)*

Today, how can a church attest that she is the church of God, the body of Christ? Thank God, we can use the method John the Baptist used to know the Lord. We must look at where the Holy Spirit abides—the church that has the abidance of the Spirit is a church that belongs to God.

God's church will have the abidance of Truth.

The Word of Truth

A church that has the truth must have this critical quality: she preaches the word as a whole according to the Bible (Ezek 11:25), and not in bits and pieces. Nowadays many churches twist or even reject God's word; having united with the world they discard God's commands in favor of men's traditions.

Conversely, the true church has the teachings of Christ as her foundation; she imitates the mind of Christ and refuses to compromise with any teaching that is different from Christ's. The true church is Bible–based and relies on the Holy Spirit's guidance to walk according to the truth.

Signs and Wonders

John chapter 3 records that Nicodemus came to see Jesus because of the signs He performed. Concerning the signs, Nicodemus remarked that no one can do them unless God is with him (Jn 3:2).

Before the Lord ascended to heaven, He promised to confirm through signs and wonders the word that the disciples preached (Mk 16:17, 20). When the disciples went out and preached, signs and wonders did indeed accompany them to confirm their testimonies.

Signs and wonders are rare except in the true church. Only in the true church would God constantly manifest His great power. Therefore, signs and wonders are another confirmation of the truth.

THE TRUTH NEVER CHANGES

The one true God is the absolute truth, everlasting, and never changing.

Absolute

Everything in this world is relative. As a popular Chinese saying goes, "There is no absolute right or absolute wrong under the sun." Even though gray areas exist throughout the world, the truth—God's word—is absolute. The Bible says, "Know the only true God" (Jn 17:3), and "'The Lord is one,' and His name one" (Zech 14:9).

Everlasting

Truth must be eternal; it cannot be true today but false tomorrow. Scripture says, "Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven" (Ps 119:89). This is an everlasting, unceasing existence. As Peter says, "'The word of the Lord endures forever'" (1 Pet 1:25).

Jesus Remains the Same

Humans' hearts change as often as the wind changes its direction. Our volatile nature fills the world with hypocrisy.

But the Lord Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8). Only Jesus, who never changes, is worthy to be called the Truth and the Life (Jn 14:6).

CONSEQUENCES OF CHANGING THE TRUTH

Eternal Condemnation

To the church of Galatia, Paul repeatedly pointed out that those who pervert God's true gospel will be condemned:

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. (Gal 1:6-9)

We must examine against the Bible the doctrines that we have received, lest we be eternally condemned for preaching "a different gospel."

Plagues

When on the island of Patmos, John received a revelation from the Holy Spirit. In the last chapter of the Book of Revelation, he expressly wrote down a warning:

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Rev 22:18, 19)

When faced with such a stern warning, how can anyone who calls on the Lord Jesus not take heed?

THE PROPER ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE TRUTH

Love

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. (Isa 2:2, 3)

The mountain, the house of God, Zion, and Jerusalem all refer to the true church of the last days. We will go up to

this mountain, to this house of God, and the Lord will reveal the truth to us and teach us so that we can see the light of the truth.

The queen of Sheba traveled thousands of miles to listen to King Solomon's words of wisdom (1 Kgs 10:1-6). The Ethiopian eunuch endured the long journey to Jerusalem to learn more about the truth (Acts 8:27-29).

Modern transportation has made traveling to distant places more convenient. We don't need to go through the trouble that the queen and the eunuch went through, traveling long distances to search for the truth. If others have been willing to endure difficulties to learn the truth, how much more should we, as children of God, endure to understand the truth that we believe in?

We must show our love for the truth.

Keep

Keep my commands and live,
And my law as the apple of your eye.
Bind them on your fingers;
Write them on the tablet of your heart.
(Prov 7:2, 3)

After a person acquires a treasure, he will certainly store it in a very secure place. If he treats it as junk, what profit would this treasure bring him? Truth is far more valuable than money and jewels, and cannot be exchanged for wealth.

I entreat brothers and sisters who have already received the truth to be watchful and make every effort to guard yourselves, lest you reject the truth and be rejected by the truth in the end.

Support

For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. (2 Cor 13:8)

Support the truth, and do not oppose it. Be strong and courageous, and submit to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When the devil attempts to alter the truth among the congregation, we should contend earnestly for the truth and point out the devil's trick lest believers be fooled by it.

Because we love God, we are willing to suffer and even give up our lives to guard and support the truth. Never compromise with the world and thus surrender to the devil. To be friends with the world is to forsake the truth which we have received, and to be enemies with God (Jas 4:4).

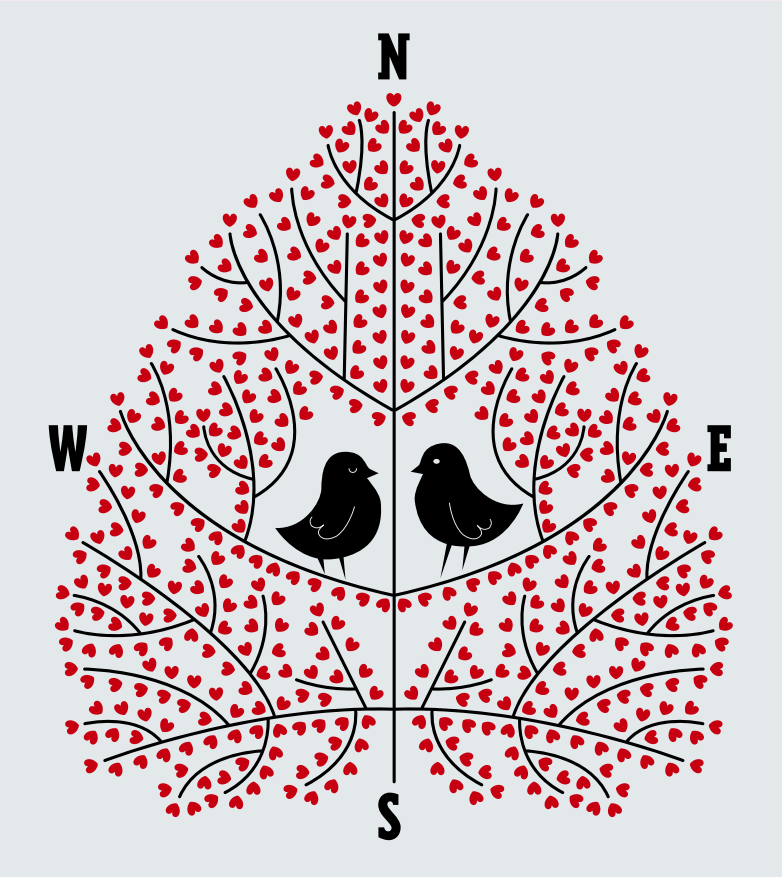
Apply

A true believer does not merely hear the truth, he practices the truth. David had the heart to practice the truth. He prayed, "Teach me Your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your truth" (Ps 86:11).

God came in flesh as Jesus and set an example for us. As long as we try our best to imitate the examples that the Lord has set for us—like what Paul wrote, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ" (1 Cor 1:11)—we will have the likeness of Christ, spotless and blameless, able to welcome the true God. Amen!

The Lord Jesus is Truth, and in Him there is no change. Though our resurrected Lord has ascended to heaven, He manifests Himself by the Holy Spirit, the evidence of Truth.

As long as we humble ourselves and seek to know the truth, we will receive it. The true God will give the truth to those who ask Him. The Lord has already promised: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3).★



East Meets West

ESH

LEARNING TO TRUST AND WAIT

For as long as I can remember I always wanted to marry a brother who loved God and served Him humbly. These requirements stayed close to my heart and prayers as I waited for my Mr. Right to turn up.

I know that many of my family members were concerned about my marriage, especially as the years drew on and I was passing thirty. Each time I saw relatives, they would ask the dreaded question, "So, do you have anyone yet?" I would either shrug it off with a joke or begin to get rather annoyed.

I even began to wonder where God was where my marriage was concerned. I mean, this was not something that I really had control over.

So sisters, I know what you're going through. I know that it gets to a point when so many people ask you (even though it is out of genuine concern) that it begins to eat at you. I know how lonely it can get at times. I know how happy, yet sad, you feel when you see another couple tie the knot.

However, one thing that I've learned through this tough waiting period is to completely and utterly trust in God.

Instead of whiling away my time, I decided that during my wait, I would continue to offer my best to God and serve Him wholeheartedly. Yes, ideally, I wanted someone whom I could serve God with, but there was no point in wasting my time waiting for him to turn up. As Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, "He has made everything beautiful in His time." Yes, God's timing is the best. During this period, I began to read some Christian literature about single life and how to make the most of it to serve God. I realized that I had more time to offer to God so I became more involved with the youths in my local church. I even got the opportunity to go to Africa to serve the members there. It was a wonderful period! I started to seriously pray about my marriage and trusted that God would provide when the timing was right.

COULD THIS BE THE ONE?

It started at the end of August, 2005.

At that time, I was working at home and logged onto MSN quite frequently. I had a friend from church who asked me about my future and what type of brother I was looking for. When I was asked this question in the past, I came up with a long list. Perhaps as I got older, the list

got shorter and shorter. However, still high on my list of priorities were the two things I mentioned earlier: to love God sincerely and to serve Him humbly.

After asking what type of brother I was looking for, my friend suddenly asked me online, "Do you know so-and so?" I had heard of this certain brother before but had never crossed paths with him. Then he asked me, "Would you like to get to know him?" To my surprise, I actually said, "Yes, why not?" In the past, I would not even dare to do such a thing! I was quite surprised at my own gall!

It seemed as if a new me was taking over! We chatted for quite a while on our first encounter on MSN. I had some good feelings, but also had my doubts. We continued communicating on MSN and then through the telephone later on.

I have to admit, when I first heard his voice over the phone it wasn't what I had imagined—it sounded too deep. I was quite nervous and was at a loss for words. Also, I was testing the waters slightly and wanted to hear him talk more so that I could conjure up a better image of him!

As we got to know each other better I began to grow fond of him but still questioned whether he was the one. "Hmm…he seems nice enough and definitely has a sense of humor, but is he really the one? Why is it that we seem different in many ways?" These thoughts clouded my mind. I realized that the more I thought about this, the more confused I would get. The only way out was through prayer. Each time I prayed about this brother and the doubts I had, I would always come out feeling peace and comfort.

FROM DOUBTS TO PRAYER AND PEACE

A month later, one of the matchmakers of my local church invited me over to her house. She told me that both she and this other matchmaker had actually been praying for my marriage, but they didn't know who to match make for me. She had gone abroad to attend a church dedication and saw a brother whom she recognized. She suddenly thought he would be a good match for me and was so excited that evening that she couldn't sleep! Still, she felt she had to pray about it first.

When she returned home, she told the other matchmaker and they both decided to pray about it together before approaching the brother. A few weeks later, they decided it was time for action.

This matchmaker phoned the brother and asked if he had met anyone. When he said he had, she finally managed to drag the name of the sister out of him and was shocked to find out that it was me.

She related the whole series of events to me at this meeting and explained, "I felt you had to know all this, just in case you were unsure about him. Can't you see? It really shows that it's God's will." It was comforting and reassuring to hear what she had to say. Basically, it answered my doubts as to whether this brother was the one.

I knew that as long as I entrusted everything to God, He would lead and guide us to the best possible ending. With this determination in mind and the assurance that I already knew it was God's will, I continued to walk on this path.

However, it wasn't all smooth sailing after hearing this. I still had my doubts. Deep down inside me, I always felt that my other half would come from the same background. I expected him to like the same things as I did, and that our personalities would be similar. But they weren't.

I often questioned whether we would be compatible or not. Despite this, I knew that as long as I entrusted everything to God, He would lead and guide us to the best possible ending. With this determination in mind and the assurance that I already knew it was God's will, I continued to walk on this path.

The brother managed to persuade me to fly out to meet him in January, which was about five months after we started corresponding. We decided that it would be the deciding point: if we met up and, well, if sparks flew, then we would continue. If not, then we would just be friends.

NOT AN IMPRESSIVE FIRST DATE!

Finally, the day came when we were to meet. I had just arrived the previous day and was still suffering from jet lag. The brother had given me directions to the place we would meet and told me what bus to get on.

Somehow, I heard the wrong number and got on the wrong bus. When I arrived, he was not there. "Typical," I thought, "our first meeting and he's late." We managed to figure out later that I had taken the wrong bus so he had to come find me.

When he finally arrived, I was not at all impressed. I know looks shouldn't matter, but having seen a photo of him, I expected him to look and dress somewhat smarter. He also said the same about me later when we discussed our first date!

The first meeting went smoothly, although I had doubts—honestly speaking, I was put off by his appearance. How strange that over the course of five months, you can talk quite freely and openly with someone and then when you finally meet him or her, you're at a loss for words.

When I got home that evening, all the negative thoughts came to me. I got down on my knees and cried in prayer. This brother seemed so different from my expectations. I cried to God, "Is this brother really the one You have prepared for me?" I was unsure about this whole relationship. I asked God to guide me. Dejected and exhausted through jet lag, I fell asleep immediately.

CUT TO THE CHASE

The next day, I conversed quite freely with the brother over the phone. Our second meeting was so much better. He got a haircut so when I saw him the second time, I actually thought, "Hmm…not bad." God had answered my prayer and took away all my ill-feelings.

We continued to meet whenever possible during my short stay. Each meeting seemed to draw us into a closer relationship and I began to feel more certain about him. My negative thoughts and doubts decreased with each prayer. There were a few times when we met up and prayed in church together. I believe God calmed our hearts and instilled in us a peace and assurance we needed to walk down this path courageously.

On our fifth date, after a heart-to-heart talk, he proposed. Yes, the fifth date. It seems crazy now that I think about it, but at the time, we both knew that this was from God and we were certain about each other. We didn't see the point in dragging it out any longer.

A MAGNETIC ATTRACTION

So, ten months after we first met on MSN, friends and family from both the East and West gathered together to witness our union. Looking back at the past year or so, I truly see the grace and love of God in my marriage. God brought my husband and me together, one from the East, one from the West. We come from very different backgrounds and our personalities are very different, but the Lord brought us together to love and cherish each other and to support each other in our weaknesses.

The preacher who officiated our wedding encouraged us with a beautiful sermon about how love is like a magnet: no matter how you try to separate two magnets, they will always be attracted to one another, even if it is as far as east and west.

Waiting for God's time is not easy, especially when you feel that time is running out and there's no one decent out there. Sometimes you may doubt God or fall into depression, or even consider looking outside the church. But you must hold on to God unto the very end. He loves each and every one of us and will lead you to the one who He sees is best for you, not who you think is good for you.

Learn to entrust everything to Him. Use your time wisely while you wait. Don't give up on Him because He will never give up on you.

"*For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand, Saying to you, 'Fear not, I will help you.'*" *(Isa 41:13)*

When you begin to let go of your will and concentrate on serving Him, you will be surprised at what great things He has in store for you! When God brings your other half to you, you will marvel at His beautiful guidance.

Pray and entrust all to Him. Be patient. You never know, our loving heavenly Father may surprise you with an unexpected love story. ★

Work: a Blessing or a Curse?

David Jeng—St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Recently in my work group we held a special meeting. Another group within our department was having difficulty, and since we were a high performing group, we were asked to rotate several of our engineers over to support their troubled program.

Our managers bluntly explained that whoever volunteered to rotate over to that program would likely face overtime and a potentially stressful environment. They were expected to immediately contribute to the program with little or no training.

Rumors described a bleak work environment where jaded coworkers toiled under poor management. Repeated failures had further decimated what little morale that remained. The only incentive was that since the department head would have direct oversight of the project, workers would have higher visibility to upper management. Given such dismal terms, I wasn't expecting anybody to volunteer. To my surprise, those positions were quickly filled.

Why would anybody willingly dive into a failed program and subject themselves to high stress and long hours?

THE TWO FATES OF WORK

Solomon, in his wisdom, spoke about two fates of all who work: a blessing and a curse.

A Curse

The Preacher reflects,

For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity. (Eccl 2:22, 23)

We live in a society that has been ruthlessly pushing for greater productivity. Gone are the days where the 40-hour week is viewed as standard. Today, 50 to 60 hours per week is the norm in most industries.

Now thanks to our digital leash, we enjoy 24/7 connectivity to the office. We can reply to company emails and work in our virtual office even from the comforts of our home. Only with great reluctance are we able to temporarily suspend our cell phones or Blackberry devices. Even so, we find ourselves fidgeting during that brief duration of our flight.

Let us step back for a moment and try to make sense of this work-frenzied phenomenon.

Why do we work so hard? Surely we can blame society for at least part of our misery. After all, we are pressured to work overtime in order to survive in this competitive world. Very few of us obey the 40-hour limit or control "when" or "how long" we work.

Under these circumstances, work can indeed seem like a curse. Not only does it burden us with stress and fatigue during the day, it also creeps into our nights to rob us of precious sleep. Worse yet, the result of our sweat and blood may simply be a pink slip (or if we own our business, having to declare Chapter 11).

A Blessing

Fortunately, not all work is doom and gloom. Solomon also writes of the blessing of work. God allows one to "enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him" (Eccl 5:18). It is a "gift of God" and a life of purpose, for "he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart" (Eccl 5:19, 20).

There are many wonderful ways we can enjoy work. The most basic perk work offers is that it allows us to sustain ourselves. There are mouths to feed and bills to pay. Groceries, rent, and gas, are only some of the basic expenses required of us to survive in this world. Work serves as a means for us to acquire the money needed to provide for our basic necessities in life.

For others, work offers more than just money. Our occupation shapes both how others see us and how we see ourselves. Aside from offering an identity and status in society, sometimes it instills a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment.

Whether they are teachers, scientists, custodians, or waiters, there are people of every profession who are able to look beyond their jobs to see a hope to create a better community, country, or humanity. They share the vision of a better world.

HOW TO ACHIEVE A BLESSED CAREER

Work is very much a part of our life in this world. When does work become overwork? When does enthusiasm, dedication, and a sense of responsibility become a destructive force that hinders our spiritual, physical, social, and emotional well-being?

Let's examine how God had intended for us to work in this world so that we can turn this curse into a blessing and achieve a blessed career.

Reserve Time for Rest

Ecclesiastes chapter 3 tells us that there is a time for everything:

A time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal;
A time to gain, and a time to lose.

In our rush to reach our goals or build up our careers, we may have forgotten that God has also given us a time for rest. It is this rest that is increasingly taken away from us by the changing workplace.

There is a fundamental shift in the workplace supporting long and irregular workdays. From free soft drinks and ping-pong tables to more lavish treatments such as free meals and pet care, many companies entice young professionals to work longer hours at the office.

Equally significant is the advent of the virtual office in the context of globalization. One may be expected to coordinate time zone differences not only between the West Coast and East Coast, but also that of Bangalore, Moscow, or London. Robbed of continuous blocks of rest, we are forced to rely on short power naps and caffeinated drinks to overcome our bodies' natural crave for rest.

Studies have shown that in addition to a drastic reduction in alertness,[1] sleep deprivation also reduces memory and learning functions.[2] According to sleep researchers, when you get less sleep than what your body naturally needs, you incur a debt that must be repaid.[3] Whether you like it or not, you will repay that sleep.

We do need to work enough to earn our daily needs, but there are only so many things we can do in a day before we run out of energy. Rest is essential to our overall well-being. Even though the bulk of our time and energy per day may be sold to the company, we must not forget that life is more than the collection of manna.

We need to recognize the importance of rest and allocate time for it. The financial advice for reducing debt, "pay yourself first" applies to rest as well. When we have blocks of free time, we need to set the proper limits and make sure our body gets the rest it needs.

Don't Chase After the Wind

King Solomon attained wisdom and understanding unsurpassed by mortals. He amassed great fortunes and a name that lasted throughout history. He constructed great waterways and pools, planted beautiful vineyards, orchards, and gardens, and built magnificent houses. In his lifetime, he achieved many times over what one would be proud to have accomplished in one's life.

But despite all his success, King Solomon's conclusion was that life without God is meaningless and empty. In other words, no matter how great our accomplishments are in this world, they are meaningless when our lives are not centered on God.

In our lives, it is sometimes so easy to lose focus of our purpose. Like Solomon, we may find ourselves unwittingly chasing after the wind.

We see others around us toiling endlessly in pursuit of a better life. People then work even harder to maintain that new standard of living. To safeguard against disasters that may take their hard-earned life away, they must work even harder.

If we follow their footsteps, we may be like the pitiful rich man who lost his focus in life (Lk 12:16-21). When God blessed him so that the ground in which he labored yielded abundantly, he focused all his time and energy coming up with a plan so that he would retire in luxury. All his toil was in vain when his life ended.

Manage Your Investments Wisely

When tending to the needs of our faith, family, and career, we are often encouraged to model our priorities after

...we should also make goals for our faith and family and hold them to the same level of expectation and ambition as we would in our career or financial goals.

the patriarchs. Whenever Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob moved to a new location, they would always first build an altar to worship God, set up the tents for their family, and finally dig a well to provide for their livestock. While they also faced many daily challenges in confronting the competing demands of life, they were able to find a proper balance.

How we manage these three aspects of life is like managing three fields we own—each requiring our labors to till, sow, weed, and harvest. While working hard to invest in your work may yield an abundant harvest of riches and success, this comes at the price of having abandoned fields of overgrown weeds for your family and your faith.

The goals we invest the most time and energy in should be tied to the potential returns: the necessities for life, a healthy body, a close-knit network of friends, a loving family, and our salvation in eternity.

Just as no amount of money can buy back the love and affection of a child who grew up with an absent parent, no amount of love and affection for our loved ones can give them that inner peace and eternal hope. We must choose carefully how much time we invest working in each field. The most rewarding one, of course, will be that field containing the hidden treasure of eternal life.

If we define clear and manageable goals in our faith, family, and career and allot the time and energy to achieve them according to their relative priority, we can reap the abundant harvest of a long-lasting, far-reaching, and much more meaningful existence.

Our faith, family, and career are all aspects of our life that need time and care. Like the legs of a tripod, focusing solely on one aspect will lead to an unbalanced life that could easily topple.

Invest in the Imperishable

When investing, we try to maximize our return on investment. We expect that, at the very least, our returns will surpass the rate of inflation.

Similarly, in our career, we expect to receive raises and promotions on a regular basis, but we also seek to maximize our advancement. We work hard and pursue advanced degrees, retrain for certificates, and keep up with the latest technology. We go to conferences or business socials to try to get more visibility with the executives—all in hopes of advancing our careers.

In the same way, we should also make goals for our faith and family and hold them to the same level of expectation and ambition as we would in our career or financial goals.

Perhaps we can spend a little more time on our health or seek to get in touch with some long neglected friends and family. Or perhaps we aim to build up and train ourselves in specific tasks so that we can work for the Lord. Maybe our goal is to simply advance our spirituality each year.

My coworkers were willing to volunteer themselves into such a bleak working environment because they valued the opportunity as a stepping-stone to success. Even though it may cost them time for family, friends, and faith, they were willing to invest in this venture.

If others are eager to sacrifice so much for such a tiny hope of greater things to come, shouldn't we, who possess the precious promise of God, invest heavily in the greatest part of our existence?

HEAR THE HIGHER CALLING

Mother Theresa dedicated her life to helping others. However, she saw helping orphans as more than just social work—she saw it as a calling from God. We help those around us not just to help others, but most of all to glorify the Lord.

As Christians, we too are determined to make a positive difference in the world around us. As the ambassadors of our faith, we have the responsibility to exemplify our faith. However, our mission and calling encompasses and surpasses the vision of simply improving humanity.

Even though our job descriptions may seem to be a far cry from the work entrusted by our Lord—to feed His sheep and preach the word of God to the ends of the earth—it is an opportunity given to us by God to do His will.

We are placed in our workplaces to illuminate our environments and season those around us. While we exert ourselves in the business of each day, we must ask ourselves: Have we glorified God in our workplace today? ★

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A Christian Perspective on Greek Organizations Part I

In the United States, many college students are intrigued with joining fraternities and sororities. Often, the secretive nature of these organizations may arouse curiosity or lend it the façade of exclusivity.

But what is the reality of life as a "fraternity brother" or "sorority sister," and what are the spiritual consequences one encounters?

Although the exact types of temptations may not exist in each country, every student faces the same pressure to join activities that may lead us away from God. Two of our church's working youths, who were once fraternity and sorority members in college, share their insights in hopes that their experiences will help brothers and sisters make more informed decisions when considering which extracurricular activities to participate in.

Here, a brother shares his experience; a sister will share her perspective in the next issue.

What is a fraternity?

A fraternity is an organization where members focus on common interests, typically long lasting friendships, academic support, social networking, and community service. Along with sororities, they are also referred to as Greek organizations.

Why do people join fraternities?

The impression many people have is that college should be a time to party and enjoy their freedom. Greek organizations promise their members the most fun-filled college experience possible through meeting hundreds of people at parties each week, and many people are drawn to such claims. They want to explore beyond the boundaries that existed when living with their parents.

People may also believe that joining a fraternity or sorority allows them to become part of a family away from their family. While students relish their newfound independence from their families, they also seek acceptance by developing meaningful long lasting friendships with fellow students. Fraternities and sororities often describe the bond between its members as family, calling their members brothers and sisters.

Why did you want to join a Greek organization?

I wanted to join a Greek organization to meet people with the same goals. Also, joining a fraternity seemed to give me the perfect opportunity to network with those who had succeeded in the challenges that I was about to encounter in college. The fraternity members seemed extremely successful and in all honesty, it felt as if I would be joining an elite group of students.

How did you first hear about your fraternity?

My first exposure to the fraternity was through people I met in my classes. Through mutual friends, I became acquainted with members of the fraternity who seemed very intelligent and nice, which was contrary to the image of a stereotypical fraternity member that I had in my mind.

The fraternity was also very reputable across the country and well-respected by other organizations. What struck me was that the members attributed a large part of their individual success to the fraternity. In addition to their friendliness and enthusiasm, I felt I couldn't go wrong enjoying my college life with people who would help me to build up my academic career at my university as well as pave the way for my professional career in the future.

What are rush and pledge like?

Through rush, I quickly became acquainted with each fraternity member. In terms of the stereotypical perception of fraternity functions, during rush there weren't as many instances of excessive alcohol consumption or inappropriate activities as I had imagined.

Many of the events illuminated each member's passion about the things that he did for the organization and his ultimate goals after graduation. Each seemed so well rounded, goal-oriented, and driven. The graduating members all seemed to pursue graduate studies at top-notch universities around the world. I felt like I could really benefit from being around them.

I received a phone call from the fraternity on the last day of my local church's spiritual convocation. I was accepted as a pledge and asked if I was willing to accept. I was absolutely ecstatic that they had accepted me. Thinking that pledging the fraternity would not negatively affect my spirituality or my life in general, I immediately accepted the pledge invitation.

What happened during your pledgeship?

Besides the frequent social events, pledges had to attend two meetings every week, each lasting from one and a half to three hours. We were given time-consuming tasks to complete, such as planning social events for the fraternity, performing community service, and organizing professional development events. There were also events that occurred on the weekends, such as mandatory scavenger hunts and community service functions that lasted the whole day.

On top of this, during the first meeting, I was elected pledge class president, which placed additional pressure on me to lead my pledge class and dedicate twice as much time to my fraternity as my fellow pledgemates.

Although it crossed my mind that I was not managing my time well, I firmly believed that I would be able to balance the collective responsibilities of school, fraternity, family, friends, and spirituality without compromising any of them. However, I quickly realized that all of my free time was being dedicated to the fraternity. I even rationalized that this was such an important chapter of my life that my other responsibilities would have to accommodate my fraternity responsibilities. This was a reflection of my priorities being reshuffled at that time, with the fraternity being the most important aspect of my life.

Not surprisingly, my spirituality quickly took a backseat to my fraternity duties. Although I still attended Sabbath services on Saturday, I had a difficult time attending Friday evening services, weekly Bible studies, and campus fellowship. There was no chance that I could juggle God, family and friends, a part-time job, schoolwork, and fraternity without any of those responsibilities being ignored or mishandled.

What expectations did the organization have of you? How did they affect your other commitments?

Once you're in a Greek organization, no events are optional. You must dedicate your time to attending events to represent your sorority or fraternity and your pledge class. It's an endless commitment that encompasses the rest of your college career once you decide to join.

The fraternity took up an average of ten hours per week for me, which included only the mandatory events and not the "voluntary" events that I was expected to attend. Prior to rushing my fraternity, I made the determination that after crossing over, I would not compromise my Sabbath attendance for fraternity events.

Sabbath worship was an integral part of my faith and because of all the

Greek Life Terminology

Crossover, or "crossing-over," refers to the special ceremony a Greek organization holds for new members (or pledges) to become initiated members of the chapter.

Pledge: Upon receiving an offer to join a particular Greek organization and you commit to it, you become a "pledge." As a pledge, you are not a full member, but more of a probationary member. Pledges learn about the history and purpose of the organization, and perform community service. Some pledges do not complete the pledgeship and do not join the organization, while those who complete it crossover.

Pledge Parents: older "brothers" or "sisters" who take you under their wings to guide you as a new member.

Rush: the name given to the somewhat involved recruitment process that anyone interested in joining the Greek system goes through in order to find the right affiliation for them. Rush occurs during the beginning of the semester or school year where fraternities and sororities recruit other students to participate in parties or events to draw people to want to join. Rush can be considered an open invitation to all who wish to know more about each organization.

The plain truth is, being in a sorority or fraternity consumes all aspects of your life, especially your spirituality.

stereotypical negative activities associated with fraternities, I was very sensitive to any activities that clearly compromised my faith. All the community service events were held during the day on Saturdays. A few times, I volunteered for the earliest possible time slot on Saturday mornings, 9 a.m.-11 a.m. In order to make it to Sabbath services, I would rush from volunteering to church, arriving late and with an unsettled heart.

When the events could not accommodate my Sabbath worship, I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. While I was able to decline events that directly conflicted with Sabbath worship, doing so was an arduous process. I would need to explain and justify to my pledge parents why I was not giving the fraternity my full dedication. The fraternity was not receptive to its pledge class president being absent from Saturday fraternity events.

Due to my repeated absence from fraternity events during Sabbath services, I was forced to attend all other fraternity events outside that timeframe. I was able to get away with making brief appearances at parties and other social events on Friday and Saturday nights. However, the burden of having to adjust my entire schedule around fraternity events was difficult to bear.

Review sessions with teaching assistants and classmates, meetings for group work, and other academic events would frequently come in conflict with fraternity events. Not surprisingly, my grades went down.

With the burdens continually increasing and the "fun" diminishing, I began to question the true value of the fraternity in my life. Due to the seemingly endless cycle between my classes, fraternity events, part-time job, familial responsibilities, church, schoolwork, and even more fraternity events, I didn't have even a moment to think deeper about whether this fast-paced lifestyle fit in with the real priorities in my life.

Did you feel any regret after you joined?

I enjoyed pledging and crossing-over into the fraternity because everything was new and fresh to me. After two semesters of involvement with the fraternity, that excitement disappeared. After I officially crossed and became a "brother," I had expected that the time commitment and participation requirements would diminish, but no relief was in sight.

What was once fun became a terrible burden. I regretted placing too high a value on being a part of the fraternity. It didn't seem worth all the trouble and effort after becoming a member of the fraternity. Much of the benefits advertised to me were hollow.

I regret not being able to explore my university and all it had to offer. I missed out on a number of activities and organizations that I would have joined had I not committed myself to the fraternity. There are plenty of organizations that would have enabled me to pursue the same "benefits"—such as networking, job placement, and academic support—offered by a Greek organization without requiring the same commitment level.

There just isn't enough time in a given week for a pledge to fulfill his duties of spiritual cultivation, school, and the Greek organization, let alone the optional or leisure activities that he may wish to pursue as part of the "college experience."

Is it possible to remain pure and holy? What challenges did you face?

By participating in fraternity social events, I unnecessarily subjected myself to temptation simply by allowing myself to be put in an environment conducive to sin. Although I remained firm in abstaining from the alcohol and sexual immorality that my fraternity brothers often indulged in, there was still a strong temptation to become curious about those activities.

I was certainly putting myself at tremendous spiritual risk with the dangerous combination of poor time management, bad spiritual cultivation habits, and subjection to temptation. Despite remaining firm in abstinence, exposing my eyes to activities unwholesome to Christians defiled the purity of my heart.

The plain truth is, being in a sorority or fraternity consumes all aspects of your life, especially your spirituality. It created a vicious cycle where I would have less free time and less time to think about and draw nearer to God. I lost focus in all that I did.

I found myself drifting away from God and from one of the purposes of my college life: Instead of utilizing the golden opportunity that God gave me during college to participate in my campus fellowship and the evangelical opportunities on campus, I was devoting far too much time to what I perceived to be of value.

Rather than developing a solid bond of spiritual friendship with my fellow brothers and sisters, I found myself often making excuses for why I was unable to attend any of the campus fellowship

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The Absent Spiritual Partner

Do you feel like you are carrying the weight of your family's spiritual well-being alone? Do you feel like your spouse is not helping or even working against you? Do you feel like you are fighting a losing battle in trying to raise your children with godly values?

The following is a testimony from a sister who has struggled with the challenges above, perhaps the same challenges you may be facing today. Read on to discover important principles she has learned that have helped her overcome these challenges and be victorious in the spiritual battle of raising a godly family.

I am a third-generation True Jesus Church member and grew up in the church. When I was young, I enjoyed going to church and experienced many blessings, but there was one thing that bothered me so much that I felt I needed spiritual freedom: I was not given the choice to go to church. When I entertained the idea of not going, my mother would fear that Satan was destroying my life and start showering me with verbal abuse. Although I was not ready at that point to be as devoted as my parents wanted me to be, I felt it was no reason for them to verbally abuse me and that if they were truly Christians, they would not have treated me this way.

This treatment led me to see the discrepancy between God's principles and how my parents (and other adult church members) carried out these principles in their daily lives. As I grew up, I began to focus more and more on these discrepancies rather than the blessings of being in church. Eventually, I married someone outside of church because I believed that this was the only way I could choose freely when it came to my faith. I was worried that if I married another church member, I would be in the same situation and lose the freedom to decide whether or not I wanted to come to church.

In the beginning of our marriage, everything was fine because my spouse respected my choice of faith. But after we had children, the situation became very complicated. It was then that I understood why my parents did not give me the choice to go to church. Although I did not agree with the way my parents taught me, I understood that they wanted me to stay in church. After I had children, I too had the same desire for my children.

I began to think of how I could build up my children so that they would draw closer to God of their own accord and not because I forced them. How would I raise them so that they would actually enjoy spiritual pursuits? This task is very challenging when only 50% of my child belongs to me and the other 50% belongs to my non-believing husband.

SUPERIORITY vs. LOVE

In the beginning, I would have huge confrontations with my husband every time we wanted to go to church, and both of us would end up very unhappy from arguing.

But one day, I had an epiphany. I realized that the reason for all this conflict was because I viewed my husband as inferior. Since he was not a church member, I felt that he was obviously inferior and I was superior. Because of this perception, I did not respect him and felt his opinions were not even worthy to be heard.

I dug deeper into how I could feel this way, and I realized that I was a third generation church member but also a third generation Pharisee. Up until that point, I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I was righteous because I went to church and read the Bible every day. I felt I was a representative of God, and whatever decision I made was God's decision. But it was not. I never realized that Christian values had never entered my heart—they had only stayed on the surface, on a very superficial level. Whoever I thought I was before—the good Christian that I thought I was—was all a lie.

I was shocked to learn that these wrong conceptions were rooted so deeply inside of me. I knew that if I continued to look at my husband this way, there would be no solution to the problem. Once I was able to see this point, I began to ask God to change me and give me a Christ-like heart.

Once I began praying this way, I realized that I had inadvertently been teaching my children the same attitude toward their father. The first thing that I needed to help my children do was to love and respect their father. Even when there was a conflict on the issue of worship, we still respected him because we realized that he did not understand the issue.

An important phrase to remember in these situations is that "God hates sin, but He loves sinners." Sometimes, it may feel like our spouse is "The Enemy." Instead of working together with you to bring your children to the Lord, it feels like they are constantly against you, undermining you, or destroying your work. But God has taught me that no human being is our enemy. Sin is the enemy, but not that person. This principle doesn't just apply to our relationship with our spouse, but with everyone.

OUR WILL vs. GOD'S WILL

When I would come across the Bible passage that says we need to raise our children in the Lord (Deut 6:5-9), I thought that I already qualified because I brought them to church and prayed together with them. But in actuality, I did not, because children look at how we live our daily lives—how we solve our problems, how we relate to them, what kind of advice we give them.

One of the most important lessons that I have learned throughout the course of my struggles is that I cannot teach my children if I am not connected to God. There's no way. It doesn't matter how hard you try, how many books you study, or how many classes you take, because the situation changes every day. If you don't have this vibrant life inside of you, constantly teaching, comforting, and refreshing you, it is mission impossible.

You may be thinking, "By the time I build up a relationship with God, it will be too late for my children! I would already have one foot in the grave and my children would have grown up and left!" But it won't happen this way. God will start working once you start devoting time to building that relationship with Him. God does not prepare you 100% so that you can teach your children. God actually teaches you through your everyday struggles and weaknesses.

You can start anytime. Don't worry that you have drifted too far away from God. Don't think that you need thirty years to catch up. God doesn't teach this way.

One of the most important lessons that I have learned throughout the course of my struggles is that I cannot teach my children if I am not connected to God.

A lot times I found myself applying or imposing my will in the name of God. The consequence of this is that our children will have a distorted image of God. For example, mom might say, "God will not be pleased if you do not get good grades."

When the Bible teaches about raising children in the Lord, this means that parents should raise their children according to God's will, not their own will. This requires daily practice—from small events, small conflicts, to personal advice, relationship issues, extracurricular activities—everything.

If you don't know the answers at the time or know how to guide your children, it's okay to tell them, "I don't know at this point, but I'll think about it and put it in prayer and then I'll let you know," instead of just saying, "Oh, I'm sure God wants you to do such and such…" We may be inadvertently using "God's will" in the wrong way when we speak too quickly.

It is so important, especially if you are the main spiritual support of your children, to teach them only according to God's will. You need to be connected to God in order to learn His will, and only then can you teach your children. Once we make this effort to understand His will and to bring our children before Him, God will reveal His mercy and grace in our lives, and He will teach us to be parents according to His will.

ALONE vs. PARTNERED

Someone recently asked me, "Now that your children are almost adults, do you feel that it is possible to raise godly children with just one active parent?"

My answer is: "It is definitely possible."

When we talk about raising our children in the Lord, it actually means bringing our children to God. Once our children come to God, they will have to fight their own battle. They will have to travel the journey of faith by themselves.

A big mistake is when a parent expects to see a "completed product" when a child turns eighteen. You might be thinking, "I have put in so much effort and I expect to see a complete work of art." But we are not completing a piece of art. We are trying to connect our children to God so that His work in them may continue.

If your goal is a completed product by the time your child turns eighteen, you will be very disappointed, because when you look at your child, you will see that they are not even 70% complete. I experienced this myself. I was very discouraged and felt that all my effort went down the drain because I did not see my beautiful, completed work. I told God, "I thought you were going to help me build a beautiful piece of art."

Then I realized that it was not my job to complete the work. I was expecting a completed product, but I realized that my focus was all wrong. That wasn't my purpose to begin with. My purpose is to bring my children to God, and let God do His work.

This change of attitude really changed our family situation. It did not happen overnight—sometimes, my husband would object to us staying at church too long, and we would come home because we knew that this upset him.

But as we continued to love him, he slowly began to realize that it was beneficial for the children to go to church. He saw the difference between his children and other children. His children would greet him when he came home from work, show him affection, and even talk to him about God and how God could change a person's life.

Even when there was a difference of opinion, the children would willingly concede to their father's wishes for the sake of God. When my husband came to this realization, the issue of going to church no longer existed.

When I look back at that day, it was the grace of God that allowed me to see myself clearly. Prior to that day, I always felt superior to my husband—and not only to him, but to many people! But God showed me that if I continued to look at people this way, I would be worse than a sinner. This attitude is totally against God's teachings and the essence of truth. I did not know that before, and this understanding and change of heart is something that God has to give to you.

IMPOSITION vs. COMMUNICATION

During the course of my marriage, I experienced times when my husband would do something or ask us to do something directly contrary to God's will. In this case, I would put this in prayer, and at the same time, I would try my best to help my husband understand why we could not do it.

I learned that conflict resolution and relationship growth must be built on understanding. He may not agree with you (and vice versa), but it helps to understand where you are coming from. This has really helped my husband overcome hard feelings. I would explain to him that we can't do something because of our beliefs, not because we don't like or respect him.

Although it is correct to strive to do God's will, we are actually not carrying out God's will if we do not have the correct attitude.

The key is to communicate all of this in a loving way. Just because we are "doing God's will" does not give us license to be rude or imposing. Many of my conflicts stemmed from bad communication. Because I was carrying out God's will, I felt I was entitled to a louder voice. Although my goal was right, my method was wrong. This made me only 50% right. When we are 50% wrong, we are still wrong.

Attitude is very important. Sometimes our attitude becomes very imposing because we feel we are God's representative and doing His will. Although it is correct to strive to do God's will, we are actually not carrying out God's will if we do not have the correct attitude.

Even if you have a very stubborn husband, God will open a door once He sees that you are trying 100% to conform to His will. That is when a miracle will happen. But with every miracle, there is a human factor to it. If you study all the miracles performed in the four gospels, there is always a human factor involved. You have to put in the effort. You can't just sit there and wait for God to perform a miracle.

CRITICISM vs. RESPECT

There were also times when my husband would do something contrary to God's teachings in front of my children. I realized that it was very important to be able to explain to my children why they should not follow my husband's example in that aspect. The challenge then became how to help my children understand that they should not do these things without disrespecting my husband.

I discovered that the trick was to never do the explaining in front of him. When my husband would say or do something against God's teachings, I would make a mental note that this was something I needed to straighten out with the children afterward. This was my way of showing my husband respect, so that he didn't feel criticized in front of the children. He still maintained his fatherly position in the family.

It is up to you how you want to explain to your children, but it is very important that you do not criticize your spouse in front of your children. In the twenty years of our marriage, I have never criticized my husband in front of my children, no matter how difficult the situation. The moment you begin criticizing your spouse, you are leading your children astray because you are not setting a good example.

My husband has a very hot temper and sometimes he gets very angry, but I do not say anything during the episodes. Afterward, my children expect me to say, "Your father is a monster…" They may have the freedom to think that in their heart, but as a mother, you should never say it. This is a very important principle to keep in mind when you are explaining to your children. If you criticize your spouse, your children will begin to fall into the "superiority/inferiority" mode again, that he is inferior and we are superior. That is an attitude that I never want to see in my children.

We might want to take over God's job because we can't stand to see any flaws in our children. But it's okay; they still have many years down the road. As long as our children understand that God is the master of their lives, that is the most important thing. God will work in their lives in His time, in His way.

An example of this is when my oldest child was a teenager. She was treading in dangerous waters and playing with temptation, and she wouldn't listen to any of my advice. I felt bitter that I was the only parent fighting this battle. Sometimes when I was very discouraged, I would look around and envy the children who had two parents in the Lord. When one was down, the other could continue to fight. But being the only one in this family, I felt like I couldn't even have five minutes' downtime.

As every day went by, I didn't see any improvement and I began to feel that God was not listening to or helping me. Then, many years later, I saw a testimony written by the same daughter. She said that during her teenage years, every time she fell astray, God would give her a severe headache that made her head ache so much that she felt like it would split into pieces. She said she even tested it, and every time she was tempted to sin, the headache would reappear. At that point, she realized that I had been praying for her. I was very touched because all these years, I never knew that God had helped in that situation and to that extent.

Year after year, God has been shaping my children's lives. I could see, to my amazement, that the less I talked, the more God worked. Because of this, I truly believe that this is all God's work. I have been comforted that I am not the only one fighting this battle. I am not alone—I actually have a partner, more than a partner. All this time, God has been fighting with me, before me. I am just following His lead. ★

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events. The campus fellowship would have provided me with a renewed mind and spirit through the study of God's word, the sharing, and praise sessions. Such peace and joy cannot be found in any other campus organization except the campus fellowship. The spiritual bond with brothers and sisters would have been very helpful when facing struggles in my college life.

What are your concluding thoughts about your experience?

Based on what I went through, I believe that college does provide students with the opportunity to truly experience the world. But it is also a journey of faith that can bring spiritual growth. We get to choose what kind of a college experience we have. It is important to reflect: Is my college experience full of eating and drinking or things of righteousness, peace, and joy? (Rom 14:17-19).

If the possibility of pledging a fraternity or sorority has reached your mind, take a moment to ponder and understand who you are, what God's will is for you, and what your ultimate goals on earth are.

Consider these questions:

- Why do I want to join a Greek organization? Is the Greek organization truly the appropriate channel for me to devote myself to?
- Will subjecting myself to impure environments and worldly influences be beneficial to my spirituality?
- Do I have commitments which already take up a majority of my time? Are there other campus organizations, part-time jobs, internships, volunteer opportunities, or church roles that I wish to pursue? Is adding a substantial time commitment detrimental to my existing responsibilities?

For many brothers and sisters entering college, much effort has been placed upon building up their spirituality. We have studied the Bible for years, we have prayed so hard for the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Elder John encourages us to not lose these things we have worked so hard for (2 Jn 8).

God wants us to be able to receive the full reward. At the end of our college experience, we want to be able to receive our diplomas knowing that we've "fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7).

May all the praise and glory be onto our Father in Heaven. ★

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.

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: 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: 2000 words.

Exhortation
An *Exhortation* encourages and admonishes the reader in different aspects of the Christian faith. Article length: 1500-2000 words.

Testimony
A *Testimony* recounts an experience in the Lord that will encourage and edify the reader. Article length: 1000-1500 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 (Word, Wordperfect, ASCII text) to manna@tjc.org, or send hardcopy and disk to:

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

Call For Articles

Author Guidelines & Editorial Calendar

Issue #58:

Theme: Sabbath

Articles due: August 1, 2008

One of the primary components of our faith is worship, particularly the observance of Sabbath. The fourth commandment states: "Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy." What does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy? What kind of worship is acceptable? We know that we observe the Sabbath under grace and not under the law, but what does this mean? Does this affect the way we keep the Sabbath?

In your submission, please include your name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number.

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.
- Adhere to the IA Style Guide, except for He/Him when referring to God/Jesus.

True Jesus Church

Articles of Faith

Jesus the True God

The One True God was manifested in the flesh. He is the Lord Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for the redemption of sinners, was resurrected on the third day, and ascended to heaven. He is the only Savior of mankind, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and the only True God.

Holy Bible

The Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible are inspired by God and are therefore the only authentic scriptures which testify to the Truth.

Church

The True Jesus Church was established by our Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit (the Latter Rain) and is the revival of the True Church of the Apostolic Days.

Salvation

Salvation is given by grace through faith. However, it is necessary to rely on the Holy Spirit to pursue holiness and to keep the biblical teachings of honoring God and loving humanity.

Baptism

The Baptism of Water is the sacrament for the remission of sins and for regeneration. The baptist must already have received baptisms of water and the Holy Spirit. The baptism must be immersion in natural, living water and must be administered in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, with the candidate's head facing downward.

Foot Washing

The Washing of Feet is a sacrament which enables one to have a part in the Lord and teaches mutual love, holiness, humility, service, and forgiveness. The sacrament of the washing of feet must be performed in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ to all newly baptized members. Mutual washing of feet may be practiced when necessary.

Holy Spirit

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is a prerequisite for entering heaven; speaking in tongues is the evidence of having received the Holy Spirit.

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 may have eternal life and be raised on the last day. This sacrament should be held as often as possible. Only one unleavened bread and grape juice should be used.

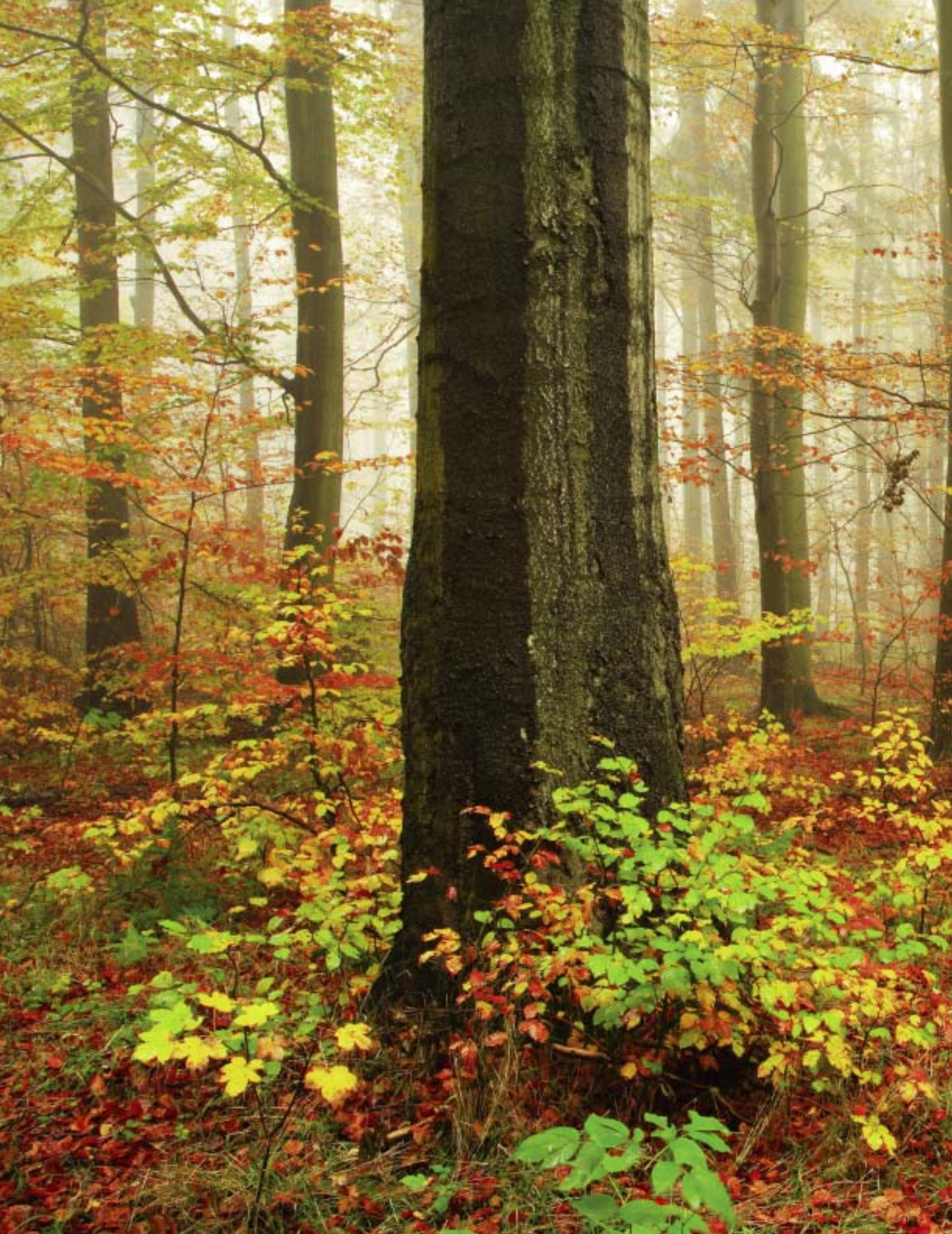
Sabbath Day

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 redemption and with the hope of eternal rest.

Judgment Day

The Lord Jesus Christ will descend from heaven on the Last Day to judge all people; 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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