Manna

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TIME TO REFLECT

Our Beliefs

PART TWO OF THREE

True Jesus Church

REFLECTING ON OUR BELIEFS

Marian Shek—Leicester, UK

Recently, we have seen some impressive examples of advances in artificial intelligence (AI) technology.[1] Through neural networks trained on vast amounts of data, machines can produce art, music, and writing[2] with human-like sophistication, but minimal human input. AI image generators are rapidly improving at conjuring photorealistic images of people and scenarios that have never existed. As our understanding of the world is increasingly mediated through screens, we may begin to feel that we cannot trust our own eyes to tell what is real and what is fake. We may wonder: *Can we believe what we see?*

In our faith, we Christians have a firm standard in which we can believe and trust: God's word as recorded in the Scriptures. We can view our lives through this unchanging lens, as God and His word are unchanging (Heb 13:8; Mt 5:18; 24:35).

To avoid being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine and trickery of men, we must "come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph 4:13–14). As members of the body of Christ, how secure are we in our beliefs and doctrines? Do we have doubts and gaps in our understanding? The apostle Paul writes:

Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified. *(2 Cor 13:5)*

Here, Paul challenged the Corinthian members to test themselves to see if they are still in the faith. This self-examination is important because if we are no longer in the faith, Christ is no longer in us. Paul continues to encourage the members to do no evil and be honorable (2 Cor 13:7–9). If the members are truly in the faith, then this would be revealed in their behavior. True faith is manifested in a Christ-like life—we are remade in His image of true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:20–24).

Issue 94, *Our Beliefs*, is the second of our *Time to Reflect* trilogy, examining our spiritual life on a deeper level. The articles in this issue look closely at some of our doctrines—the Sabbath and the three sacraments—which set us apart from other Christian denominations. How does practicing these doctrines transform us on a spiritual level, and what effect should they have on our mindset and actions throughout our lives? How do our beliefs influence how we see the world and how we move through it?

Even though Paul had never met Jesus in the flesh, he was able to manifest the image of Christ. Through faith, Paul understood the deep significance of receiving baptism, and could feel the deep love and sacrifice of our Lord Jesus:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. *(Gal 2:20)*

Being alive in Christ and dead to sin, Paul could live a victorious life. Similarly, partaking of the Holy Communion has a profound life-giving effect on the recipient—we have the life of Christ in us and will be resurrected to everlasting life (1 Cor 11:23–26; Jn 6:51–56). Do we believe these things? If we do then we would, like Paul, live a renewed life in Christ and allow the knowledge of our future judgment guide our every thought and action.

In our special feature, *Emerging from the Pandemic*, we reflect on how three years of collective trauma and intermittent isolation under COVID-19 have impacted our faith, worship, and worldview. How should our belief in the one true church, the sanctity of the Sabbath, and God's role as sole Sovereign and Judge guide us out of this period, to renewed hope and victory through faith?

As we consider how our beliefs should guide our lives, let us examine ourselves. Have we fallen short of the grace and glory of God (Rom 3:23; Heb 12:15)? If so, let us refocus our eyes on God's word, which makes us wise for salvation, and build our faith upon this firm foundation. Rely on the Holy Spirit to help us understand and keep the doctrine we have learned from the beginning, by which we have been saved (2 Tim 1:13–14; 3:14–16).

[1] Paul Glynn, "Sony World Photography Award 2023: Winner refuses award after revealing AI creation," *BBC News*, April 18, 2023, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-65296763.

[2] Ian Sample, "ChatGPT: what can the extraordinary artificial intelligence chatbot do?," *The Guardian*, January 13, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jan/13/chatgpt-explainer-what-can-artificial-intelligence-chatbot-do-ai.

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THE SABBATH IS MADE FOR MAN



KC Tsai—Toronto, Canada

"And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it" (Gen 2:2–3a). Jesus also said: "The Sabbath was made for man" (Mk 2:27b). Everything done by God carries a significant purpose, but many Christians today cannot see the importance of the Sabbath. Some view the Sabbath as part of the Jewish law, which has been phased out and, thus, not pertinent to them. Unbelievably, some others do not even know what the Sabbath is.

ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS

Has the Lord's Day Replaced the Sabbath?

Today, many Christian denominations observe the "Lord's Day" instead of the Sabbath. Observed on Sunday, the first day of the week, the Lord's Day is the principal day of worship and the weekly memorial of Jesus Christ's resurrection.[1] But is it right to replace the Sabbath with Sunday? Is there any biblical evidence to support this change?

First of all, we must understand that even though the Lord Jesus indeed resurrected on the first day of the week (Lk 24:1), He is the eternal God who could not be held by death (Acts 2:24). There is no basis for making the day of the Lord's resurrection (the first day of the week) superior to the Sabbath day (the last day of the week), which God had established in His eternity. Removing the observance of the Sabbath in our walk of faith is a misinterpretation of God's eternal purpose. After all, it is because of His unmeasurable love that He made the Sabbath for man.

Second, the phrase "the Lord's Day" is only mentioned once in the Bible.

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last," and, "What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea." *(Rev 1:10–11)*

The apostle John had been exiled to the island of Patmos for "the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1:9). Taken by the Spirit to a day near the Lord's coming, he saw the state of the seven churches of Asia Minor during the end times. That is a day destined by the Lord. The loud voice behind him belonged to the Lord Jesus; John was to record everything that he had seen in a book and deliver it to the seven churches.

The Lord's Day does not refer to a certain day of the week. It could be any day of the week, or it may point to a certain "time." For example, the Lord said:

"Many will say to Me in that day, *'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' "*
(Lk 7:22–23, emphasis added*)*

"That day" refers to the day the Lord will execute judgment. The "Lord's Day," as recorded in the Book of Revelation, has the same meaning.

In summary, there is no biblical basis for changing the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath, established by God at the time of creation, to an observance of the Lord's Day on the first day of the week.

Are All Days the Same?

One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. *(Rom 14:5)*

Some people use this verse to argue that the Sabbath should not be esteemed above any other day—that all days should be esteemed the same. However, contextually, this verse is not about the Sabbath. It is about how some Jews still observed days of fasting or abstained from meat, even after believing in the Lord Jesus.

In fact, it was God who set the seventh day apart from the other six days:

Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made. *(Gen 2:1–3)*

God did not need to rest from His creation. The Creator neither faints nor is weary (Isa 40:28). Rather, the day of rest was created for those who work and grow weary. Besides allowing man to rest from his worldly labor, the Sabbath also allows man to anticipate that promised Sabbath ahead—the eternal rest in heaven (Heb 4:9–11). In other words, not all days are the same.

Did Gentile Believers Keep the Sabbath in Apostolic Times?

Many Christians believe that Sabbath observance is only meant for the chosen people of the Old Testament and that such a requirement of Mosaic Law does not apply to non-Jewish believers. Is this view correct?

"Also the sons of the foreigner
Who join themselves to the LORD,
to serve Him,
And to love the name of the LORD,
to be His servants—
Everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath,
And holds fast My covenant—
Even them I will bring to
My holy mountain,
And make them joyful in
My house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
Will be accepted on My altar;
For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations."
(Isa 56:6–7, emphasis added*)*

This passage addresses the sons of the foreigner who *hold fast God's covenant.* What covenant would a Gentile have

[1] "Sunday," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed January 6, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sunday-day-of-the-week.

with God? The Bible says that they were uncircumcised and, as mentioned in Ephesians, they were "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12). Indeed, in the past, the Gentiles were "strangers from the covenants of promise." But at the Last Supper, Jesus took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (Lk 22:20). Through His blood, non-Jewish believers now have a covenant with the Lord Jesus—a covenant which encompasses keeping the Sabbath!

"Because they had seen Paul with Trophimus, an Ephesian, they assumed that Paul had taken this Gentile into the temple"

In the Isaiah passage, God also says, "For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." How can Gentiles enter the temple of God? Did God not declare through the prophet Ezekiel that "No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart or uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter My sanctuary, including any foreigner who is among the children of Israel" (Ezek 44:9)? In fact, the Jews took this very seriously. After his third missionary journey, when Paul returned to Jerusalem, he was arrested and nearly killed by the Jews. They accused Paul of being "the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore, he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place" (Acts 21:27–29). Because they had seen Paul with Trophimus, an Ephesian, they assumed that Paul had taken this Gentile into the temple.

Therefore, when Isaiah prophesied that the temple of God would be a temple of prayer for *all* nations, this was a reference to the body of Jesus (Jn 2:21), which is the church established by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:23). The Gentile believers of the Lord Jesus have to keep from defiling the Sabbath and hold fast His covenant.

The elder James concluded at the end of the Jerusalem Council:

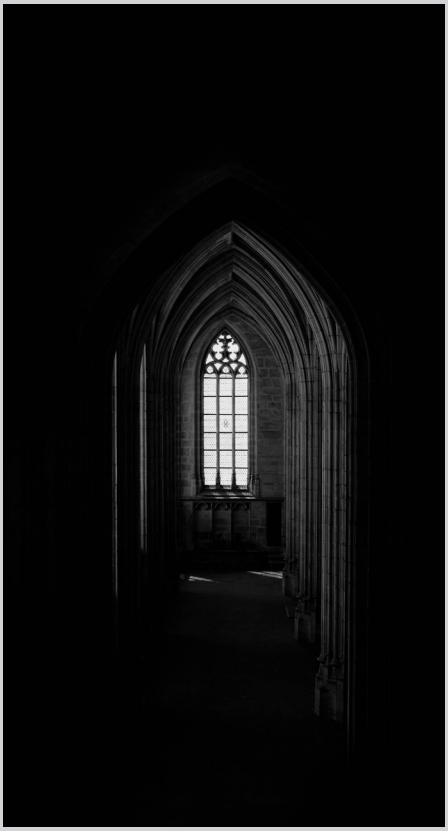
"Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."
(Acts 15:19-21, emphasis added*)*

This statement shows that, in apostolic times, Gentiles who came to believe in Jesus would listen to the reading of the law every Sabbath in the synagogue. Today, Christians should also have a holy convocation on the Sabbath (Lev 23:3), where we serve God with a reverent and quiet heart and study the teachings of the Bible.

UNDERSTANDING THE TRUTH ABOUT THE SABBATH

Keeping the Sabbath Signifies Belonging to God

According to God's commandments and decrees, His chosen people kept the Sabbath separate from the nations. God said, "[F]or it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you" (Ex 31:13). Today, the true church of God likewise keeps the Sabbath to be separate



from the world. Keeping the Sabbath is also a sign between us and God for countless generations to come. The true worshippers of God observe the Sabbath to honor His covenant, which makes them holy.

Today, the Jewish people keep the Sabbath under the law, whereas we keep the Sabbath under the grace of the Lord Jesus. What is the difference? How do we keep the Sabbath under the grace of the new covenant?

There are several important aspects of the Sabbath that we must grasp; these are well summarized in the words of Jesus:

And He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath." (Mk 2:27–28)

The Sabbath Was Made for Man

After Adam sinned, the earth was cursed. Thorns and thistles began to grow out of the earth, and man had to make a living by the sweat of his face before ultimately returning to dust (Gen 3:18–19). Man's life would comprise endless toil and labor. In contrast, Adam's pre-fall life in Eden was not one of hard labor or toil, even though he was told to tend the garden. Man did not have to sweat to make a living, so he did not need a day of rest from his daily labor. Nevertheless, after six days of creation, God blessed the seventh day for man. It was indeed marvelous grace prepared long before man needed it.

Returning to this Edenic state and gaining access to the tree of life is what we all hope for while living in this world (Rev 22:14). Those who eat of the tree of life, which is within the heavenly Jerusalem, will have eternal life. Entering this Jerusalem above grants us our heavenly Sabbath rest (Heb 4:8–9; 12:22–28, ESV).[2]

God is love, and the Sabbath clearly expresses God's love. Not only did God establish a cycle of seven days in a week, He also prepared one day each week for man to rest. In addition, through this weekly Sabbath rest, He instills hope for the eternal rest we will enter after ending our labors in this world.

1. Man was not made for the Sabbath

During Jesus' earthly ministry, He preached the gospel of the heavenly kingdom and, at times, healed the sick on the Sabbath. The Jews, especially the Pharisees, were quick to criticize Him. They pointed to His disciples and questioned, "Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" (Mk 2:24). These attacks stemmed from their dogmatic adherence to literal requirements of the law as if the Sabbath was more important than the men it was prepared for. Their faith was bounded by laws and customs, and they were unable to understand the eternal love behind God's establishment of the Sabbath. Jesus' words (Mk 2:27) were meant to correct this misconception.

IS KEEPING THE SABBATH AN ACT OF LEGALISM?

Some claim that observing the Sabbath is a legalistic act, which the apostle Paul denounced multiple times in his epistles. In his ministry, Paul encountered situations where brethren sought justification through the law; they pursued the righteous

[2] The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

requirements of the law. This would ultimately nullify the grace of God (Gal 2:21).

Is Sabbath-keeping a legalistic act, a holdover from the law by which we are no longer bound?

"Keep and remember the Sabbath" is the fourth of the ten commandments. But keeping the Sabbath is not just an authoritarian command from God, issued without rhyme or reason.

After six days of creation, God sanctified the seventh day, blessed it, and made it holy. This sanctified day is different from the other six days of the week. This is the will of the eternal God, and it will never change. The Sabbath was established before Abraham, before the Israelites came into existence, and before the Mosaic Law was given (Ex 16:23). Thus, the Sabbath was not created for the chosen people in the Old Testament only. God established the Sabbath for *all man out of His love and compassion.* If a Christian denomination refuses to accept and enjoy the Sabbath, this would be a rejection of God's love, as though God's purposeful establishment of the Sabbath were meaningless.

Therefore, keeping the Sabbath is not an act of legalism, and our church does not advocate legalism. It would be legalistic to keep the Sabbath under the law—this includes restrictions on walking distance, kindling fire (for example, cooking, igniting an engine, switching on a light), and other rituals welcoming a Sabbath and during Sabbath worship. Today, we are loosed from the bond of these restrictions by Jesus (Lk 13:16).

Jesus also said, "[I]t is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Mt 12:12b). He did not encourage people to do whatever they please on the Sabbath, but it is lawful to do good work that is necessary on that day.

Keeping the Sabbath under the grace of Jesus is different from doing so legalistically. To observe is to follow the teachings of Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath.

2. Keeping the Sabbath under the law

The Israelites were commanded to keep the Sabbath from generation to generation as an eternal covenant (Ex 31:16–17). It was to be evidence between them and God, and a reminder that God made them holy (Ex 31:13). Today, millennia later, the Jewish people still keep the Sabbath by adhering to the regulations and behavioral boundaries established by their rabbis; these separate them clearly from the world. In this respect, they are like a solitary people who dwell alone.

Many people find it difficult to understand God's past actions when it comes to Sabbath observance, such as in the example below:

Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him under guard, because it had not been explained what should be done to him.
Then the LORD said to Moses, "The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp." So, as the LORD commanded Moses, all the



congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him with stones, and he died. (Num 15:32–36)

The Israelites who saw the man gathering sticks knew it was not right, so they brought him to Moses. However, it was inaccurate for them to say that "it had not been explained what should be done to him," since Moses had already told them much earlier:

"Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh day shall be a holy day for you, a Sabbath of rest to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your dwellings on the Sabbath day." (Ex 35:2–3)

The law was clear: whoever kindles fire—which constitutes work—shall be put to death! But therein lies humankind's weakness. They are wont to wonder whether God means what He says—to test God's stated boundaries: Is God really serious about His commands? Would He really kill a person for a seemingly innocuous act?

This incident shows that God's words are not uttered meaninglessly or superfluously. He means what He says and does as He says. This characteristic of God is a great assurance. When Jesus says that the Sabbath was made for man, this is a promise of the everlasting grace He has prepared for the world. God's will is immutable across time and environment. His counsel stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations (Ps 33:11). This Almighty God is determined to give His children His grace of the Sabbath, and His sincere regard for all who observe His Sabbath will never fade away.

Instead of recognizing the deep underlying love of God in the Numbers 15 incident, many people only see the cruelty and unforgiveness of God. Reconsider the incident from this perspective. The man who went out to collect sticks was signaling his unwillingness to enjoy the Sabbath. He despised the mercy and love of God. Like a loving parent who chastens the erring child to teach and protect his other children, God would not allow one man's ignorance and negligence to cause His Sabbath to be despised by others and the grace in Sabbath to diminish.

The chosen people in the Old Testament saw similarly severe punishments throughout their history. They failed to experience the love of God in Sabbath observance. Instead, they developed a sense of insecurity and fear regarding the Sabbath. The apostle John writes, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love" (1 Jn 4:18). The Lord Jesus came to the world to remove such fears through His grace of salvation on the cross.

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, *which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.* (Col 2:13–17, emphasis added)

The Bible says that "he who is hanged is accursed of God" (Deut 21:23b). Our Lord Jesus was hanged on the cross for us. By being hanged, He redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (Gal 3:13). His atonement wiped out

the handwriting of the requirements of the law against us.

Festivals are held once a year, the new moon once a month, and the Sabbath once a week. Under the Mosaic Law, there were ordinances of sacrifices designated for these occasions. But these ordinances had been wiped out by the redemption of the Lord Jesus. However, the Sabbath did not emerge when the Ten Commandments and God's statutes and judgments were decreed. It came immediately after the six days of creation. This is the Sabbath under the grace of the Lord Jesus, which the True Jesus Church keeps and remembers today.

3. The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath

Therefore, the Sabbath is a servant of the Lord Jesus, serving Him and obeying His commands. It is the Lord Jesus Who decides how man should keep the Sabbath.

Now He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And behold, there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up. But when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him and said to her, "Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity." And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God. But the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, "There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day." The Lord then answered him and said, "Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound—think of it—for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?" *(Lk 13:10–16)*

"The Lord Jesus wants us to be loosed from such bonds, and through His Sabbath, He frees us"

Difficulties and tribulations are never-ending in man's life on earth. Many people hardly have a moment of respite amidst endless labor and toil that fill the day. They feel like this woman who was bent over and could not raise herself up. The Lord Jesus wants us to be loosed from such bonds, and through His Sabbath, He frees us. He is Lord of the Sabbath, explaining the original purpose behind the Sabbath's establishment.

The Sabbath enables a person to harmonize with nature, the environment surrounding him, and the people with whom he is in contact. It also affords him time to reconcile with the Lord. After six days of relentless strife, attempting to conquer all that stands in the way of his ambition, he can enjoy a day of inner serenity on the Sabbath.

4. The new covenant: keeping the Sabbath under grace

The True Jesus Church keeps the Sabbath. Apart from the Seventh Day Adventists, the vast majority of mainstream Christian denominations do not. However, unlike the Jews, who keep the Sabbath under the law, the True Jesus Church keeps the Sabbath under grace. What does this comprise?



Sacred work and doing good

"Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple." *(Mt 12:5–6)*

The Old Testament law required priests to offer sacrifices, set the showbread (Lev 24:8), light the lamps, and burn incense (Ex 30:8) on the Sabbath—they ministered and worked in the temple. The Lord Jesus saw them as blameless, although they profaned the Sabbath. He is greater than the temple, and the church is His body. Therefore, today, *we are without fault when doing holy work in church on the Sabbath.*

And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." *(Mt 12:10–12)*

Jesus declared that *it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.* However, it does not imply that one should do good works with no limits or self-control on a Sabbath day. After all, the Sabbath is meant for us to find a quiet time with our Lord.

Turning away from our own pleasures

In our busy and overstimulated lives today, it is difficult for many to put away their cell phones. There are a thousand and one work and life commitments to attend to, and we feel we cannot drop them on a Sabbath day. It is a great pity if we have forgotten the Lord Jesus' promises about the Sabbath. He wants us to let go of the cumbersome worries and turn to His gracious words on the Sabbath. An intimate relationship with our Lord will build up over time if we do so.

"If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,
From doing your pleasure on My holy day,
And call the Sabbath a delight,
The holy day of the LORD honorable,
And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways,
Nor finding your own pleasure,
Nor speaking your own words,
Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD;
And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth,
And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father.
The mouth of the LORD has spoken."
(Isa 58:13–14)

God will cause us to ride on the high hills of the earth! What a promise this is. The Lord will bear you on eagles' wings and bring you to Himself! You will have an eagle's eye to view the troubles and difficulties below. These troubles will become so tiny and insignificant from above, and you will be victorious over whatever troubles you, but only if you turn away your foot from the Sabbath.

Finally, God will "feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father," if you honor the Sabbath and call it a delight. Jacob was originally the second son of Isaac, but God called him His son, His firstborn, when He sent Moses to take the Israelites out of slavery (Ex 4:22). Jacob inherited the blessings God bestowed upon Abraham, a heavenly city built by God (Heb 11:9–10, 16). God will feed us with the heritage of Jacob, our heavenly inheritance, if we observe the Sabbath with a genuine heart.

SACRAMENTS AND THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS (PART 1): WATER BAPTISM

Boaz—Malaysia

WHAT IS A SACRAMENT?

For True Jesus Church members, the mention of "sacraments" usually brings to mind either the lessons shared with truth-seeking friends or theological seminar lectures on the efficacy of these sacraments. We tend to perceive the spiritual efficacies of these sacraments as one-off phenomena, occuring at the moment the sacrament is administered. We may also view the teachings behind these sacraments merely as Bible knowledge we discuss with truth-seeking friends. Unwittingly, we have separated these sacraments from the life we are to lead as saints. Let us reconsider the teachings behind the sacraments and reflect on how their spiritual efficacies should transform and echo throughout our lives.

THE SPIRITUAL EFFECTS OF BAPTISM

1. Forgiveness of Sins: Constant Self-reflection

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word in not in us. (1 Jn 1:7–10)

By God's grace and through faith, our sins are forgiven through the baptism of water. After baptism, if we continually reflect on a deep and genuine level, this effect of forgiveness is amplified. The Lord's precious blood covers not just the sins we commit outwardly but also cleanses away the evil deep in our hearts. True reflection is based on two components: the standard of right and wrong found within God's truth and godly sorrow when faced with one's own sin. Both of these are critical and interconnected. The knowledge of right and wrong evokes "intellectual repentance," but we must not stop there. Instead, we must take one step further to feel deep sorrow when we realize our sins. Such godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation (2 Cor 7:10). Believers should thus put aside a daily time for reflection. At the very least, before we turn in for the night, make time to reflect on the day's events; review our conduct and thoughts (even passing thoughts) to see if we have fallen short of the glory of God. In this way, we will be able to confess and repent of our sins, lest we treasure up for ourselves God's wrath in the future (Rom 2:4–5).

"The heart is deceitful above all things,
And desperately wicked;
Who can know it?" (Jer 17:9)

There is a Chinese idiom, "Deceiving oneself as well as deceiving others," which implies that deceiving others is preceded by self-deception. When we make crafty excuses to appease our seared consciences, we deceive ourselves and become ensnared in our own lies, remaining blind to our true state or situation. Only the Lord searches the heart, tests the mind, and is willing and able to help (Jer 17:10). As believers, we ought to pray to God to uncover our hidden faults and secret acts. David also prayed in this way to make sure he had a clear conscience (Ps 19:12). When David committed a great sin in a moment of folly and was unaware of his transgression, God instructed the prophet Nathan to awaken and rebuke him right away. When his sin, committed in the dark, was pointed out and made public (and recorded for generations of people to read), David did not deny it or

make excuses for himself. Neither did he fly into a shame-fuelled rage. Instead, he sincerely confessed and repented of his sins (2 Sam 12:13). This was God's mercy towards David, turning him back in a timely manner so that he would not continue in his sin.

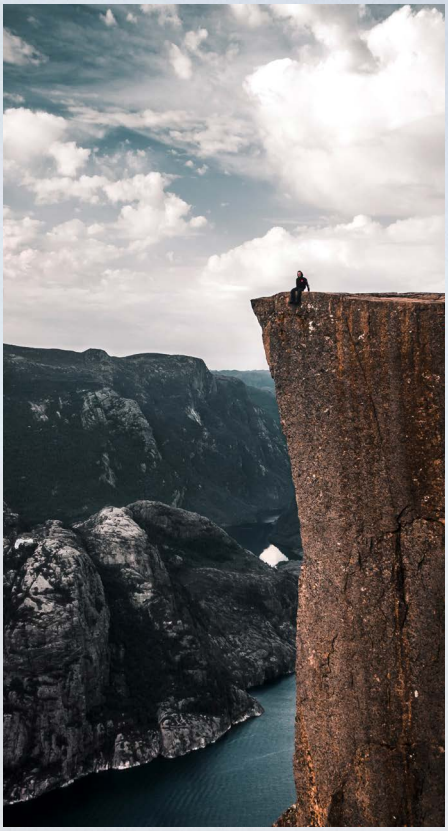
In defiant arrogance, people may argue, "Wouldn't grace abound where sin abounds?" (Rom 6:1). This would be equivalent to believers who are too afraid to commit mortal sins and yet persist in endless so-called "minor" sins, thinking that God's boundless grace would similarly persist for them. Such believers tread the grey area between righteousness and unrighteousness. They fail to reflect thoroughly on why they continue in these minor sins. Do we, too, assume that the precious blood of Jesus is sufficiently generous that it covers—or even condones—our refusal to change or our slackness in getting rid of these minor sins? Do we think that the lack of immediate judgment is a manifestation of God's great grace for us? These minor sins committed wilfully will one day cause us to lose our spiritual life. This is because "those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5:18–21). Here, Paul lists "lesser" sins, such as envy and selfish ambitions, alongside murder, while the verb "practice" is in the present continuous tense. The author of Hebrew sternly warns that there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins for those who sin wilfully (Heb 10:26).

"God is helping us to constantly reflect on ourselves so that we will stop being stiff-necked and covering our ears in rejection of God's reminders"

As a merciful and loving Father, God does not leave us struggling alone. He helps us examine our hearts in several ways. First, He provides His word to help us discern the thoughts in our hearts (Heb 4:12). In this case, we proactively use God's word to filter ourselves. Second, the grieving of the Holy Spirit awakens our sleeping consciences (Eph 4:30). In this case, God personally calls out to us through His indwelling Holy Spirit. Third, the teachings spoken on the pulpit advise and examine us (1 Cor 14:25). In this case, God reminds us through a third party. Under the last two circumstances, God is the active initiator, while we are the passive recipient of His exhortation. Being passive, however, does not mean that we take no action. At the very least, our hearts should be moved. In all three circumstances, God is helping us to constantly reflect on ourselves so that we will stop being stiff-necked and covering our ears in rejection of God's reminders.

2. Put on Christ: Constant Vigilance

Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame. *(Rev 16:15)*



Baptism allows us to put on Christ (Gal 3:27). But beyond the moment of our baptism, we must watch and keep our garments of salvation. In other words, we must ensure that we have properly put on Christ as our garment of salvation, and be justified by relying on Christ. Otherwise, when trials and temptation come, we will be like the anonymous young man who was seized by his garment and fled naked, leaving his linen cloth behind, because he was terrified of being arrested together with Christ (Mk 14:52).

Why do believers become naked? Revelation 16:13 describes the temptation from three mouths: that of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. These three mouths use both hard and soft tactics, as well as performing great signs, so that people might let down their guard and be persuaded to take off their robes of salvation. While these three mouths often appear in the stories of the Bible, they do not manifest themselves in recognizably detestable forms. On the contrary, they use different ways to camouflage themselves; deceitful words from these three mouths impacted the saints of old who had lost their vigilance, deceiving those who based their discernment on their physical eyesight, instead of spiritual eyesight.

The mouth of the dragon (Rev 12:15–16) can be seen in Delilah's honeyed lips. Stronger than Samson's muscles, her sweet words broke Samson's last line of defense, and he gave away the secret of his strength (Judg 16:15–17). Today, the dragon's mouth signifies the world's mainstream ideologies. Erroneous at the core, these are whitewashed, wrapped in elegant apparel, and adorned with jewels (Rev 17:4). This alluring world arouses the desire of all those who lay their eyes on it. The honeyed dragon's mouth makes countless and irresistibly beautiful promises so that people are seduced into offering their youthful life to the world. Let us emulate Joseph, who guarded himself against the sweet words of his master's wife. Although he lost his garment, he remained clothed with the salvation of his soul.

The mouth of the beast (Rev 13:6) can be seen in the threatening lips of the high priest's servant girl (Mk 14:66–70). Greater than Peter's nerve, these words exhausted what little courage he had left. Today, the mouth of the beast signifies everything that intimidates and threatens. An overwhelming and powerful appearance (Rev 13:2), it strikes fear in all who witness it. The threats spewing from the beast's mouth are meant to cause us to give up our faith. Consider the time when Nehemiah was rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. The enemies tried to obstruct this holy work by using words in different ways. This included threatening to report their "rebellion" to the king (Neh 2:19; 7:6), mocking the "poor quality" of their work (Neh 4:2–3), and conspiring to attack them (Neh 4:8–11).

Let us emulate David's fearlessness in the face of Goliath's great stature and barbarous threats, and be determined to fight to the end for our faith.

The mouth of the false prophet (Rev 13:11, 13–15) can be seen in the tempting mouth of the serpent. So brilliant were its words that it breached Eve's defenses and even

swallowed Adam. The false prophet's mouth signifies great signs that deceive. In the Book of Revelation, the elder John saw a vision of a beast with the appearance of a lamb, but the voice of the dragon (Rev 13:11). People worshipped him wholeheartedly because of the great signs he could perform. Jesus warned of false prophets who hide their true colors under innocuous sheep's clothing (Mt 7:15). The mouth of the false prophet may even deceive the elect because he could call the wind and summon the rain (Mt 24:24). His words are misleading (1 Tim 6:20), and he affirms his words by the signs he performs. Those with itching ears and whose faith is not built on the teachings of Christ will be drowned by this spiritual deceit (2 Thess 2:11–12).

"Survival is possible when other parts of our body are damaged; however, an injury to the head can be fatal. Paul describes salvation as a helmet that protect the head"

To survive such devious attacks, we must have the right armor. The head is the most important part of our body. Survival is possible when other parts of our body are damaged; however, an injury to the head can be fatal. Paul describes salvation as a helmet that protects the head (Eph 6:17), an indication of how important salvation is to a person's soul. We must thus guard the garment of salvation from the Lord with vigilance, lest we be deceived by the three deceitful mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. Once we lose this garment of salvation, our eternal life will also be lost.

3. Born Again: Constant Renewal

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. *(2 Cor 4:16)*

Aging is a natural and irreversible life process. Facing death is an inevitable battle (Eccl 8:8). However, for those reborn in Christ, there is another possibility beyond physical life. Their souls do not suffer from sin-induced aging. On the contrary, they can be renewed daily by relying on the Holy Spirit. This constant renewal is not a natural or necessary process; it requires a conscious and concerted effort to resist the law of sin and submit to the law of God (Rom 7:23–25; 8:2).

Those who receive baptism are born from above (Jn 3:6), and born of God (Jn 1:13). This is the first resurrection (Rev 20:5). We should cherish this blessed opportunity to be reborn as a new creation and ensure that this new man matures and becomes strong in spirit, growing into the full stature of Christ (Lk 1:80; 2:52). Our model ought to be the holistic development of the infant Jesus, who grew not only physically but also spiritually at the same pace. If a person's cognitive development lags behind his physical development, he is considered immature. Conversely, a child whose cognitive development outpaces his physical development is



deemed precocious. Neither case is ideal; cognitive and physical development ought to be synchronized.

How do we ensure holistic growth? From the moment we are spiritually reborn, we must, like a baby, desire the pure spiritual milk of the word (1 Pet 2:2). To build a solid foundation on God's holy word, we must pursue the truth—the common belief of our church (including the Ten Articles of Faith). If we consume erroneous teachings from outside the church, we may suffer indigestion or worse, food poisoning. As we grow, we can proceed to solid food. In fact, only full-grown, mature Christians can take solid food, because they have the ability to discern the truth of God (Heb 5:14). Rigorous training in God's word helps us become adults who are independent and mature in thought. We are not easily deceived, and our judgment not easily swayed (Eph 4:14).

"Putting on the new man" requires a transformed mind (Eph 4:22–24). The apostle Paul describes it as being "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom 12:2), which means a change emerges in a believer's values and ideology because of his knowledge of Jesus. Paul changed drastically from before to after he believed in the Lord (Phil 3). These include changes in his:

- Worldview (Phil 3:5)—the scope of his concern widened beyond the chosen "Jewish people" to include "Gentiles."
- Moral view (Phil 3:6)—his mission changed from persecuting the church to serving the believers in all ways.
- Values (Phil 3:7)—things he once considered as profit were now disdained as loss.

In a nutshell, the apostle Paul intentionally forgot all he had once deemed precious. His new and sole motivation was to press on toward the reward from Jesus (Phil 3:13–14). What man treasures derives from his perception of its value. Paul letting go of what was precious to him in the past was a fundamental change—he completely discarded his past value system.

Therefore, a person who is born again must be deeply rooted in the teachings of the Bible. His soul will then grow as he relies completely on the nutrients absorbed from God's word. When every cell of one's life becomes filled with these teachings, his perception and values will be gradually transformed to be more and more like those of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

When the sacraments are conducted, the Holy Spirit, through tangible substance (lowly and eventually corruptible), bestows great spiritual grace upon those who believe. Similarly, if we submit to the Holy Spirit's movement, we will be continuing the effects of forgiveness, putting on Christ, and spiritual renewal that were started at the point of baptism. Therefore, let us constantly reflect and repent, vigilantly holding on to our garment of salvation, and being transformed and nourished by God's word. In this way, this humble and dying life of ours can become a channel between God and man; to bring grace and joy to the people around us.

SACRAMENTS AND THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS (PART 2): FOOTWASHING

Boaz—Malaysia

MAN'S ROLE IN SACRAMENTAL EFFICACY

In the study of sacraments, an ongoing debate regarding their efficacy concerns the extent of man's role—both the persons receiving and executing the sacraments—to complement the essential part played by the Holy Spirit. The True Jesus Church's Articles of Faith state that we are saved by grace through faith (Eph 2:8). Salvation grace is freely given to man through the sacraments. Salvation depends solely on God, the Giver of grace, not man's good deeds. Moreover, the Bible clearly states that man will be justified through faith. Therefore, the person who receives the sacraments must believe in Jesus and His gospel (Mk 16:14–16). And the person performing the sacraments must be sent by the church (Jn 20:21–23).

THE SPIRITUAL EFFECTS OF FOOTWASHING: HAVING A PART WITH THE LORD

Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!"
Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." *(Jn 13:8)*

When Jesus made this statement, it would have been best understood by the person it was directed to—Peter—and the one who witnessed and recorded the exchange—John. To understand the full significance of the original word for "part" (Greek: *méros*), we must go back to these two apostles, Peter and John. One incident involving both of them is found in the Book of Acts.

"You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God."...Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me." *(Acts 8:21, 24)*

Peter and John had been sent to assist in the evangelistic ministry in Samaria. They encountered Simon, a believer, and ex-sorcerer, who egregiously offered to buy the power of bestowing the Holy Spirit through the laying of hands. Rebuked severely by Peter and told he would lose his part (Greek: *merís*), Simon's immediate response was to ask for forgiveness. This indicates the seriousness of this matter and the vital importance of having a part with the Lord.

What are the specific ways we can have a part with the Lord?

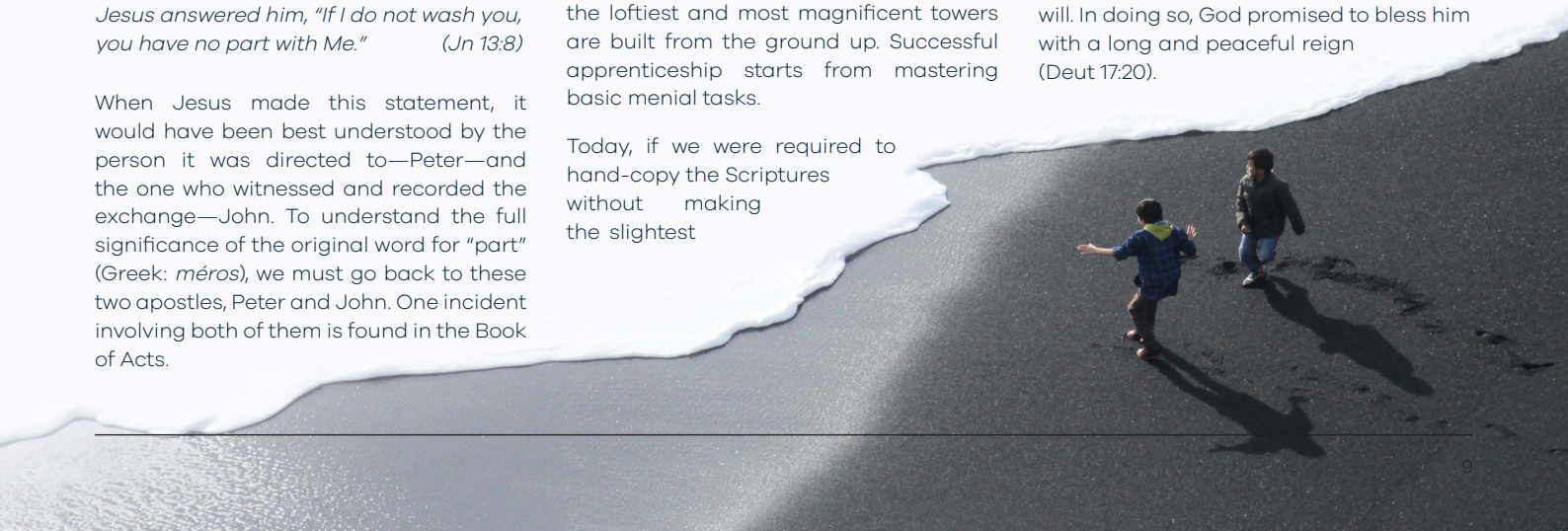
1. Have a Part with God's Word

The True Jesus Church has invested—and continues to invest—substantial money, time, and effort in religious education for all ages so that believers can have a part with God's word. Learning allows everyone to build a firm foundation in the word. Some think laying the foundation—learning the basic doctrines—is dry and dull. However, the loftiest and most magnificent towers are built from the ground up. Successful apprenticeship starts from mastering basic menial tasks.

Today, if we were required to hand-copy the Scriptures without making the slightest mistake (or risk having to start anew), would we have the patience to complete the task? Yet this is what the Lord commanded all future kings of Israel to do at the start of their reign:

"Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD *his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes."* *(Deut 17:18–19)*

God knew the temptations that would come with wielding power—the desire to follow their own ways, form allegiances with other nations, and follow false gods. So He instructed the king to write his own copy of the law and read it daily. Why did the king have to copy the law by his own hand? Why was this seemingly menial and time-consuming task not assigned to the priests and scribes? It was so that the king's reign would be established on the firm foundation of God's word. This process enabled the king to internalize God's word so that he would carefully observe it and learn to fear God. It would prevent him from becoming proud and diverging from God's will. In doing so, God promised to bless him with a long and peaceful reign (Deut 17:20).



The world values quick wins and short-term rewards. Such influences may inadvertently lead us to over-emphasize immediate outcomes and overlook God's plan for our future. In summary, we must not lose patience and focus regarding this fundamental stage. We do not yet know what role God will send us to fulfill in the future. So whatever God commands and entrusts to us, we must do with all our hearts.

Apostolic spirit: teaching, preaching, and defending the word

"[B]ut we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."
(Acts 6:4)

Having a part with the word of God includes teaching the word (1 Tim 2:7), defending the word (2 Tim 2:15; 1 Pet 3:15–16), and preaching the word (2 Tim 4:2, 5). When we do these well, we contribute to building a solid foundation for future generations of believers. The objective of religious education is to ensure that the truth committed to the true church can be passed to the next generation as the unaltered pattern of sound words.

Towards the end of his life, Paul's greatest priority was to ensure that his son in faith would faithfully pass on what he had learned from Paul (2 Tim 2:2). The church then faced vehement attacks, both internally and externally. Those who faithfully taught the word were dwindling in number. Paul knew that after his death, people would rise in the church to speak perverse things when he could no longer pastor them. So in his last conversation with the elders in Ephesus, he entrusted them to God (Acts 20:30, 32). The elderly apostle John (the last of the apostles to die) too could only entrust the church to the Holy Spirit for preservation (1 Jn 2:26–27).[1]

After the apostles' deaths, when there were no more faithful men who could teach, the church was truly helpless under the onslaught of heresies. When the word of God is "attacked" by heresy, every believer is responsible for defending the word. Therefore, our pursuit and knowledge of the word must match the level of heretical attacks on the truth so that we are adequately equipped to "[cast] down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:5).

Besides teaching and defending the word, evangelism is also key. The commission to preach was given by Jesus to the disciples before He ascended to heaven (Acts 1:8). To execute the mission, the apostles made preaching the gospel their top priority (Acts 6:2). Not even imprisonment could deter them from fulfilling this resolution. Just like Stephen, who was martyred, they preached boldly, enduring persecution even to the point of death.

2. Having a Part with the Lord's Holy City

[A]nd 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 22:19)



To have a part with the holy city, we must play a part in mending its gaps (Ezek 22:30). This entails being able to see where these gaps exist. Mending the gaps in the holy city means bearing the weaknesses of the church (2 Cor 11:29). While carrying our brethren's burden may be troublesome or even painful, Apostle Paul reminds us that those who endure together with the Lord will reign with Him (2 Tim 2:12). Seeing the gaps does not mean merely observing what problems exist in our community of faith. Instead, we must perceive and resolve to fulfill—not shirk—our responsibility to the church and to restoring our brethren (Gal 6:1–2). Daniel and Nehemiah were righteous men who enjoyed high social status, being employed in trusted positions in the palace. But they grieved for the state of Israel and Jerusalem. When they interceded for the people, they did not dissociate themselves from the situation as though they were the self-righteous interceding for the weak. Instead, they humbly regarded themselves as part of God's erring people (Dan 9:8, Neh 1:6–7).

NEHEMIAH: THE COMFORT OF GOD

Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes. The favor he enjoyed from the king was indicated in his position as well as the king's concern for him (Neh 2:2, 6). Despite these, his heart still yearned after Jerusalem and the children of Israel (Neh 1:2, 6). He saw the part he had to play in the holy city; this spurred him to relinquish his high-level job to return and rebuild Jerusalem, which was in ruins. There were many sacrifices he made. He did not take the governor's pay (Neh 5:14–15). He paid for meals out of his pocket (Neh 5:18), and he did not take advantage of the situation by buying up land (Neh 5:16). The holy city and holy temple were actually "foreign" places to Nehemiah. But his heart was there. His high position, busyness, and distance from the city neither removed nor reduced his concern for God's temple and work. He had great compassion for brethren he had never seen. He treated the holy city's problems as personal, weeping and interceding for it (Neh 1:4–5). With such a heart, he truly was not only the comfort of God (the meaning of his name) but also comfort to God.

Priestly spirit: bearing the weaknesses of the church

Five types of sacrifices are recorded in the Book of Leviticus. One of the sacrifices the priests could eat was the sin offering (Lev 6:26, 29–30). These were sacrifices offered on common occasions, and the male priests were allowed to eat them.[2] The people making the sacrifice put their hands on the animal to signify that the animal would bear their sins. So when the priests ate the sin offering, they also bore the people's sins (Lev 10:17).

In other words, the role of the priests included bearing the sins of the entire house of Israel. Throughout the Scriptures,

[1] When John tells believers that they "do not need that anyone teach" them, he is referring to those who are trying to deceive the believers (1 Jn 2:26–27).

[2] The exception was the sin offering made on the Day of Atonement. This could not be eaten. Instead, the blood of the sacrificial animal was to be brought into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled seven times onto the mercy seat, and the animal burned outside the camp (Heb 13:10–12; Lev 4:29, 33).

we see God's workers who epitomized this. In the Old Testament, God's righteous judgment would have long destroyed the recalcitrant Israelites had it not been for generations of intercessors. For example, Moses was willing to sacrifice his soul in exchange for God's forgiveness of Israel (Ex 32:31–32). Another example is Samuel, who—even in his twilight years—never stopped praying for the people. Although these two saints were long gone, God remembered their intercessions of love and specifically made mention of them to subsequent generations (Jer 15:1)

Paul recognized this priestly role when he said, "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?" (2 Cor 11:29). He made the problem of the church his own, he treated the weak and lost brethren as the nursing child in his bosom (1 Thess 2:7–8; Num 11:11–12) .

I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church. (Col 1:24)

In this verse, the afflictions of Christ refer to His suffering on the cross. He had once and for all offered the perfect sin offering without blemish. This was Christ's role in the salvation plan. However, in terms of the entire process of salvation, Jesus' sacrifice is just one part of the plan. The remaining part is for the gospel of God's salvation to be preached throughout the world.

Today, the church's mission on earth is to exalt Christ, preach the gospel, and endure various afflictions and persecutions. Christ, the head of the church, suffered afflictions in order to fulfill salvation. The body of Christ, the church, suffers afflictions in order to exalt this salvation and make it known. Although what the church suffers can never compare to the sacrifice Christ made, we have a part in His sufferings (1 Pet 4:13; Rev 1:9).

Not only was Paul willing to suffer physical afflictions and persecution for the gospel of Christ, but he was also willing to endure the mental pressure arising from the weaknesses (the gaps) in the church. In other words, he used the sufferings in his own body and soul as ointment to apply to the wounds on the body of Christ.

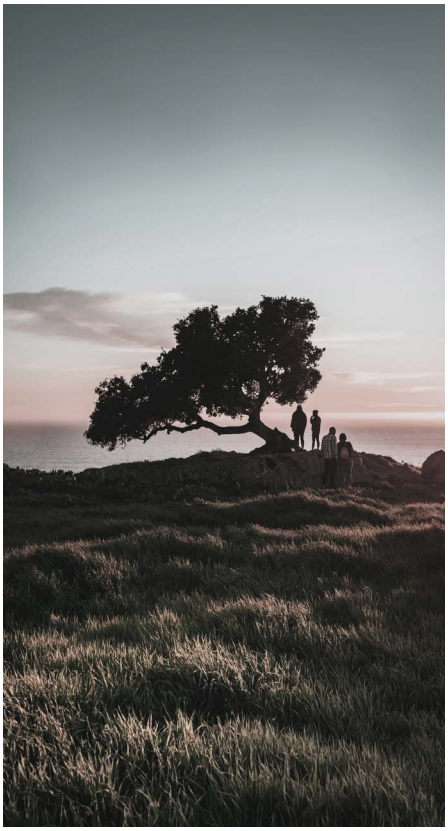
3. Having a Part in the Function of the Tree of Life

Believers ought to be like the tree of life, bringing healing to the nations (Rev 22:2). The tree of life bears fruit every month; its leaves are good for medicine, and its fruits are good for food (Ezek 47:12).

Bringing warmth and life to the world

As its name implies, the tree of life is an evergreen tree that does not grow old. Only those whom the Holy Spirit has regenerated can, in turn, bring life and nourishment to others. Consider two aspects of the Dead Sea as a contrast to the tree of life.

First, due to the high salinity of the Dead Sea (8.6 times more than normal sea water), organisms cannot live in it. The ecosystem is adversely affected, and only certain plants can survive. Ezekiel chapter 47 recorded that the water flowing from under the temple's threshold toward the east flowed into the Dead Sea, turning the bitter water sweet and bringing life to



every living thing wherever the rivers go. The function of the trees growing along the banks of this river is consistent with the vision in Revelation chapter 22.

As the vegetation around the Dead Sea failed to flourish because of the high salt levels, our lives were once withered and oppressed by sin (Rom 7:24). But when the Holy Spirit comes (Rom 8:2), He frees and renews us. We receive abundant life in Jesus because His Spirit helps us to stop sinning (1 Jn 3:9), to put to death the evil deeds of the flesh (Rom 8:13), and finally, enables our corruptible flesh to overcome death (1 Cor 15:54).

Second, the Dead Sea is the lowest body of water on the earth's surface. Located south of the Sea of Galilee, it takes in the minerals injected by the upstream Sea of Galilee and Mount Hermon but does not have an outlet for the water. After a long period of accumulation, a huge amount of minerals has sunk to the bottom of the lake, increasing its salt content.

We lived like the Dead Sea in the past, receiving without knowing how to give. However, we must now live like the healing leaves on the tree of life, in sharp contrast to the nature of the Dead Sea. Believers exude bright rays of love in this cold and indifferent society. Do your friends around you feel blessed because you are a Christian? There are people in the world lying wounded. Do we stop to care for them like the good Samaritan, or do we hurry past like the indifferent priests? Many may see us as good believers based on the number of services we attend or the deep knowledge of the Bible we demonstrate. But in reality, have we lost our love and concern for the spiritual lives of the people of the world? Are we cold and unwilling to restore our weak and dying brethren?

We often feel our hands are tied as we undertake our labor of love. The "healing" that we bring to others is limited by our finite resources or ability. However, hands raised in supplication are more powerful because healing comes from God, who is infinite. We must never underestimate the power of prayer. We ought to make every effort to intercede for people around us, believers or non-believers. We may not know if God wants to heal them and how or when He will heal them. What we do know is that if we intercede for them according to God's will, it will be acceptable to Him. In this way, we can be healing as the tree of life.

CONCLUSION

In John F Kennedy's inaugural address as the thirty-fifth president of the United States in 1961, he spoke the famous line: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

The footwashing sacrament allows us to have a part with Jesus Christ. This is the grace we have received from the Lord. Rather than being satisfied with having a part, or asking what we gain from having a part, we ought to think about the responsibilities that having a part entails. Heirs have a part in their father's inheritance, but they are also responsible for safeguarding and growing this inheritance. As the children of God, who have a part with Christ through footwashing, let us cherish the salvation grace we have received and walk forward with the commitment to play our part in the ministry of the word, in building up the holy city, and bringing healing to the world.

SACRAMENTS AND THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS (PART 3): HOLY COMMUNION

Boaz—Malaysia

THE COVENANT OF HOLY COMMUNION

In a covenant, two parties (or more) have an obligation to fulfill the clauses in the contract in exchange for the guarantee of the covenant. The root of the Hebrew word for "covenant"—***bĕriyth*** (Gen 15:18)—has several meanings. Two of these are "to eat with" and "to slice or cut down." Therefore, when a covenant is made, the two parties may dine together. In the Bible, we see examples of these between two people—Isaac and Abimelech (Gen 26:30), Jacob and Laban (Gen 31:54)—and between man and God—the nobles of the children of Israel and the Lord (Ex 24:7–11), the disciples and Jesus (Mt 26:26–30). Additionally, covenants could be made by passing between an animal cut in two (Gen 15:10). This signifies that while the covenant is valid, each party has clear and distinct responsibilities; the party who breaks the covenant will receive the punishment due to him.

From this perspective, the Last Supper was essentially Jesus making a covenant with His disciples (or the people of the world), in which both parties hold clear responsibilities (Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). Since partaking of the Holy Communion is partaking of the Lord's feast and drinking His cup (1 Cor 10:18, 21), believers must take the Holy Communion in a worthy manner towards God, both in spirit and truth. In terms of spirit, believers ought to carry a respectful attitude; in terms of truth, they ought to discern that what they are receiving are Jesus' body and blood (1 Cor 11:27–29).

The Bible indicates that we should conduct this Holy Communion regularly, but not how often (1 Cor 11:26). Therefore, the church finds herself in a dilemma when trying to balance between the frequency of Holy Communion and the attitude of believers. As the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt. Believers may take the Holy Communion for granted if it is conducted too frequently. Reducing the frequency would compel believers to treasure the opportunity to partake of the Holy Communion. That said, would such scarcity really increase the Holy Communion's value to believers, or would it take away the opportunity to remind them of its significance? A better way to correct the attitude of believers would be to educate them and build a good foundation of the right attitude with which to partake of the Holy Communion.

Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ

"For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed." *(Jn 6:55)*

If we were invited to a grand ball involving important dignitaries, we would plan and prepare our outfit, our transport, and how we would conduct ourselves several days before the occasion. During the Holy Communion, we partake of the flesh and blood of Christ. While our level



of preparation does not directly affect the efficacy of the Holy Communion, it will determine the benefit we reap for our soul when we partake of it. Believers who esteem the Holy Communion feel moved and compelled by the love of the Lord to weep for their weaknesses and resolve to overcome them. Those who despise the Holy Communion may similarly partake of the flesh and blood, but the sacrament does not bring blessings to their souls; rather, it brings judgment and even death (1 Cor 11:29–30).

Some believers choose not to partake of the Holy Communion because, after self-examination, they feel afraid or unworthy because of their sinful thoughts or low faith. We may occasionally refrain because, in our momentary weakness, we are unprepared. But we should not always use the excuse of "not being prepared" as a reason to refrain. In the Old Testament, Israelites who intentionally declined to keep the Feast of the Passover were cut off by God and made to shoulder their own sins (Num 9:13). Therefore, it is the responsibility of every Christian always to be prepared to partake of the Lord's flesh and blood.

"From our first Holy Communion until today, have we lived according to our resolutions? Where have we fallen short of God's glory?"

In the Old Testament, God instituted a second Passover, which would occur a month after the first, on the fourteenth day of the second month. This provision was made for those who had set their hearts on keeping the Passover but were prevented from doing so because they were unclean from touching a dead body or had been traveling (Num 9:6–11). During King Hezekiah's reign, the nation decided to keep this second Passover because the priests and the people had not readied themselves in time for the first. And in the second month, although the people of the northern kingdom who had come to participate had been unable to sanctify themselves according to the ceremonial laws, God forgave the entire congregation because they had prepared their hearts to seek God (2 Chr 30:2–3, 18–20).

These examples show that the Passover was precious in God's eyes, whether celebrated in the first or second month. Most importantly, the people of God also esteemed it and prepared their hearts to seek Him. Similarly, esteeming the Holy Communion is demonstrated by how we prepare our hearts: do we reflect on our behavior, repent, make resolutions, and cultivate gratitude? Making preparation is better than making no preparation at all. Making ample preparation is much better

than making hasty preparation. Giving ourselves sufficient time allows us to do a thorough examination. From our first Holy Communion until today, have we lived according to our resolutions? Where have we fallen short of God's glory? When we seriously introspect, our resolutions will be more definite and our thanksgiving more sincere.

THE SPIRITUAL EFFECTS OF HOLY COMMUNION

1. United with Christ

"He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him." (Jn 5:56)

When we partake of the Holy Communion, our lives are joined to Jesus. How should we who are united with the Lord Jesus manifest the life of the Lord?

Be preserved in the church

The church being united with Christ is akin to the great mystery of the union between husband and wife (Eph 5:31–32). This union was established when the church (the bride of Christ) was redeemed by the blood flowing from Christ's side, just as Eve was created from Adam's rib. In the salvation process, the church fulfills the bride's role by gathering all good believers who have prepared themselves to receive the coming of Jesus. Believers must preserve themselves in the church because there is no salvation outside the church (Mt 16:19; 18:18; Jn 20:22–23). Although each believer is individually saved, he must not leave the church, which is the whole; we are united with Christ through the church.

Bear fruit diligently

Individually, being united with Christ is akin to the relationship between the branch and its vine (Jn 15:4–8). When a believer is baptized and abides in Christ, he is like a branch grafted onto the vine (Rom 11:17). Two aspects of being a branch are pertinent—sustenance and productivity. First, if a person constantly abides in the Lord, the word of God abides in him (Jn 15:7). God's word is like rain that falls from heaven (Isa 55:10-12; Deut 32:2). The vine absorbs water from the soil through its roots and transports it to the branches via its stem. Similarly, when we are joined to the vine, we receive rich and constant spiritual nourishment from God's word. Second, the person who always abides in the Lord ought to bear much fruit (Jn 15:5). The fruit that we bear—our good deeds and virtues, including the fruit of the Holy Spirit—will glorify God (Jn 15:8). Believers must diligently bear fruit. The heavenly Father will cut off any branches that do not (Jn 15:1–2). This was Jesus' warning to every branch in Him. Therefore, let us not make light of, or be complacent in, our pursuit of faith. The Israelites in the past also boasted of their status as Abraham's descendants, but they were broken off because of their unbelief (Rom 11:20–21). The heavenly Father will prune the branch that diligently bears fruit (Jn 15:2). Although pruning—the refinement of our faith through the fiery furnace—is a process of affliction, this branch will receive even more nutrients, and thus bear even more fruit.

Maintain our union in holiness and honor

Since believers have been united with Christ, the apostles instructed the Gentile believers to abstain from certain acts in order to maintain the sanctity of this union. They were to refrain from eating food offered to idols, blood, and strangled animals, as well as from sexual immorality (Act 15:29). To do any of these would be to form an alternative, ungodly union—defiling their original union with Christ and provoking the Lord to fiery jealousy (Deut 4:24). Partaking of food offered to idols is partaking of the table of demons, which means entering a covenant with demons (1 Cor 10:21). Eating blood, or meat that contains blood, means forming a union with the animal, since its life is in the blood (Lev 17:10–11). And finally, committing fornication with someone means being joined, as one body, with that person (1 Cor 6:15–18). Therefore, when we are joined with the Lord in spiritual unity, we must guard our bodies in holiness and honor (1 Thess 4:4). We must never allow our bodies—members of Christ (1 Cor 6:15)—to be



joined with demons, animals, or anyone apart from our spouse.

2. Gain Eternal Life, Resurrect on the Last Day

Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (Jn 6:53–54)

Jesus Christ is the bread of life and the hidden manna (Jn 6:48; Rev 2:17). He urged the people of the world not to labor for food that perishes, but, instead, for the food that endures to everlasting life. Even the manna that came down from heaven would turn bad if it were kept overnight. Only the manna kept in the golden urn lasted for generations (Ex 16:33). This refers to Christ, the hidden manna that was revealed in the last times (1 Pet 1:20). Only Christ is the true bread from heaven. He is the hidden manna of which man may eat and not die (Jn 6:50), unlike the manna in the wilderness that could not prevent the death of those who ate it.

Throughout history, there have been many legends of explorers seeking a mythical fountain of youth, and alchemists working to discover the elusive formula to the elixir of life, both of which were believed to promise eternal youth. Today, we have been granted the bread of life not because we are more capable or have invested more than the individuals in these stories of obsessive pursuit. Neither do we need to "work the works of God"—seeking justification and reward through practicing the law—as the Jews thought (Jn 6:28–29). On the contrary, we have freely received the bread of life because we believed in Jesus. This is entirely out of God's grace, not because of the works we do (Rom 4:4–5). Furthermore, we did not have to traverse mountains or voyage across endless oceans to seek the bread of life. Rather, the heavenly Father drew us to Him (Jn 6:44).

Today, where can the world find this hidden manna? In the wilderness, God's people did not collect manna in Egypt or any other part of the world. The only place manna could be found was around the camp of God's people (Ex 16:13, 15–17). Similarly, only when one comes to the true church can he find this "hidden manna"—for his soul to be satisfied and never thirst again.

When we hold the precious bread of life in our hands during each Holy Communion service, do we reflect anew on our call and election by the Lord? Are we laboring for the food that perishes or the food that endures to everlasting life? Are we utterly convinced this ordinary-looking hidden manna can give us everlasting life? Or do we hanker after the delicacies of Egypt to satisfy our never-ending desires?

In fact, our daily labors will reveal what is in our hearts. The destination of our lives is not reached in a single big step or achieved by a big decision. It is attained by accumulating every step we take every day of our lives. We do not hope for any extraordinary achievements in this short life. Instead, we hope that every little step we take in every ordinary day of our life is a step towards eternity until we reach our destination—everlasting life. Then, we can truly say that the promise of resurrection on the last day belongs to us.

CONCLUSION

The Holy Communion has all the spiritual efficacies of unity with Christ, eternal life, and resurrection on the last day. Besides these, this sacrament is also a trumpet sound in our faith, reminding us of what Jesus said: "Remember Me." When Jesus instituted the Holy Communion, He said this twice to emphasize that we who have partaken of His body and blood must never forget the price the Lord has paid. Each time the body and blood of the Lord are before us, do we feel the heavy price Jesus paid? Can we see Jesus' pain, sacrifice, and love?

In the inevitable aging process, we cannot stop even the most precious memories from fading. May Jesus' name be the one we hold in our memory to the last.





PARABLES OF THE HEAVENLY KINGDOM (PART 6)

KC Tsai—Toronto, Canada

Editor's note: The seven parables in Matthew 13 enable men to find the true church through the knowledge of the kingdom of God. In the first parable—the parable of the sower—only seeds that fall on good soil will grow, be deeply rooted, flourish, and bear fruit. Everyone has an equal chance to find the kingdom of heaven, but only the truly receptive heart will understand the gospel, come to the true church, and continuously walk in God's word. In the second parable—the parable of the tares—tares sown among good seeds will ultimately be weeded out and destroyed. The devil works through false brethren to trouble the true church. True believers should not lose heart but trust God to eradicate the sons of the wicked one. In the third parable—the parable of the mustard seed—the eponymous seed grows into a huge tree that attracts birds to nest in its branches. The growing true church will suffer the infiltration of heresies. To continue to enjoy God's abidance, the true church must firmly uphold the truth at all times. In the fourth parable—the parable of the leaven—leaven hidden within a small measure of meal leavened the entire lump. The true church must remain hypervigilant because the slightest tolerance of immorality or infidelity to the truth will corrupt and destroy the church. In the parable of the hidden treasure and the parable of the pearl, the protagonists sell everything they own to retain the treasure they have found. As a church and as individual believers, we are blessed with the priceless blessing of the truth and the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ. We must do all we can to keep this truth and proclaim this way of righteousness.

This installment concludes our series on the parables of the heavenly kingdom.

THE PARABLE OF THE DRAGNET

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." *(Mt 13:47–50)*

"The good will be carefully differentiated from the bad; these are stored in the vessel, while the bad will be discarded"

A net cast into the sea does not discriminate between the sea life it captures. However, a critical point of this parable is that the selection happens after the net has been pulled in. The good will be carefully differentiated from the bad; these are stored in the vessel, while the bad will be discarded. Such a warning echoes the conclusion of the parable of the tares.

What are the parable's key messages for the true church?

Gathering Some of Every Kind

The true church, God's kingdom of earth, is the fisher of men (Mt 4:19). All who are willing to believe—regardless of gender, race, or past—may enter. Just as Paul writes, "[E]ven the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference" (Rom 3:22). The target of our evangelism must, therefore, be inclusive, transcending geographical borders and racial boundaries. The local-centric methods of evangelism we have traditionally used—inviting neighbors, evangelistic counseling,[1] long-term personalized follow-up with truth-seekers, intensive rooting and watering[2] within the church, regular visiting and pastoring—may no longer suffice in this age of technology where the internet facilitates instantaneous connectivity. Moreover, in some countries, legal restrictions prevent their citizens from encountering the Christian faith. This is a difficult blockade that the evangelists sent by the church and we, in our personal evangelism, must overcome.

We must have faith in Jesus' abidance as we obediently carry out His instruction to cast our nets into the vast ocean that is the world. First, He said we are to launch out into the deep (Lk 5:4). Do not be limited



by our worries or preconceived notions of who will or will not believe. Launching out into the deep water is equivalent to "enlarging the place of [our] tent, and stretching out the curtains of [our] dwellings," a comforting promise from God conveyed through the prophet Isaiah:

Enlarge the place of your tent,
And let them stretch out the curtains of your dwellings;
Do not spare;
Lengthen your cords,
And strengthen your stakes.
For you shall expand to the right and to the left,
And your descendants will inherit the nations,
And make the desolate cities inhabited.
(Isa 54:2–3)

CASTING THE DRAGNET THROUGH THE INTERNET

The province of New Brunswick in Canada is about 1,300 kilometers (more than fourteen hours by car) from Toronto, where the nearest True Jesus Church (TJC) is located. In 2019, a New Brunswick man came across the beliefs of TJC while browsing online and contacted the church. The resident preacher of Toronto TJC then started communicating with him online and systematically introduced the church's core beliefs to him. In 2022, he expressed his willingness to be baptized.

Second, Jesus said we should let down the net on the right side of the boat (Jn 21:6). The disciples had toiled futilely all night, yet they obediently cast the net again at the Lord's instruction. As a result, the Lord bestowed upon them a net full of fish. Do not be discouraged by past adverse experiences in evangelism. For example, some have read our church's evangelistic pamphlets or websites but decided to remain outside of the dragnet. Some have seen the "place of our tent" but decline the invitation to enter. We need not be discouraged. Instead, we prepare by weaving a net that is strong, compact, and without any holes. And then, when we let down the net again on the right side—we fulfill our commission and evangelize in faithful obedience to the Lord's instructions—we, too, will draw in a net full of fish. Then, we must pray sincerely for the Lord Jesus' mercy and love to keep them in.

Gathering the Good, Discarding the Bad

The kingdom of God is the church, and the sea creatures of every kind in the dragnet represent all the believers. We will undergo the selection process with only two possible outcomes: being placed into the vessel (eternal life) or the furnace of fire (eternal condemnation). Peter alerts us that judgment begins from the house of God (1 Pet 4:17), which is the church.

Two days before the Lord Jesus was delivered to the authorities (Mt 26:2), He spoke the parable of the goats and the sheep. He said, "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels

[1] Counseling refers to members sharing with truth-seekers their experiences of faith, e.g., seeking the Lord, understanding the gospel, experiencing miracles and so on.

[2] Rooting and watering refers to various activities customized for individual regular truth seekers to nurture their faith.

with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats" (Mt 25:31–32). Both the sheep and goats belonged to the Lord Jesus, but they received strikingly different sentences. The sheep would inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world, but the goats were cursed and cast into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Mt 25:34, 41).

"Nonetheless, how we respond to this blessed opportunity determines whether we remain in the vessel or are tossed away"

It is entirely by God's grace that a person enters the true church, which the Holy Spirit has established on earth. Nonetheless, how we respond to this blessed opportunity determines whether we remain in the vessel or are tossed away. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ allows us who are born of the flesh to be reborn, no longer born of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (Jn 1:13). Subsequently, a reborn man must follow the wind of the Holy Spirit; he must have the sound of the wind as well as be transformed by the wind. In other words, to remain in the true church, we must be continually renewed through the power of the Holy Spirit to truly become a man who abides in the Spirit.

[You] have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. (Col 3:10)

A reborn man must constantly walk by the Spirit (Rom 6:11–14), conducting himself as the holy and beloved elect of God (Col 3:12–17), in order to gradually attain the image and nature of God. Consequently, he will pass the final selection, be welcomed into the spiritual true church, and stand to inherit the kingdom prepared for him from the foundation of the world.

CONCLUSION: TRUE DISCIPLES OF THE HEAVENLY KINGDOM

Jesus said to them, "Have you understood all these things?"
They said to Him, "Yes, Lord."
Then He said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old."
Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these parables, that He departed from there. (Mt 13:51–53)

In the Bible, the scribes and Pharisees are usually mentioned concurrently. They were always spying on Jesus, enticing Him to speak so that they could find fault and falsely incriminate Him. They had a deep knowledge of the Mosaic Laws and Jewish customs, but they used this knowledge to judge others instead of spurring themselves to improve. When the Lord Jesus was teaching in the temple, He once said:

"Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation."
(Mk 12:38–40)

After speaking the seven parables, Jesus said, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old." As believers of the true church, we should be wary of falling prey to the hypocrisy and legalism of the scribes and Pharisees. Do not merely nitpick through the wording of the Old Testament or simply put on an outward



appearance of a pious and learned scribe to impress others. Instead, use the New Testament teachings to nurture ourselves spiritually. The Lord Jesus constantly cited Old Testament Scripture but emphasized a deeper observance of the truth. Thus, we must learn from the Lord Jesus to neither neglect the old nor the new, and use Scripture not to burden or judge but to help ourselves grow in favor with God.

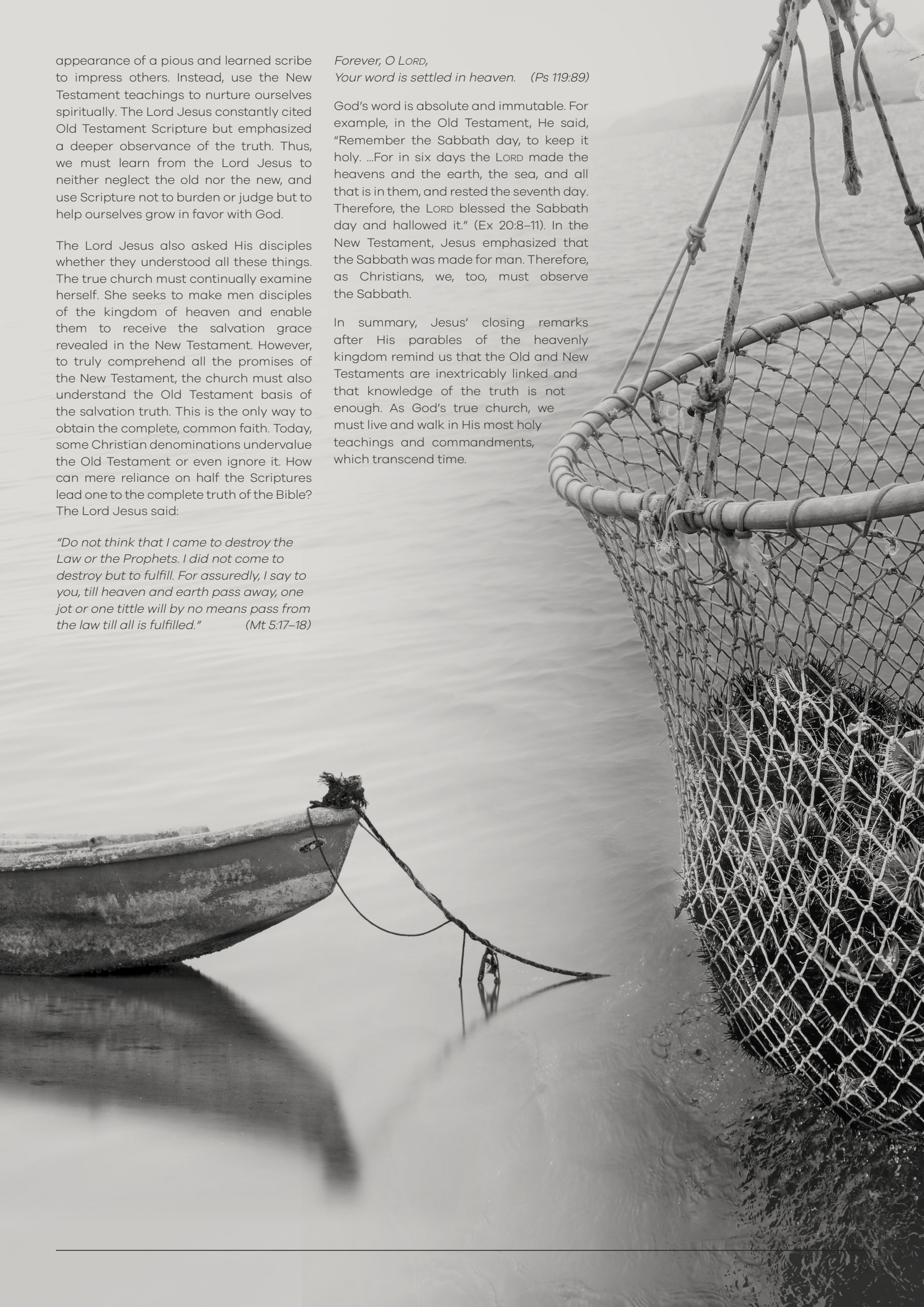
The Lord Jesus also asked His disciples whether they understood all these things. The true church must continually examine herself. She seeks to make men disciples of the kingdom of heaven and enable them to receive the salvation grace revealed in the New Testament. However, to truly comprehend all the promises of the New Testament, the church must also understand the Old Testament basis of the salvation truth. This is the only way to obtain the complete, common faith. Today, some Christian denominations undervalue the Old Testament or even ignore it. How can mere reliance on half the Scriptures lead one to the complete truth of the Bible? The Lord Jesus said:

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled." *(Mt 5:17–18)*

Forever, O Lord,
Your word is settled in heaven. *(Ps 119:89)*

God's word is absolute and immutable. For example, in the Old Testament, He said, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. …For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it." (Ex 20:8–11). In the New Testament, Jesus emphasized that the Sabbath was made for man. Therefore, as Christians, we, too, must observe the Sabbath.

In summary, Jesus' closing remarks after His parables of the heavenly kingdom remind us that the Old and New Testaments are inextricably linked and that knowledge of the truth is not enough. As God's true church, we must live and walk in His most holy teachings and commandments, which transcend time.



LESSONS FOR THE POST-PANDEMIC CHURCH

Vincent Yeung—Cambridge, UK



JUST PERSONS WHO NEED NO REPENTANCE

People do not like change. In the formative years of adulthood, we adopt certain habits and a way of life that we are most comfortable with. Once a status quo becomes established, it takes much convincing to extricate ourselves from it. A status-quo bias develops because we avoid any change that would be perceived as a loss or inconvenience.

The tumultuous years of the pandemic have shaken the foundation of our lives and reset the status quo. How we live, travel, learn, work, and worship have changed significantly. The physical separation imposed by lockdowns, fear of illness or death, conflicting information, and disinformation has isolated us from friends, family, colleagues, and brothers- and sisters-in-Christ. Yet, technology has created new possibilities in living and worship. We can work and worship remotely, participate in worship hosted in faraway lands, and interact with brethren in every corner of the world. Although we are far away, we can be so close. Conversely, we could be in close proximity yet feel so distant. Now that the pandemic has subsided, or at least its impact on public health has been minimized, families can meet, while workplaces and churches have reopened. We are now confronting the choice of reverting to the pre-pandemic way of life or settling for the new normal.

The scars of the pandemic on our spiritual life are gradually emerging. Some churches have many empty seats during services, a hangover from the days of government-imposed social distancing, even after all restrictions have been lifted. Some members do not want to physically attend church due to a habit of self-imposed isolation or social anxiety developed during the pandemic. Such habits may be crystallized by pre-existing desires, previously suppressed, but allowed to reign freely during an era of lockdown and social distancing. Any positive peer pressure to come to church was removed during the pandemic, with online worship becoming a license to exempt or liberate us from in-person attendance. When asked to return to the pre-pandemic style of worship, we may say we are doing very well, why must we change?



I Did Not Come to Call the Righteous

The phrase "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Mk 2:17; Mt 9:13; Lk 5:32) is often associated with the Pharisees and scribes. We rarely group ourselves with these. The parable of the lost sheep was a response to the Pharisees' perception of superiority over sinners (Lk 15:2–7). Hence the ninety-nine sheep who did not need saving represent those who believe they need no repentance and resist responding to God's word. They fail to acknowledge their shortcomings and the need to respond, repent, and change for the better.

The Pharisees and scribes rejected Jesus' message because they believed their way of living was sufficient, or as Paul terms it, "blameless" (Phil 3:6). They sought their form of righteousness as opposed to God's righteousness (Rom 10:3). Today, we could be in the same situation with the same attitude. We think we are good enough before God, so we do not need to change. We attend church services on-site or remotely, are baptized, and have the Holy Spirit. We may participate in church work, offer tithes, and by doing so, we think we have fulfilled our role.

"We simply do not have the will to attend to a problem and feel anxious at the prospect of a change that is taking place"

It is the same reason that the religious elite at Jesus' time did not see the need to change their way of life. They made various excuses to discredit Jesus: "By the ruler of demons He casts out demons" (Mk 3:22b). "This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath" (Jn 9:16b). " 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' " (Lk 7:34b). It is human nature to selectively justify our behavior. In Jeremiah's time, the people of God attributed their calamity to turning away from idols (Jer 44:18). We simply do not have the will to attend to a problem and feel anxious at the prospect of a change that is taking place.

A LESSON FROM HISTORY

It has been said that history repeats itself. Of course, history rarely repeats itself exactly, but profound changes happen regularly. New world orders affect the entire fabric of society. The catastrophic demise of the Judean Kingdom and the destruction of

the Jerusalem temple wreaked havoc on the survivors. Most, particularly the upper-class and educated, were taken captive to Babylon (2 Kgs 24:14). Worship at the temple was no longer possible (2 Chr 36:19; cf. Ezra 3:2ff). The exiled were forced to adopt a new life in a new environment, and the mode of worship had to change. Some have postulated that synagogues were instituted because temple worship was inaccessible to the diaspora in faraway countries, and priests could not exercise their functions.[1] Those who remained in Judea were plagued by economic crisis in the aftermath of the war.

"People were busy pursuing their own livelihood and lifestyle instead of rebuilding the temple"

Eventually, the major components of the Jewish nation and faith were all restored one after another—the exiles returned (Ezra 1:1–4), the temple was rebuilt (Ezra 6:15), the city wall restored (Neh 6:15ff), temple worship resumed (Ezra 6:18), the law reaffirmed (Neh 8), and the covenant renewed (Neh 10:28f).

However, on an individual level, many issues were bubbling in the background. People were busy pursuing their own livelihood and lifestyle instead of rebuilding the temple (Hag 1:6–8). The contributions to support the priests and Levites were insufficient (Neh 13:10). God's people intermarried with Gentiles (Ezra 10). Many neglected their faith and did not participate in worship. Such issues that plagued God's people nearly 2,500 years ago have resurfaced in this technologically advanced and post-pandemic world.

So, what can we learn from the past? Most people continued to live a life they thought was fine but, in fact, was not. A few leaders knew God's will and word well. They identified these issues and urged and motivated the people to change. Some people responded and made an effort to adjust their behavior to become pleasing to God, while others remained in their waywardness. How can we be like the former group and become more responsive to God's calling?



Come Together As a Church

When teaching the members in Corinth about the Lord's Supper, Paul raised a pertinent point on the essence of a church—that members must come together. The church is the body of Christ, the fullness of Him (Eph 1:23). We, individual members, are fitted and built together for a dwelling place, a holy temple in the Lord (Eph 2:21–22). Individual members are called in one body, and the church—the members collectively—is presented to Jesus (Col 3:15; Eph 5:27). Hence, Jesus reminds us that an individual branch cannot thrive independently of the vine, which is Jesus and His body (Jn 15:1, 5–6). A solitary member or family unit cannot sustain their spiritual well-being and growth on their own. It is an illusion to believe that an individualistic faith is sustainable in the long run. The communal faith is not just a symbol or organizational identity, but God's will that the oneness of the members manifests the glory of God, to make known Jesus to this world (Jn 17:20ff). There is only one body (Eph 4:4); we are given different gifts for the purpose of edifying this body (Eph 4:12), to ensure each part joins, knits together, and grows into perfection (1 Cor 12:27; Eph 4:16; 5:27).

We cannot say we belong to Jesus only and have nothing to do with the church. To belong to Christ is to also belong to the body. The church is the means by which Jesus imparts salvation. Christ is the head and Savior of the church (Eph 5:23). If Christ is the Savior of the church, all believers together receive salvation from Christ—not as individuals, but as His collective body.

Each individual and the collective church can only grow by serving, loving, empathizing and helping one other (Rom 12:5–13). Without such interactions, how can one learn to show mercy, kindness,

[1] The oldest Graeco-Jewish documents mentioning synagogues date to the time of Ptolemy III (Euergetes), 247–221 B.C.E; Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ Volume II* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 425; J Bright, *A History of Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 437.



humility, forbearance, and forgiveness? Without serving others, how can one learn to sacrifice and bear the weaknesses of others patiently? Faith devoid of practice is only theoretical—untried and untested. Only when we assemble can we stir up love and good works, exhort and support one another (Heb 10:23–24), and guard against stagnation and backsliding.

WE NEED TO PROGRESS

Paul exhorts believers to forget the things behind and reach forward to the things ahead, as spiritual stagnation is never an option when we have neither attained nor are perfect (Phil 3:12–13). We should never be satisfied that we have some form of godliness (2 Tim 3:5), complacently thinking we have already achieved salvation. The end goal is to be partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4), putting on a new man created in righteousness and true holiness (Eph 4:24). However, this transformation is not a one-off event but a process. We are told to be sanctified by truth (Jn 17:17, 19), by the Spirit (Rom 15:16), and by faith (Acts 26:18). The change needs time and effort, which requires obedience, patience, and longsuffering. Peter describes this transformation as building blocks of divine qualities, gradually adding to and complementing each other (2 Pet 1:5–7). Without these, we would be unfruitful and idle (2 Pet 1:8). Only when we diligently pursue such transformation can we be assured that our call and election are sure (2 Pet 1:10). Similarly, Paul reminds believers to "work out" their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12).

"Why do we find it so difficult to be more involved in the community of faith, knowing how vital it is for us to be part of the church?"

With such insight, we realize that a half-hearted faith and response to God's calling is insufficient. The church is filled with wheat and tares (Mt 13:30). Our choices determine whether we are good or bad seeds. Jesus asked a pertinent rhetorical question: "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?" (Lk 6:46). It would be tragic and ironic if we have already received salvation, yet choose to proceed alone, and have nothing to do with our fellow members in Christ. Why do we find it so difficult to be more involved in the community of faith, knowing how vital it is for us to be part of the church?

Burden versus Pleasure

Many believers find it hard to balance work, life, and church. Work pressures are so intense that people hardly have time to spend with their families. Additionally, the ambition for children to thrive and excel in academic and extracurricular activities consume the mind and spare time of parents. These competing priorities have eroded and encroached into our time for God. Life has become a series of trade-offs, with time for God a diminishing part of that equation for many. It is not uncommon to see members arriving late for service and leaving immediately afterward, with no time for fellowship and interaction with



other members. They may only attend one worship service but skip the remaining sessions. Observing the Sabbath has become only a sliver of time on Saturdays, with worship just another activity within a packed itinerary. The pandemic lockdown has created a seemingly new way to save time by shaving off the commute to and from church. It makes it easier to squeeze in services from different locations to fit into our busy schedules. We can even pause and restart an online sermon later if we so wish. With such a mindset, worship services are no different from any other daily task or responsibility we have to handle.

The question is, do we see our relationship with God as a duty or a contractual requirement we have to fulfill? It is true that we have a covenantal relationship with God, and we must fulfill our responsibilities (Deut 28:2, 15). There are steps to take and things to do to inherit eternal life. But are we doing it willingly and joyfully or reluctantly because we are compelled to do it? There is a range of perspectives on our relationship with God. On the one hand, He could be seen as the best employer in town, offering eternal glory and riches. On the other, we have a personal and intimate relationship with God; we love Him because He loved us first (1 Jn 4:19). If rewards, blessings, and eternal life are our sole focus, then our relationship with God becomes task-based, and transactional. We should be inspired by the love of Christ so that we no longer live for ourselves but for Him who died for us (2 Cor 5:14–15). Our heart is filled with God's love through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). We see Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as not just for humankind but more importantly, for us personally (Gal 2:20). Only with such a mindset would we willingly and joyfully sacrifice for Jesus. We would delightfully repay His love because He touched us so much and promised us our heavenly reward. The old paradigm of "doing your pleasure" and "doing your own ways" on Sabbath will give way to the new paradigm of calling "the Sabbath a delight," as we naturally exult in the Lord (Isa 58:13–14).

CONCLUSION

In every aspect of our life, we are constantly challenged to make adjustments, be it the movement for a healthier lifestyle, ethical eating habits, or environmental conservation. How does our attitude towards these differ from how we see our religious habits? We procrastinate, consoling our conscience that we are fine or inwardly telling ourselves that we still have adequate time to change before it is too late.

We need to remind ourselves that each part of the body does its share and causes the body to grow (Eph 4:16). With the unity of the faith and the knowledge of God, each member helps the church mature to become a perfect man (Eph 4:11). Before we can play our part, we need first to change our mindset, then our actions, to love and edify each other (1 Pet 1:22; Eph 4:11,16). Our newfound liberty in this post-pandemic world should not become an invitation to indulge the flesh (Gal 5:13). We are free to exercise our willpower to be obedient to the truth and overcome akrasia (lack of self-control). Only through loving sacrifice can the church truly join together and grow. Jesus is coming again; we do not know when, but Jesus warns us to be alert: "I say to all. Watch!" (Mk 13:37b).

OVERCOMING INDIFFERENCE BY PUTTING ON LOVE

River

INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, the lives of people around the world drastically changed as governments attempted to contain and minimize the impacts of COVID-19. Strict rules and regulations were imposed to ban or restrict gatherings, while social distancing requirements compelled churches to cease in-person worship services. As a result, the True Jesus Church (TJC) in different locations moved to online worship through various media platforms, enabling members worldwide to worship without borders. This created many additional opportunities for individual spiritual cultivation that may have been impossible pre-pandemic. So despite the limitations, I gained many blessings during this period, as the Holy Spirit helped me to conquer my weaknesses and build stronger relationships with brothers- and sisters-in-Christ.

As COVID-19 restrictions have eased, churches globally have resumed in-person worship services and activities. Members may return to the church to joyfully observe the Sabbath instead of joining a live stream from home. Regardless of how long we may have worshipped from home, the opportunity to gather at church again is exciting. Human beings are inherently social creatures needing companionship and connection.

Returning to in-person worship is something to celebrate and give thanks for. But for some, the prospect of returning to church may be daunting. Once we are accustomed to the convenience of worshipping at home, we may feel anxious about exposing ourselves to the virus or reluctant to commute to and from church.

When COVID-19 restrictions eased in our city, I felt hesitant about returning to church, but for very different reasons.



Why Did I Feel Reluctant To Return?

At the beginning of the pandemic, my family settled comfortably into worship at home. The family altar was part of our daily life before the pandemic, so transitioning to online worship was easy, and we were able to set apart the Sabbath day by devoting more time to prayer. Sometimes we prayed with overseas family members after the conclusion of our local live stream services. We grasped opportunities to attend church events and fellowships worldwide, giving us much-needed spiritual cultivation and the chance to draw closer to God. It was a time of blessed spiritual growth.

"Part of this sentiment stemmed from my inability to accept the imperfections of others, my reserved personality, and cultural differences"

For quite some time, I had felt that members in my local church were merely brothers- and sisters-in-Christ, different from close friends and not quite family. I had moved to the area many years before but still felt that, other than faith, I had nothing in common with the brethren. Part of this sentiment stemmed from my inability to accept the imperfections of others, my reserved personality, and cultural differences. Additionally, the social cliques seemed more apparent because the church is smaller than the one in which I grew up. Being an introvert makes small talk challenging, so I lacked the confidence to break through these barriers.

In contrast, when I visited the TJC in other locations previously, I felt genuine love from being part of the one true church with the abidance of the Holy Spirit. Even when attending online seminars, I feel a strong connection with my brothers and sisters even though I have never physically met them. These connections are the work of the Holy Spirit within our hearts and evidence of the love of God that abides in us (1 Jn 4:11–13).

BE PERFECT JUST AS YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER IS PERFECT

Love Our Brethren

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. ...Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." *(Mt 5:43–48)*

Here, Jesus tells us that we must overcome our innate human instinct of only loving those who love us and hating our enemies. Instead, we must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us so that we can be called sons of God.

Hatred and dislike, prevalent in our sinful nature, are significant obstacles to reaching perfection. It is easier to love those who love us but difficult to love those with whom we do not see eye to eye. Therefore, Paul reminds us to be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Rom 12:2), through applying God's word and following the Holy Spirit's guidance to help us grow in the likeness of Christ.

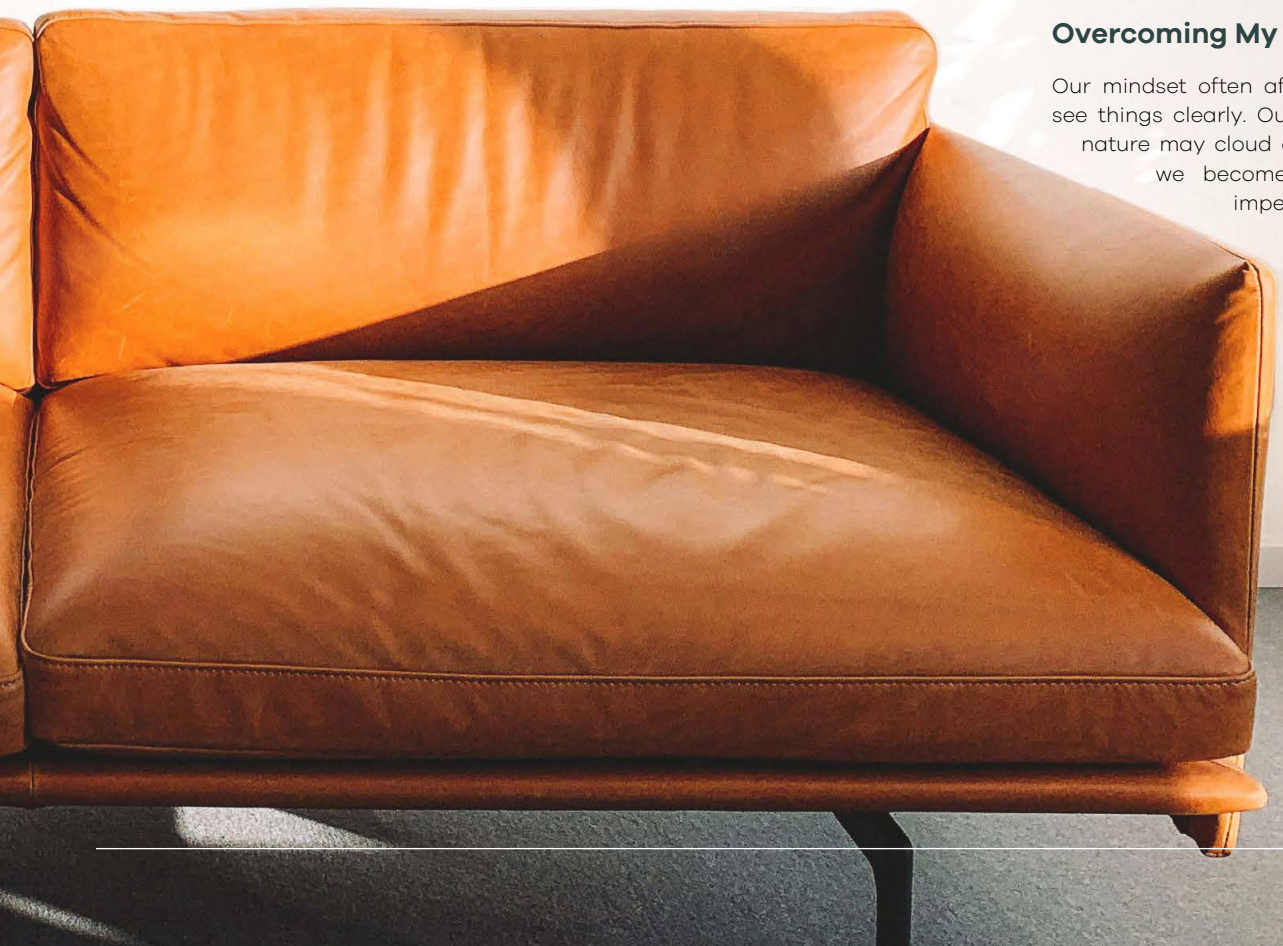
Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. *(1 Jn 4:7–8)*

We may not hate our brethren but, instead, feel indifferent toward them. Indifference is not an expression of love, as it denotes being devoid of feeling. Further along the scale, dislike often stems from differences of opinion or mindset, which can lead to hate if left unresolved. If we rationalize and accept our dislike of others, it hinders us from being like our heavenly Father. Our heavenly Father is righteous, merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love. Love is, therefore, an essential characteristic of spiritual perfection. Hence, we must love as the Lord Jesus instructs us in Matthew 5.

No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. *(1 Jn 4:12)*

Overcoming My Mindset

Our mindset often affects our ability to see things clearly. Our pride and innate nature may cloud our judgement and we become unaware of our imperfections. A minister once made a comment



to me in a not-very-tactful manner. Despite recognizing the good intentions, I felt wounded. After the incident, I shared what had happened with another sister, who told me the minister would have spoken similarly to her. This made me realize that my mindset or pride led me to think that the minister looked down on me, causing deep resentment. Thankfully, God changed my attitude in prayer, and those feelings disappeared. The Holy Spirit will guide and teach us if we spend time in prayer, meditating, and reflecting on God's word.

"As I have developed more friendships and connections within the church, my eyes have been opened to see the strengths and positive character of others instead"

Before returning to in-person services, there were prayer requests for terminally ill members and their families. While praying for them, I felt more connected to them in Christ. They were no longer merely brothers and sisters. I started to care for them genuinely. In the same way, when I posted a prayer request on social media in my time of need, my heart was overwhelmed with a feeling of love and warmth that can only come from God through the prayers of family-in-Christ.

In the past, as I got to know different members, I would quickly notice their weaknesses or flaws. As I have developed more friendships and connections within the church, my eyes have been opened to see the strengths and positive character of others instead. Endeavoring to set aside some quiet time each morning to intercede for others also helped me overcome my previous mindset. The Holy Spirit transformed my heart, drawing me closer to my family-in-Christ. This was confirmed when one day, a sister started chatting with me. She seemed to be making a particular effort to engage with me around the church. My heart instinctively knew that this was the work of the Holy Spirit, allowing me to connect with her.

One in Christ

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. For in fact the body is not one member but many. *(1 Cor 12:12–14)*

Through baptism, our sins are forgiven, and we become one in Christ. God gave us the Holy Spirit to help us in our spiritual journey (Jn 14:26), cultivating and strengthening us. We can be renewed through the Spirit and truth and offer ourselves as a living sacrifice with our brethren-in-Christ.

Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. *(1 Pet 2:4–5)*

One living stone, combined with many other living stones, builds up a spiritual house to become a royal priesthood offering up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God. This one body can only achieve spiritual perfection when all parts cooperate and work together to help one other in Christ (Eph 4:16). From these verses, I understood that we cannot walk this spiritual journey alone and apart from our fellow members.

Emulate the Humility of Our Lord Jesus

In Philippians 2:2–9, Paul exhorts us to be like-minded, have the same love, to be of one accord and one mind. We must esteem



others as better than ourselves, in humility, just as our Lord Jesus Christ humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death on the cross.

Let us examine ourselves to recognize our weaknesses, assessing ourselves by God's standards to overcome them in prayer. Suppose we have a difference of opinion with another member that does not conflict with the truth. In this case, we should humbly consider how we can be of one mind instead of expecting others to conform to our opinions. Through the Holy Spirit, God will help us overcome our nature and be forgiving, accepting, and understanding, to prevent misunderstandings that could cause us to stumble.

"Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." *(Lk 6:37)*

If we do not gather at church and interact with our fellow brethren, we will not be able to see where we fall short of God's standard. For myself, I realized I had pride and the wrong mindset. In the eyes of God, we are far from perfect, yet He patiently embraces us with all our shortcomings, giving us opportunities to sanctify ourselves with His word and the Holy Spirit. Though differences between brethren may arise, should we not embrace one another with the same love and forgiveness God bestows on us?

Online Worship versus In-Person Worship

[N]ot forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. *(Heb 10:25)*

Though I experienced the joy and convenience of online worship and fellowship, they are incomparable to the benefits of gathering in person. The sensation of praising God with the congregation or the sound of prayer enveloping us are much more powerful than experiencing them through speakers or earphones. When my son received the Holy Spirit at home, he felt uncertain. A week later at church, a minister confirmed that my son had received the Holy Spirit. My son told me that all his doubts had disappeared when he knelt to pray in the chapel, because he felt the power of the Holy Spirit when the whole congregation joined in prayer.

> "But if we put our trust in God, we abide under the shadow of His wings"

Some believers may still feel anxious about gathering in person while the virus is still in our midst. But if we put our trust in God, we abide under the shadow of His wings and make Him our refuge and fortress. He will deliver and protect us from the pestilence that walks in darkness (Ps 91:1–13).

God especially commands us to assemble to worship on the Sabbath (Lev 23:3). Furthermore, the prophet Isaiah reminds us that we will receive precious spiritual blessings if we turn from doing our own will, and delight in the Sabbath (Isa 58:13–14). God's love, peace, and joy will abide in our hearts. When we gather, worship, and have fellowship together, we mutually encourage and exhort one another, strengthening our hope of eternal rest in the kingdom of heaven.

CONCLUSION

To be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect requires us to be built up and joined together with our fellow members. God reveals our hidden weaknesses through our interpersonal relationships so that we can strive to spiritually cultivate ourselves, to emulate the divine nature of Christ in righteousness, humility, mercy, and love.

We are the household of God, with our faith built on our chief cornerstone, Jesus Christ. In Him, we are fitted together to grow into a holy temple in the Lord, built for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph 2:19–22).

My spiritual journey continues daily, as God gives me opportunities to build stronger connections with those whom I seem incompatible. Through the transforming power of God's Spirit and word, and fellowship with the brethren, I can overcome my prior indifference and put on love so that I can be built up with my fellow brethren. May we all continue to strive for perfection through God's love.

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. *(Col 3:12–14)*



REFLECTING ON GOD'S WILL THROUGH VIRAL CHOREOGRAPHY (PART 1):

BECOMING JOB AND HIS FRIENDS

Meditating in the Field—Singapore

He shall cover you with His feathers,
And under His wings you shall take refuge;
His truth shall be your shield and buckler.
You shall not be afraid of the terror by night,
Nor of the arrow that flies by day,
Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness,
Nor of the destruction that lays
waste at noonday.
A thousand may fall at your side,
And ten thousand at your right hand;
But it shall not come near you. (Ps 91:4–7)

As I reflected on these verses, I was into my fourth day of self-isolation. That day, I also became part of national statistics of confirmed COVID-19 cases. Sore throat, fatigue, headache, and body ache. "Get some food at the supermarket and go home to rest. Drink more water ah, ah-girl," the doctor instructed. In my drowsiness, I nodded obediently, saluted him, and wondered how the old man before me could withstand the virulence of COVID-19 when seeing so many patients in a day. At home, drifting in and out of consciousness between bouts of coughing and throat pain-induced silence, I endured on. In the liminal space between life and death, my mind began to wander. *Has God's arm been shortened? Have I become one of the thousands and ten thousands that fell beside me?* In theory, we should not fear, but in practice, we all do. Can the discrepancy between the Scripture and the number that reflects the reality of sickness and death be reconciled? Especially when the number also includes many who have been faithful to the Lord.[1] [2] My fragmented thoughts were intermittently interrupted by the screaming of ambulance sirens in the distance.

Since the pandemic outbreak at the end of 2019, the world has danced with the virus as it moves and mutates. People, capitals, and commodities that once circulated en mass around the globe came to a standstill. In April 2020, the densely populated city-state of Singapore implemented its first circuit-breaker (or lockdown) in an effort to curb the viral infection. Changi Airport, which once thronged with travelers, became eerily empty. Responding to the choreography of the virus, people put on masks, rubbed hands with sanitizers, washed hands, maintained safe distancing, and scanned their phones upon entering public spaces. Passersby walked briskly through the Central Business District along Orchard Road, gazing downward with anxiety perched on their brows. As the choreography of the virus evolved, people configured and reconfigured their gatherings of duets, trios, fives, eights, and finally, tens. At work and school, people coordinated in shifts of staggered arrangement.

COVID-19 is more than a pandemic of viral infection. It leads to other forms of physical, mental, sociocultural, and financial pandemics. From Delta to Omicron and its subvariants, I seek to reflect on God's will through viral choreography. By allowing His people to dance with the virus, I ask, what does God want me to become? In what ways has God challenged my ingrained assumptions about Him and my relationship with Him? How has my understanding of Him evolved as a result?

UNDERSTANDING SUFFERING BEYOND THE DUALISM OF GOOD AND EVIL

Job emerges as one of the most studied biblical characters since the pandemic erupted.[3] Our understanding of him, a human being made to undergo profound suffering, grows in complexity and nuance with increasing prevalence of Covid infection and reinfection. In the eyes of his friends, Job's suffering is commensurate with his wrongdoing. Their reasoning is straightforward. Good deeds yield good; evil deeds yield evil. This principle has been taught to generations through the Mosaic Law, reinforced in King Solomon's wisdom books, and reiterated in the prophets' warning messages throughout the Old Testament. Even Jesus' disciples reason in the same way. When meeting a man born blind, they ask Jesus if it is because of his sin or the sins of his parents (Jn 9:3). Judging by Job's immense suffering, his friends conclude with certainty he must have erred in the eyes of God while still insisting himself to be righteous (Job 31).

Pre-pandemic, it was easy to fall into the thinking mode of Job's friends. At the onset of the pandemic, stigmatization often followed those infected. We wondered to ourselves that perhaps their suffering was divine punishment for something they had done. However, as the virus continues to mutate, we take turns walking in the shoes of Job and his friends. In Singapore, at the time of writing, at least sixty percent of the population has been infected. People take turns to play the roles of the sick and the caregiver, the weak and the strong, the consoler and the consoled. Through this constant role-switching process, we gradually see Job with greater empathy. The figure of Job is no longer the distant Other. We are concurrently Job and his friends. We begin to understand that many reasons contribute to human suffering. The cause of suffering is far more complex than the simplistic dualism of good-yields-good versus evil-yields-evil formula. Suffering could result from multiple factors and agents from the material and spiritual worlds coming into interaction. Only God sees the entire picture and into the future.

SUFFERING IS EXTRA-ORDINARY

Suffering is an extra-ordinary experience. Though suffering is not uncommon, it is immensely significant to the sufferer. It disrupts the ordinariness of everyday life by throwing us off our usual rhythms and routines. Suffering disappoints, saddens, and deprives us. In life, we

[1] Jia Li Liao, "Please Give Me Understanding" [Mandarin], YouTube, sermon, October 29, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNsk-cPpgoI.

Jia Li Liao, "Heart of a Servant, Hope of a Child" [Mandarin], YouTube, sermon, October 29, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/live/SmeYxt2AMr8?feature=share.

The speaker delivered these sermons after his wife's sudden passing due to COVID-19.

[2] Wen Ji Wang, Su Hui Liao, and Ming Wei Yang, "Missionary Films Himself Counting Fire Trucks" [Traditional Chinese], *Yahoo! News*, July 1, 2021, https://tw.news.yahoo.com/傳教士直播數消防車-以為自己能獲救-201000987.html.

[3] Timothy Yeung, "A Failing Comforter," YouTube, sermon, November 22, 2022, https://youtu.be/8rrctxOsiRg.

have expectations. For instance, we may envision the kind of school we want to study at, the kind of career path we want to take, the kind of family we want to build, and the kind of retirement we eventually want to enjoy. We may also expect to stay healthy and that our children will exceed our own accomplishments. When we go through an experience in life that confirms our expectations, it, in turn, reinforces the worldview that we hold. Yet when we undergo an experience that disconfirms our expectations, we go through stressful phases of denial and adjustment in which we alter our expectations and worldview. This psychological transition could last for years, decades, or even a lifetime and is well documented and studied in trauma research.[4]

Remember Job's torrent of complaints? Yes, he is thinking aloud to figure out what went wrong. He is also readjusting his expectations in life and his relationship with God. In short, Job's ordinary life is disrupted when suddenly deprived of wealth, family, and health. He is grappling with an extra-ordinary experience so much greater than him that he cannot comprehend, explain, or completely accept. It is difficult, if not impossible, to remain silent when much pain, bitterness, and disillusionment are pent up inside.

REMAINING SILENT AND PRAYERFUL IN SUFFERING

Yet silence is golden when in suffering. When eventually confronted by God, Job replies:

"Behold, I am vile;
What shall I answer You?
I lay my hand over my mouth.
Once I have spoken, but I will not answer;
Yes, twice, but I will proceed no further."
(Job 40:4–5)

Similarly, in Jeremiah's lamentation over Israel's plight, he concludes:

"It is good that one should hope
and wait quietly
For the salvation of the LORD. …
Let him sit alone and keep silent,
Because God has laid it on him."
(Lam 3:26, 28)

When Paul suffers criticism from the church, he responds:

"But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. …Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts."
(1 Cor 4:3, 5a)

As human beings, we like the reassurance of clear and quick answers. They settle us with a sense of security. They guarantee that no further intellectual hard work or soul-searching is required on our part. In contrast, silence denotes indeterminacy and inconclusiveness. There is a lack of closure. Yet remaining silent is a powerful assertion of God's absolute sovereignty. It is also the sufferer's resolution to honor that sovereignty.

What does God want us to do when in silence? In the depth of a pit, Jeremiah calls on the name of the Lord (Lam 3:55). He knows God does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men (Lam 3:33). When Jonah is trapped in the belly of a giant fish, he prays:

"Yet You have brought up my life
from the pit. …
When my soul fainted within me,
I remembered the LORD;
And my prayer went up to You,
Into Your holy temple." *(Jon 2:6b–7)*

After communing with God, Jonah returns to his mission. Similarly, Job's conversation with God is a series of prayers that allows him to process his suffering. In the end, Job recalibrates his understanding of God and his own positioning. He professes, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You" (Job 42:5). Through trauma, denial, and finally re-comprehending his relationship with God, Job is released from his suffering.

WE ARE JOB AND HIS FRIENDS

If remaining silent and prayerful is God's will for those in suffering, what then is God's desire for those who keep their company? Job's three friends are certainly on the right track at the start. They come together by agreement and visit Job with the intention of comforting him. In deep grief, they sit with him seven days and nights. No one says a word upon witnessing Job's immense suffering. However, after hearing Job's complaints, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar become judgmental. They take turns to expound on God's justice. Their knowledge of God is unimpeachable. But none of them can identify the cause of Job's suffering. Elihu, a young man who waits for his turn to speak, eventually becomes frustrated by all three of them because they condemn Job before they can even convince him (Job 32:3).

Through the viral choreography of COVID-19, God has shown us we can be Job or his friends at any point in time. With the help of historical hindsight recorded in the Bible and through the study of psychology, we could argue that Job is going through a transition process after a major trauma. If it is God's will for an individual to go through a period of readjustment, those surrounding him or her are in no place to come to their own conclusions. At this juncture, Job needs his friends' presence, prayers, food supplies, and access to daily necessities. Their company and prayers are to spiritually uplift Job in overcoming the extra-ordinary experience he is going through. The friends provide food and daily necessities to maintain the ordinary routine of Job's everyday life, which would make him feel grounded. If we refer to Brennan's socio-cognitive model of transition in Appendix 1, where would you place yourself in the diagram as a friend? If you were Job, where would you like to place your friend? Take out a pen and draw yourself into the diagram.

By dancing with the virus for the last three years, we come to understand that we can be Job or his friends at any given point in time. When we are Job, remaining silent and prayerful is golden in times of trials and tribulations. When we are his friends, God requires us to bring comfort—through our presence, prayers, non-judgment, and provision of food and daily supplies.

Appendix 1:

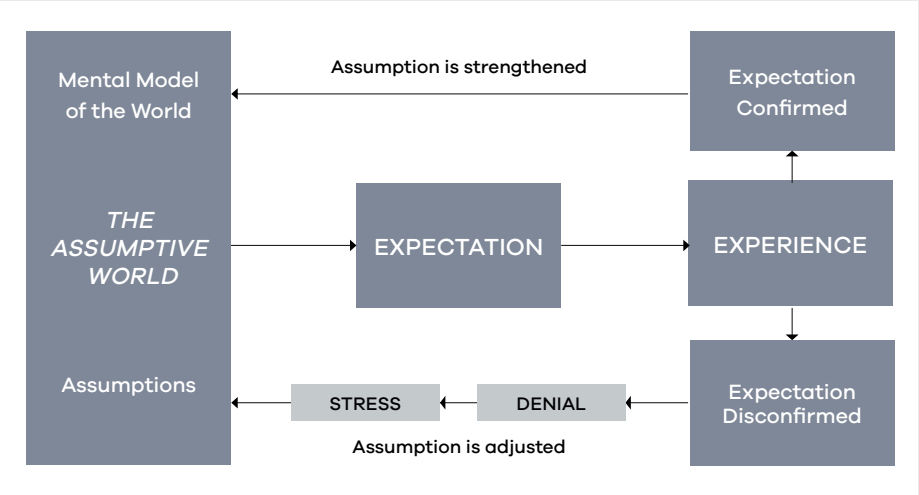


Figure 1. Adapted from Social-Cognitive Transition Model of Adjustment (Brennan 2001)

[3] J Brennan, "Adjustment to cancer – coping or personal transition?," Psycho-oncology 10, no. 1 (January/February 2001): 1–18.

James Brennan offers us an insight into the different stages of suffering from a psychological perspective. See Appendix 1 for visual reference.

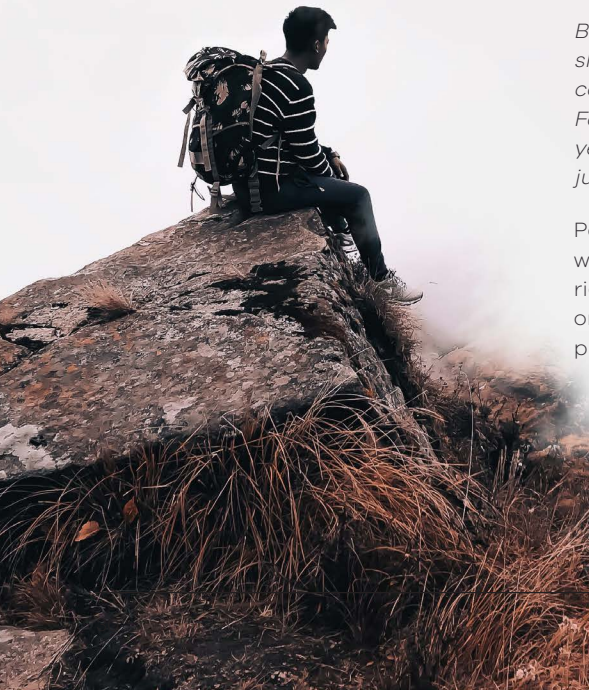
WHO AM I?
(PART 2)

Boaz—Malaysia

Editor's note: This is the second article in a two-part series on understanding who we are. The first part examined how Christians should manage dual and contrasting identities. This article focuses on who God wants us to be and the spiritual aspects He wants us to cultivate as His workers.

WHOSE OPINION MATTERS?

When we ponder the question "Who am I?", whose perspective should we consider? How others view us is important and can help us understand what kind of person we are. What do our actions and behavior reveal about us, especially in light of our Christian identity? Whatever opinions people make about us will, in turn, impact how they see Christians as a whole. Thus, we must be mindful of whether we are good Christians in the eyes of others and live up to the image of Christ.



Nevertheless, we should not hold the opinion of others in too high regard. For example, it is not important whether others perceive us as wealthy, beautiful, or gifted because these are temporal (Jas 1:11). Despite this, we also do not wish to be seen as poor, plain, or mediocre.

To put things into perspective, we must always ask, "Who am I in my own eyes?" This question helps us better understand our status, leading to a more balanced view of ourselves. As God's workers, we should neither think too highly of ourselves nor suffer from an inferiority complex, for the Lord has dealt each of us different gifts (Rom 12:3–8; Prov 16:5; Rev 3:17).

Who Am I in God's Eyes?

Ultimately, God's opinion of us is the most important of all, because He is the final Judge:

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. *(1 Cor 4:3–4)*

Paul reminds us that no matter how well-regarded we are by others or how righteous we perceive ourselves to be, only God's judgment stands. The Chinese proverb, "Do not judge a man until the lid of his coffin has closed," is a reminder that one can only truly be assessed after one's death. However, whether others judge us to be successful or virtuous does not matter. When we depart from this earth, the most beautiful eulogies will not increase our chances of entering the kingdom of heaven. God is the only and final Judge. Hence, in this life and our service to God, there is no question more important than who we are in God's eyes. What kind of believer does God want us to be?

1. SHEPHERD AND SERVANT

We can learn much about being a shepherd from the apostle Peter.

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. *(1 Pet 5:2–4)*

Although this message was directed at the elders at the time, its teaching is relevant for all believers, not just ordained church ministers. Many of us carry the responsibility of a shepherd, whether as a parent, a religious education teacher, or a member caring for fellow brethren, among others.

First and foremost, we must recognize who has ultimate authority over the flock. Peter addressed Jesus as the "Chief Shepherd"—the leader of all shepherds. This means there is only one head, one leader, and one commander within the church, the house of God. It is Jesus Christ.

Second, we must understand how

to shepherd. Rulers of the world rule with power and authority (Mt 20:25). Shepherds in the kingdom of God do not. In the workplace, superiors order their subordinates to work because they have the authority to do so. In contrast, the shepherd is a role model for his lambs. As the adage goes, example is better than precept. The Lord Jesus set us an example in all things—baptism, footwashing, keeping the Sabbath, and even in suffering for righteousness' sake.

The apostle Paul echoes Peter's reminder of the shepherd's heart of care for God's flock:

[F]or if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God? (1 Tim 3:5)

"Always remember that we are shepherds caring for believers, not managers barking curt orders at employees in meeting rooms"

We are called not to manage the church dispassionately; instead, we must tend to God's household with a caring heart. In the original Greek text, the word for "take care" has the same root (*epimeléomai*) as the word used in the parable of the good Samaritan, who "took care" of the injured man (Lk 10:34). Always remember that we are shepherds caring for believers, not managers barking curt orders at employees in meeting rooms. We are not hirelings who only show care and concern during official "work hours." Hirelings feel no deep connection to their charges. They finish work on the dot, put away their shepherding staff, and go home. Should something unexpected happen to the lambs in the middle of the night, the hireling would say, "Please do not come knocking on my door to disturb me." Even when the hireling is on duty, do not expect him to sacrifice his life to save the lambs from predators. The hireling does not go the extra mile because the little lambs are not his. In contrast, true shepherds love their sheep with a parent's heart. Parents have no qualms sacrificing sleep to nurse their sick child or toiling hard to give their families a better life.

Third, shepherds fulfill their roles regardless of time or place. We are religious education teachers not only during lesson time but also outside the confines of the classroom walls. We care for each other as brethren not only within the church, but also when we have returned to our respective homes. Paul demonstrates what it means to have the heart of a shepherd. Besides laboring hard and willingly enduring physical tribulations and persecution, his heart was always deeply concerned for the members (2 Cor 11:28).

In 1 Peter 5:2–4, the apostle Peter also teaches us about servanthood: we are to serve willingly and eagerly. Peter would have recalled what his Master and Teacher had once taught them and how the Lord set them an example.

Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Mt 20:26–28)

Being a servant (Greek: *diákonos*) or a slave (Greek: *doûlas*) is not humiliating. In fact, despising people in these positions would be tantamount to despising the Lord Jesus, because this was the form He took when He was on earth (Phil 2:7). Our Lord deliberately chose to be a servant to serve believers, and taught us how to serve through His actions. He lowered Himself and bent over to wash His disciples'



feet. If Jesus was willing to take up a job deemed inferior by others, what is our basis for rejecting this beautiful work?

A servant stands by unobtrusively (Gen 18:8) and is alert to the slightest indication of his master's needs (Lk 17:7–8). In the church today, some believers willingly lower themselves to serve quietly like a servant. They may go unnoticed by others, but they notice everything the church needs. What lies behind such willingness to labor? Consider why Jacob was willing to work fourteen years for Laban under dreadful conditions.

"There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes."
(Gen 31:40)

Jacob was willing to suffer because of his love for Rachel. Similarly, those who labor faithfully and quietly do so because they love Jesus and the church. Their love is not limited to a certain number of hours per day.

SERVICE IN ACTION

During a youth group visit to an interstate church, an elder took on the responsibility of receiving them. As he was also pastoring other churches in the region, he got up early in the morning to see to the youths' well-being before leaving to conduct services at the other churches. Then at the end of a busy day, he took it upon himself to continue serving the visiting youth during their evening barbecue. Not only had the elder prepared the ingredients for the barbecue the previous night, he also helped with the grilling. After the youths had enjoyed the delicious barbecue, he led the youths in cleaning up.

Whether serving on or off the pulpit, this elder fully manifested the spirit of a servant (Lk 17:7–10). Through his conduct, believers around him saw and learned what it means to be a humble and faithful servant.

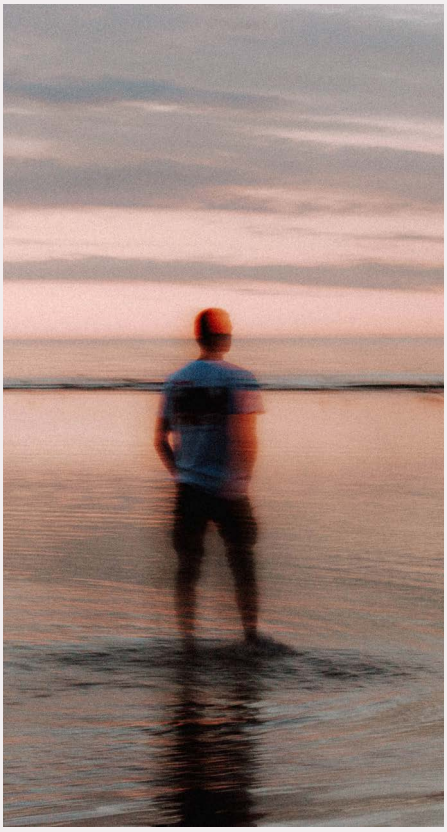
2. A LEARNED TONGUE AND EAR

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak.
(Jas 1:19a)

God has given us both tongue and ear and asks that we use our ears more and our tongues less. Ironically, we do the converse—we always demand that others listen to what we have to say. As shepherds and servants of God, what are the best ways to use our ears and tongue to serve His flock?

The Ear of the Learned

"The Lord GOD has given Me
The tongue of the learned,



That I should know how to speak
A word in season to him who is weary.
He awakens Me morning by morning,
He awakens My ear
To hear as the learned." *(Isa 50:4)*

The function of the ear is to receive. Ultimately, the learned must use his tongue to support and encourage the weak. However, to be learned, one must first be taught, and be keen to learn. What then should our attitude towards learning God's word be?

Morning by morning

Learning is lifelong. The learned knows that understanding God's word is not achieved overnight, nor is it a one-time effort. In fact, as the learned greatly esteems the learning of the word, he strives to learn as long as he lives.

Awakened

The phrase "He awakens" is used twice in this passage. It refers to waking up from sleep or being stirred up. Our slumbering ears must be woken up from their sleep. We must allow our ears to be awakened by God's word, especially by listening to sermons.

"Regardless of the style and content of the sermon, our ears and hearts must always be open to God's message"

Different people prefer different sermon styles and content. Some sermons are based on traditional expositions of the Bible that we have heard from young; others use creative explanations to evoke a sense of realization. Some sermons contain interesting anecdotes and surprising twists, while others take on a more didactic tone. Regardless of the style and content of the sermon, our ears and hearts must always be open to God's message.

To hear

As Christians, we are open to hearing and accepting the words of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Besides His recorded words in the Bible, Jesus may speak to us through the people around us. When we begin our service, we happily take advice from our seniors and elders. However, the



longer we serve in the ministry, the more we should sincerely reflect on whether we are willing to hear and accept the words of our co-workers. Do we give sufficient consideration to the opinions of our co-workers? Even more critically, do we reflect on ourselves and improve after hearing encouragement and correction from our co-workers?

The Tongue of the Learned

Once we have the ear of the learned, the Lord will bestow upon us the tongue of the learned. At this moment, the learned, having received education from God, will become the giver.

What are God's expectations of our tongue?

To speak to the weary

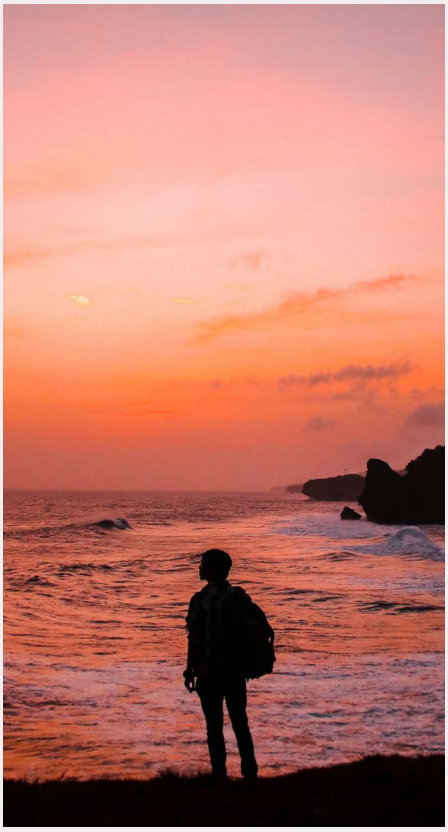
The learned must pass on everything he has learned and freely received from God to others. As we use our tongues to teach and encourage others, we ought to remember that our tongues are not for competing to be the most popular or impactful sermon speaker, for winning theological debates and showcasing our "wisdom" during Bible studies or faith discussions, or for malicious criticism and gossip about others. Instead, our tongues must be used to help and support those who are weary—those who are spiritually weak.

The Obedience of the Learned

The Lord God has opened My ear;
And I was not rebellious,
Nor did I turn away. *(Isa 50:5)*



In Isaiah 50:4, the ear is awakened by the Lord and receives His teachings, allowing us to become learned. In Isaiah 50:5, the ear is opened by the Lord and receives His instructions, allowing us to become His servant. Since we have received so much from God, more will be required from us (Lk 12:48). Gaining deeper spiritual insights through God's guidance should not puff us up with pride. In fact, the more spiritual knowledge we gain from God, the more submissive we will be expected to be.



Jesus exemplified this perfectly through His total obedience to the will of the heavenly Father. The author of Hebrews records how Jesus cited Psalm 40 to describe His calling and ministry:

Sacrifice and offering You did not desire;
My ears You have opened.
Burnt offering and sin offering You did not require. …
"I delight to do Your will, O my God,
And Your law is within my heart."
(Ps 40:6, 8, emphasis added*)*

Therefore, when He came into the world, He said:
"Sacrifice and offering You did not desire,
But a body You have prepared for Me.
In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin
You had no pleasure.
Then I said, 'Behold, I have come—
In the volume of the book it is written of Me—
To do Your will, O God.' "
(Heb 10:5–7, emphasis added*)*

What is the relationship between opening the ear and preparing a body? In the Old Testament, the Hebrew servant must be freed after serving six years. However, if the servant wants to stay with his master, his ear will be pierced (Ex 21:5–6). Therefore, piercing the ear signals that a man will give up his freedom, be his master's servant, and obey his master's commands forever. Since freedom is such a precious human right, piercing the ear is clearly not an action taken to gain a greater reward. Instead, it is done out of sincere love for his master.

[Christ Jesus] made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name. *(Phil 2:7–9)*

"Opening the ear" and "preparing the body" refer to how Jesus submitted to the will of the heavenly Father. While He was in His body of flesh, He took the form of a bondservant. While torn between choices, He offered up His body to become the burnt and sin offerings. He put aside His own will and submitted to God's will—this is what being a servant entails. He who has his ear opened will become humbler the more he serves and, all the more, submit to Christ and the church.

CONCLUSION

Jesus submitted to God's will while He was alive on earth. As a servant, He tasted the lowliness of man and sufferings on earth. Therefore, when He resurrected, the heavenly Father exalted Him as the most high—every knee shall bow before Him, and every tongue shall praise Him (Phil 2:7–11). The message is enduring and clear. Who I am in this life will determine who I will be in the life to come. If I am a rich fool in this life, I will have no part with the Lord in the life to come. If I am a submissive servant in this life, I shall reign with Him in the life to come (2 Tim 2:12).

So as we serve God in His church, let us remember who we are in God's eyes—a loving and selfless shepherd, and a faithful and obedient servant, whose ear is continually awakened by God's word and whose tongue is ready to comfort and teach.

SEEK THE LORD QUICKLY

Hosea—Ipoh, Malaysia

It is universally acknowledged that we only have twenty-four hours in a day. How we choose to spend these hours will by no means add to the twenty-four we already have. More soberingly, once these twenty-four hours are past, there is no way to get them back.

Therefore, we try to fill our hours with things we want or need to do. Priorities and values are attached to the activities that take up our time. This being true, we can ask ourselves, is our time being spent the most efficiently, most enjoyably, most fruitfully, or even most wisely?

We often hear this maxim when planning our time: "Begin with the end in mind." We consider the potential outcome of our choices to evaluate the action to be taken. Will we regret it in the future? No one enjoys the feeling of regret, but if we do the right thing at the right time, resulting in the right outcome, we will have no regrets. Therefore, the question is, how should we spend our time to reach the best outcome?

SERVE THE LORD WHILE WE CAN

The Gospel of Mark records two incidents of women bringing costly oil and spices to Jesus. In Mark 16, three women sought Jesus to anoint His body after death. However, little did they know that the opportunity had already passed. Jesus had resurrected, and His body was no longer in the tomb. The women had prepared the anointing spices in vain. Conversely, Mark 14 records another woman who, knowing Jesus had come, sought Him immediately and sacrificed her flask of costly fragrant oil to anoint Him. Even though the people around her thought her actions were wasteful, that was not how Jesus viewed them:

But Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her." (Mk 14:6–9)

Here, Jesus rebutted those who had disagreed with the woman's actions, saying that she had done a good work for Him. And more significantly, He stated that they would not have His physical presence with them forever.

> "While we may draw near to Jesus and come to church for services today, will we still be able to attend services tomorrow?"

Jesus may have been warning His disciples of what was to come, but His words also serve as an important reminder for us. We can find Jesus now, but are we sure we will find Him in the future? While we may draw near to Jesus and come to church for services today, will we still be able to attend services tomorrow?

Comparing the two incidents from chapters 14 and 16, we see that these women sought to perform the same act of love and kindness. They were willing to sacrifice valuable materials, but only the woman in chapter 14 could anoint Jesus with her bottle of costly spikenard oil. The others had the right intention, putting in the time and effort to prepare spices and seek out Jesus, but their efforts were in vain because Jesus was no longer there.

Hence, dear friends, brothers, and sisters, even with the right intention and effort, our actions would count for nothing if not executed at the right time. Therefore, it is essential to seize the opportunity to serve God while we can.

TIME SPENT ON THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

Yet we hear of many reasons given for not serving God. One common one is "I'm too busy." In our current socioeconomic environment, we are constantly persuaded to buy and spend to improve our lives which, in turn, requires us to earn more money so we can continue buying and spending. This capitalist outlook drives people to spend more time working.

However, if we take a step back, we know that life is more than just acquiring material things and living comfortably. Jesus warns us, "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mt 16:26). Is it worthwhile to busy ourselves trying to earn the whole world while exchanging our soul in the process? Dear brothers and sisters, have you ever been so busy that you cannot attend church services? Have you ever been so busy that you cannot do church work, serve, pray, or draw close to God? If we do not seize the time and opportunities to draw closer to our Savior when we can, will we still have the opportunity in the future?

Perhaps it is not a question of personal choice. Rather, we may be pressured to fulfill our duties to the people around us, which consumes our time and energy. In today's society, people are under tremendous stress from school, work, and even social obligations. At home, our families can be a source of stress too. The anxiety we accumulate over a day is challenging to shake off. No matter how hard we try, we can never please everyone or solve every issue. The constant stress can feel like a heavy burden on our shoulders. But have we forgotten that we have our heavenly Father as our Savior and Comforter? He calls out to us, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). The Lord Jesus is our reliance. He beckons us to come to Him to receive peace.

However, it seems that each time the Lord calls out to us, we turn Him away. We continue to carry our own burden, wishing to tread on our own chosen path and relying on our own strength and intelligence. If we take a moment to reflect, are we truly happy on this path we have chosen? Are we able to feel peace and rest, or are we always struggling under the weight of our burdens? The Bible tells us:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
And lean not on your own understanding;
In all your ways acknowledge Him,

And He shall direct your paths.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
Fear the LORD and depart from evil.
It will be health to your flesh,
And strength to your bones. *(Prov 3:5–8)*

The author here explains that we are stressed and worn out because we have been relying on ourselves alone. We have decided to use our own understanding to choose our path. Let us not blame God or the people around us if we continue on the wrong path, wondering why we are no closer to our goal. Remember that our heavenly Father loves us and is waiting earnestly for us to turn back to Him: "If you will return, O Israel," says the LORD, "return to Me" (Jer 4:1a).

TIME SPENT ON THE PLEASURES OF LIFE

Thus far, we have discussed how we must seek the Lord quickly at every opportunity and how we must not let the pressures of life stop us from doing so. However, we still face one more potential obstacle when we seek God: our desire for comfort and enjoyment. When we were young, we attended church services with our parents and met our friends there; we had fun participating in church camps, Bible seminars, courses, and spiritual meetings. But when did everything begin to change? When we started working, looking for a life partner, or having children, we may have secretly felt like the church was a third wheel—an inconvenience. Where have our initial zeal and love for God gone? In our youth, we were so faithful and zealous. However, spiritual matters have been pushed to the side by our lives' success, blessings, and comfort.

"When the temple of God needs to be built up, we are too comfortable to answer the call"

Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?"
Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: "Consider your ways!
You have sown much, and bring in little;
You eat, but do not have enough;
You drink, but you are not filled with drink;
You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm;
And he who earns wages,
Earns wages to put into a bag with holes."
Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Consider your ways!" *(Hag 1:3–7)*

If we are neither cold nor hungry and experience no lack in our lives today, these verses may not seem relevant. And perhaps, for this reason, we do not feel the need to self-reflect. When the temple of God needs to be built up, we are too comfortable to answer the call. We need to quieten our hearts and remember the warnings that God gave to the people of old:

Woe to you who put far off the day of doom,
Who cause the seat of violence to come near;
Who lie on beds of ivory,
Stretch out on your couches,
Eat lambs from the flock
And calves from the midst of the stall;
Who sing idly to the sound of stringed instruments,
And invent for yourselves musical instruments like David;
Who drink wine from bowls,
And anoint yourselves with the best ointments,
But are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.
Therefore they shall now go captive as the first of the captives,
And those who recline at banquets shall be removed.
The Lord GOD has sworn by Himself,
The LORD God of hosts says:
"I abhor the pride of Jacob,
And hate his palaces;
Therefore I will deliver up the city
And all that is in it." *(Amos 6:3–8)*

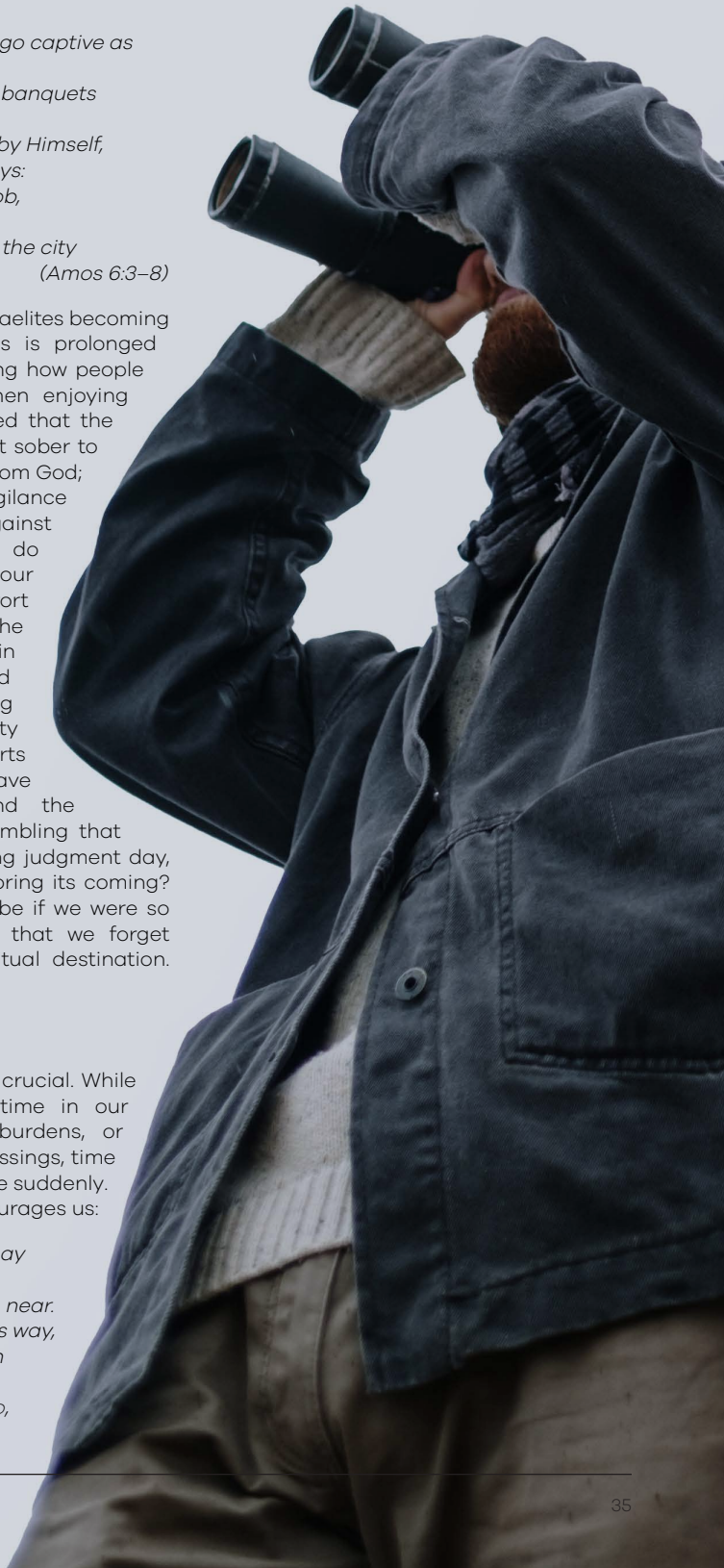
This description of the Israelites becoming drunk in their pleasures is prolonged over many lines, reflecting how people linger in indulgence when enjoying themselves. Amos warned that the leaders of Israel were not sober to reflect on the blessings from God; they had lost their vigilance and were defenseless against their enemies. Likewise, do we neglect God when our lives are full of comfort and bliss? And has the desire to maintain successful lives turned us away from seeking after God? Has prosperity so occupied our hearts and minds that we have lost our vigilance and the attitude of fear and trembling that we should have regarding judgment day, even to the point of ignoring its coming? How pathetic we would be if we were so engrossed in pleasures that we forget to prepare for our spiritual destination.

CONCLUSION

We all know that time is crucial. While we invest our limited time in our careers, carrying our burdens, or indulging in personal blessings, time ticks on; the end will come suddenly. Therefore, the Bible encourages us:

Seek the LORD while He may be found,
Call upon Him while He is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way,
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
Let him return to the LORD,
And He will have mercy on him;
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon. *(Isa 55:6–7)*

Seize hold of the time we have to seek God quickly. Do not delay while we can still choose who or what we will serve, whether that be our careers, our friends and families, our comforts and desires, or the Lord. Who knows what tomorrow will bring and when we will be called to give an account to our Lord? Previously, we may have been caught up in the affairs of this life, but it is not too late for us to seek the Lord while He may be found, and He will have mercy on those who seek after Him.



A LIFE OF GRACE

Daniel Liew—Portsmouth, UK

In the name of the Lord Jesus, I testify of His grace.

GROWING UP IN THE CHURCH

Looking back on my life so far, I realize how much my life has been touched by God's blessings, even from the very beginning. I was born two months premature and weighed only 1.53 kilograms (three pounds and six ounces). I was a scrawny little baby, as my father so flatteringly explained years later, like a small raw chicken, able to fit in the cupped palms of his hands. By the grace of God, thirty-seven years later, I am a fully grown man, blessed to be a husband and a father of two beautiful children with *very* healthy birth weights. I was also blessed to be born into a True Jesus Church (TJC) household. I did not have to go through the struggle of searching for the gospel and grace of salvation or seek out God's church.

My parents brought me up in the faith and always took my siblings and me to the church, both when we lived in Cambridge and after we moved to Portsmouth, United Kingdom. From young we attended church services and religious education lessons and learned God's word so we could grow spiritually. Locally, the church held Bible camps and, when we got older, there was the National Student Spiritual Convocation (NSSC) every summer. I was always eager to hear and learn the words of God and have fellowship with friends. Through these many opportunities, I gradually learned more about the importance of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not only the guarantee of our heavenly inheritance (Eph 1:13–14), but also our Guide and Helper in our life of faith (Jn 14:26; 16:13). Back then, I would hear about fellow students receiving the Holy Spirit or being touched by the Holy Spirit during prayer sessions. On the one hand, I felt a sense of joy because God's promises were proven to be true. When someone was confirmed to have received the Holy Spirit, we would all thank God and congratulate the individual. On the other hand, after seeing so many others receiving the Holy Spirit, I felt a slight hint of jealousy because it seemed to be happening to everyone except me. Oh, how I longed for a prayer to end and a worker to confirm that I had received the Holy Spirit. I longed to know what it was like to receive the Holy Spirit and be congratulated by others. Thinking back, perhaps my mentality was a little wrong. Maybe I subconsciously thought of receiving the Holy Spirit as an achievement and something praiseworthy to attain.

RECEIVING THE HOLY SPIRIT

Everyone's experience of receiving the Holy Spirit is personal and can vary. Scripturally, the key is to speak in tongues, as this is the evidence of receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–4). In 1999, when I was fourteen years old, I attended the NSSC at London TJC. During the convocation, there was an encouragement to pray

for spiritual wisdom and teachings on how we should serve in the church. One evening prayer, I went to the front of the church hall with my fellow students to pray for the Holy Spirit and receive the laying of hands. So many of us squeezed into that space that it was almost impossible to move without bumping into someone! At one point during the prayer, I told the Lord that I needed His Spirit to guide me. Otherwise, how could I serve Him well and edify the church? Without His Spirit, I would not have the spiritual wisdom and strength to be useful to Him. Thank God for His grace that, in His time, He granted me the promised Spirit during that prayer! I remember the experience vividly. There was a strong power and pressure on my head like someone was pouring warm water on it, and this sensation filled me. I was enveloped in glorious light, and the Spirit enabled me to speak in tongues to glorify the Lord. I wept uncontrollably with joy because my mind had been enlightened, and two things became clear to me: that God exists and that I am one of His blessed children! That moment will always remain etched deeply in my mind. Suddenly, despite being surrounded by praying classmates, their voices became muted, and it was like there was no one else around me. It felt like I had transcended time and space; it was just me and our heavenly Father. What an experience!

"From then, I knew in my heart that I wanted to serve God in any way I could. This thought was rooted deep into my heart as I carried on with my life of faith"

When the prayer ended, I opened my eyes and met the gaze of the preacher who had led the prayer session. He looked at me with a broad and knowing smile and gave me a thumbs-up. Though he said nothing, we both knew what it meant.

After I returned to my seat, I tried to tell my classmates that I had received the Holy Spirit and that God was real. But I was so overwhelmed I could barely get the words out. When they asked me if I was okay and if I had received the Holy Spirit, I nodded and smiled.

That evening before bed, I shared my experience with classmates to encourage



Preacher Daniel and family at his ordination ceremony.

them to pray more because God's promises were true. I was glad to be reading and sharing the Bible with my fellow students. From then, I knew in my heart that I wanted to serve God in any way I could. This thought was rooted deep into my heart as I carried on with my life of faith.

THE CALL TO SERVE

A few years later, in 2003, I attended my first year of the Youth Theological Training Course (YTTC), in Newcastle. The lessons were edifying, and the students bonded together through fellowship. Thank God, I was attentive, eager to learn, and fared well in the various tests. Then a thought occurred that, perhaps one day, I could serve the Lord and the church as a full-time preacher. But I pushed the thought aside and gently chided myself for thinking someone like me could be a preacher. I reminded myself I should not think too highly of myself but be more sober-minded. I filed away those thoughts in the back of my mind and kept them to myself.

I attended my second year of the YTTC in Sunderland the following year. One of the lessons was about priesthood, and the lecturer began to talk about serving as full-time workers. The preacher shared some skills and qualities that would be beneficial for a full-time worker to have. He encouraged us that if we had such gifts from God, we should use them for the sake of the church to serve the Lord. As the preacher listed them, it was like a pencil was ticking off a checklist in my mind. Rather than feeling proud and arrogant for possessing such qualities, it was a humbling realization: If I had any "good qualities" or "skills," it was only because God had blessed me with them, so I should use them to do His work. It was not the clear calling that some others have received in the past, such as hearing the powerful voice of God in a prayer or in a vision. Just as the pieces of a jigsaw come together to form a clear picture, my previous experiences and the teachings shared came together, and the message became clear to me: the Lord was calling me to serve Him with the gifts He had given to me. I knew I still had much to learn, so I began to pray that if this were indeed God's will, He would lead me and help me grow spiritually so I could serve Him.

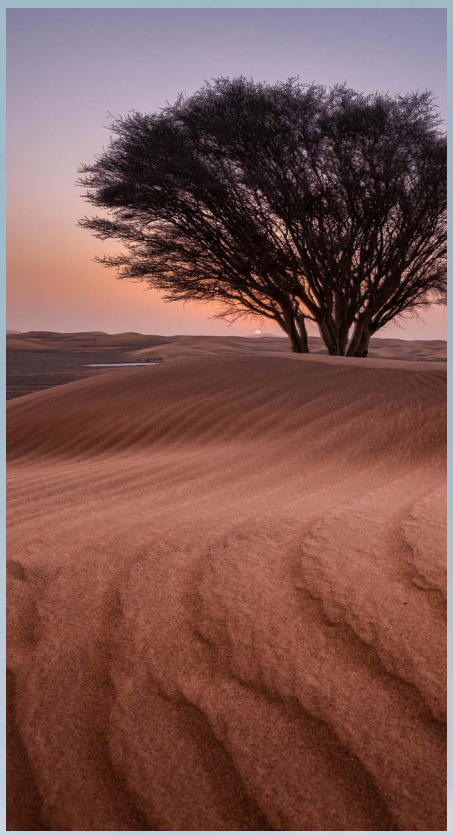


In my third year of the YTTC, we studied the Song of Solomon. We had an assignment to choose a verse from the book for personal reflection. I chose Song of Solomon 2:7:

I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
By the gazelles or by the does of the field,
Do not stir up nor awaken love
Until it pleases.

We had learned that God would not force believers to love and suffer for Him, because they would not be able to stand firm and would easily fall away from the faith. Instead, He hopes that when they are willing, they will awaken their love for Him and show it through action because this is what they truly desire. Forced love and genuine love are quite different, and the true nature of our love is revealed in testing times. I understand this passage to be true from personal experience. When my daughter was one or two years old, she would happily comply with my requests for a cuddle and a kiss. But one day, she came up to me and gave me a cuddle and a kiss completely of her own volition. Since it was not something demanded of her, it made her actions all the more precious. I was overjoyed. If I experience such joy as a father receiving unsolicited love from my child, imagine our heavenly Father's joy when we freely love and obey Him! Now consider this: if we willingly and wholeheartedly love and obey the Lord, we will bear and endure all things, remaining faithful no matter what. Such love and obedience is a sweet-smelling sacrifice to the Lord. When we set our love upon the Lord, His love and help will be manifested in the good times and more so in the bad times. When we call upon God, He will deliver us, and we will be satisfied with His salvation (Ps 91:14–15). Thus, we love because He first loved us (1 Jn 4:19). This love changes our behavior towards God and the brethren.

After reflecting, I concluded that though my heart was willing, my love for God had not yet been fully stirred up and awakened. There was still room to grow and more of the Scriptures to know so that I could become a useful worker, whether in a full-time capacity or otherwise. I needed to do better. I wanted to do better. My reflection became less of an assignment and more of a letter to Jesus. I asked the Lord to be patient with me and said I would try not to keep Him waiting too long. I would strive to be a useful vessel to Him.



After I submitted the assignment, one of the preachers came to ask me if I wanted to be a preacher. This surprised me because I had not told anyone this was in my heart. I confessed that I had considered it and explained why. Then he asked me if I was willing to serve as a preacher. I said that if God was willing, I was willing.

Reflecting on all that had happened, there was something I had to remember. Though I desired to be a preacher, God may have other plans. Regarding the role of the High Priest, Hebrews 5:4 says, "And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was." No one can be a preacher just because he wants to be one. If God is not willing, it would not matter how much you want it to be so. I reminded myself that whatever happens in the future, so long as I remained faithful to God and endeavored to do His will in all that I said and did, I would be doing my part to serve the Lord, no matter the capacity.

"These experiences helped me to understand the different works to be done, the diversity of members needing care and concern, and the many challenges that can arise while serving God"

The call to serve was firmly in my mind and only strengthened over the years. Thank God I had opportunities to serve in my local church, including serving a term on the church board. Furthermore, I was able to join missionary trips to Africa. God provided me opportunities to participate in aspects of the holy work that I would not ordinarily have had the chance to do at such a tender age. These experiences helped me to understand the different works to be done, the diversity of members needing care and concern, and the many challenges that can arise while serving God. I also learned how to work with others to deal with issues and how important

it is to rely on God while doing His work. I believe that God was preparing me for the path ahead. But I had to be willing to grasp these opportunities, so I could learn and be trained. I realized that I was most joyful when serving the Lord in the church and in life.

WHEN IS THE RIGHT TIME?

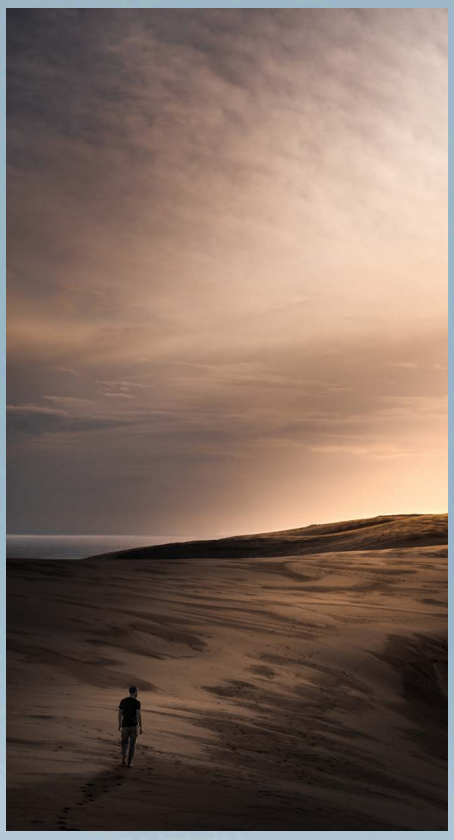
The question remained of when to step forward and say, "Here am I! Send me" (Isa 6:8). I applied for the theological training program (TTP) when I was twenty-seven, and this was considered fairly young. We had a newborn baby girl and were learning to be a family. People asked me why I decided to offer myself to serve at that time in my life. My wife Lisa and I had discussed various factors before we agreed on when I would apply. We wanted to have children first—with God's blessing, we hoped to have two. If I were to apply and be accepted as a candidate, she would effectively be a single parent, looking after the children and managing things at home. We agreed that it would make things easier for her if I waited until the children were a little older before I went for training. This meant I would apply around my mid-thirties. Though I had considered applying earlier, after prayer and discussion with Lisa, this seemed a sensible plan, and we trusted that God would lead. However, life does not always go the way we plan, and what we plan is not always the best for us. The reason is simple: we do not know what will happen tomorrow. Therefore, what the Bible teaches us is simple too.

A man's heart plans his way,
But the LORD directs his steps.
(Prov 16:9)

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
And lean not on your own understanding;
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct your paths.
(Prov 3:5–6)

If we pray to God, trust and acknowledge Him in our planning, we can have faith that whatever happens is part of His will for us. He will surely guide our steps onto a path He knows is ultimately good for us.

Even the best-laid plans must change to suit the circumstances, and the circumstances changed in 2012. This was an important year for me because two



life-changing events occurred that would cause us to bring forward my application to be a full-time worker.

The first was my mother's passing. She was fifty-two years old and suffered from liver cancer before the Lord called her to rest on February 21, 2012. The second event was the birth of my daughter in May 2012. I remember the joy of being in the operating theatre when she was delivered by emergency cesarean section, and I held her for the first time. I was a father at twenty-seven and entering this new chapter of life; who would have thought it? I felt both young and old at the same time. Within a few months, I witnessed the passing of one loved one and the birth of another, and I came to a realization. Life is short. My mother was not old by any definition, and I was already more than half her age. Who knew how long I would have left in this life to serve the Lord? I did not. Furthermore, the work was plentiful, and the workers were few. Once again, the pieces fell into place, and the picture was clear. It was time. I spoke to my wife and explained the epiphany I had. After we considered various factors and prayed about it for some time, we agreed to submit my TTP application at the end of 2012.

CONCLUSION

When we take the time to look back on our lives and count the blessings of the Lord, we can understand and more greatly appreciate the grace and blessings we have received. Then what God has given becomes a source of motivation to serve Him with a thankful heart, equipping us to serve Him according to the opportunities He gives us. We cannot allow the Lord's grace toward us to be in vain. Instead, we ought to respond positively by living a life worthy of the grace we have received, by pleasing Him in all we say and do (1 Cor 15:10; Phil 1:27). Let us arm ourselves with a willing mind to use what we have received for the sake of the Lord and His church (2 Cor 8:12).

KEPT IN THE HANDS OF GOD

James Liu—Newcastle, UK

In the name of our Lord Jesus, I testify.

For those of us who grow up in the True Jesus Church, we are always taught to trust in God. Although we may experience difficulties in life, it is not until we face a true challenge that we come to understand what it means to trust God fully. Until then, trusting in God may only take the form of mentioning our hardships in prayer.

My wife and I grew up in the church. We were active as youths, taking part in many church works, and were eventually married in church. Having children was the natural next step for us as a couple. After praying about this matter, my wife conceived in 2018, by God's grace. The pregnancy was healthy, and the first six months proceeded smoothly. We experienced the joys of all the normal milestones: the scans, kicks, and baby movements. As soon-to-be parents, we eagerly looked forward to our baby girl's birth.

In May 2019, my wife started to notice that the foetus would not move and kick as much as she used to. Our midwife advised that it was still early in the pregnancy, so quiet times could be expected. It may just be that the baby is sleeping more or is in a different position. But if we had concerns, we could request a checkup for reassurance. Despite the midwife's words, we still felt uneasy. Therefore, we put this into prayer, asking God to guide us to make the right decisions and for God to protect the child no matter what happens. Finally, we decided to request a checkup in the hope that it would at least give us peace of mind.

"Suddenly, a team of doctors arrived and explained that there were serious concerns for the baby"

The checkup consisted of a period of monitoring the baby in the womb. It was supposed to last twenty minutes but turned into an hour. Suddenly, a team of doctors arrived and explained that there were serious concerns for the baby. An emergency cesarean section was advised. My wife was swiftly taken into theatre, and our baby girl was born. She was exactly three months premature, weighing only 810 grams (one pound and twelve ounces)—small enough to fit into the two palms of my hands. We were overwhelmed with uncertainty over the future. What would happen now? Would she have long-term health problems? How will we take care of her? Would our daughter even survive? She was immediately taken into the Special Care Baby Unit (SCBU), where she was put onto a ventilator and various other life-support equipment. The doctors informed us that the only abnormality they could find in the womb was the beginning of placental abruption, where the placenta begins to detach from the uterus. This usually results in a failure of the placenta, meaning the baby would no longer receive oxygen and nutrients. If we had not requested an examination, the problem would have become more serious.



Truly, life is in the hands of God. In discovering the problem early, our daughter's life was preserved. True enough, while in SCBU we met another family in a similar situation, they had not requested a checkup. Their baby was in a more serious condition than our daughter. Undeniably, God moved us to make the right decision to protect her life. Knowing that all life is in the hands of God, gave us comfort. Even though we faced uncertainties over the future, we came to realize that we can be certain of God, our immovable Rock and steadfast Refuge (Ps 62:6–7). He will sustain and guide our family regardless of what may come to pass.

Eventually, my daughter was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Although my daughter continues to have lifelong disabilities, her condition is good for someone with her diagnosis. Step by step, she has been able to make positive progress. Her life is also full of wonderful testimonies of God's grace, a few of which I will share here.

THE POWER OF INTERCESSION

The SCBU is divided into three color-coded sections to differentiate the level of support needed: red for intensive care, blue for reduced care, and green for minimal care in preparation for discharge. Since her birth in May, my daughter had remained in the red area.

In July 2019, our local church hosted the annual National Student Spiritual Convocation. As one of the religious education coordinators, I was assigned to oversee this convocation. At first, I was conflicted about whether or not to continue with my responsibilities. On one hand, I desired to be with our daughter as much as possible, yet, on the other hand, I felt a sense of duty to the church. Since my daughter was still in the red area of SCBU, there was not much we could do for her except visit. We took faith in the words of Jesus, that if we seek God's kingdom first, He will provide for our needs (Mt 6:33), which meant He would also take care of her. Therefore, I continued with my church duties. In doing so, we had several opportunities to take the visiting preachers, who were there for the convocation, to the hospital to pray for my daughter.

After one particular visit in the morning, a preacher requested the intercession of the students for my daughter during a prayer session. That evening, during our visit, we discovered that our daughter had been transferred from the red to the blue area. The sudden move showed that her condition had vastly improved during the day. We felt immense joy and encouragement to experience God's power. It was also greatly encouraging for the students to see for themselves the power of united prayer. We praise God for fulfilling the promise of our Lord Jesus that when "two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by [our] Father in heaven" (Mt 18:19).

"Yet the power of intercession is undeniable. Having experienced it firsthand, I have come to realize that the benefit of intercession far outweighs the discomfort of requesting it"

To request intercession is not always an easy matter. It makes us feel exposed—as if we are confessing our weaknesses before others. Or sometimes, we feel like our challenges are too mundane to bother the brethren with. Yet the power of intercession is undeniable. Having experienced it firsthand, I have come to realize that the benefit of intercession far outweighs the discomfort of requesting it. I learned to forgo my feelings and reach out for intercessions whenever needed. Through the continued prayers of our brothers and sisters, my daughter was discharged from the SCBU altogether in October 2019, after just over four months. She came home with a portable oxygen tank to support her breathing, which she was weaned off a year later.



TO RELY ON GOD IS TO EMPTY ONESELF

Throughout the first two years of my daughter's life, she was constantly readmitted to hospital for various reasons. On a few occasions, she had to stay in the hospital for nearly a month. This was particularly difficult once the COVID-19 lockdown began in March 2020. Government-imposed restrictions meant only one parent could remain in the hospital, while the other could not even visit. This created a great sense of helplessness for my wife and me. On a few occasions, our daughter was admitted to hospital because of symptoms with unknown causes. As parents, we could not do much for her apart from being with her and waiting for tests and results. This further added to the feelings of powerlessness.

On one occasion before my daughter's first birthday, I remained in the hospital with her for a few weeks while my wife stayed at home. Our daughter was struggling to feed properly, sometimes even refusing to feed. One evening, I talked to my wife via video call about how difficult it was. After our conversation, I tried to feed her again; miraculously, she drank her milk without a problem. When I reported this to my wife, she revealed that after our conversation, she had knelt to pray and continued praying until I messaged her to say that our daughter had taken her feed.

"We had previously put many matters into prayer, but it was only when we hit rock bottom—when we felt like we had nothing left—that we sincerely yearned for God's help"

We were completely amazed at the power of prayer. When we came before God in our helplessness, God revealed His power. Through this experience, we understood what it means to trust in God. We had previously put many matters into prayer, but it was only when we hit rock bottom—when we felt like we had nothing left—that we sincerely yearned for God's help. This is mirrored in Paul's experience, that when we face our greatest weakness, God's strength is manifested (2 Cor 12:9–10). When we empty ourselves, we truly see how much we need God.

We thank God for allowing us to experience this. As our daughter continues to grow, she will face a range of health problems. Yet we now know how to fully rely on our God to meet these challenges. We have learned to fully empty ourselves before God to seek His power and grace. Time and time again, God has revealed His great power and mercy to us.

BAPTISM INTO THE FOLD

Because of the pandemic, no baptisms were conducted in our local church during 2020 and early 2021. As a result, our



daughter was not baptized until August 2021, at the age of two. The two years of waiting were a period of anxiety due to her numerous health problems. We were constantly concerned that something might happen before she could be baptized. But because of the pandemic, all we could do was put the matter into prayer. Upon reflection, we found that God's timing was good. If the pandemic had not occurred and baptism had been possible during 2020, it would have been challenging as my daughter's health was weak, and she still required oxygen support. Having her baptism delayed meant that her body was much stronger. On the day of her baptism, we were greatly moved. Everything went smoothly, and my daughter experienced no complications. We saw how precious it was for our daughter to be baptized into God's fold.

In the True Jesus Church, the water baptism sacrament is followed by footwashing and Holy Communion. We were worried about the Holy Communion because our daughter was incapable of eating solid foods, even though she was two. She could not swallow solids, and any attempt to do so usually resulted in vomiting. In the weeks leading up to the day, we sought advice from a number of ministers. Ultimately, we were advised to do our best, and even if she could only take a little of the bread and the cup, it would suffice. We also put the matter into prayer. We thank God that when the time came for Holy Communion, we followed the ministers' advice with faith. By God's grace, and to our surprise, our daughter could take a little of the bread and the cup.

Now that she had received all three sacraments of the True Jesus Church, we felt an overwhelming sense of relief. Our daughter is now a child of God, with the hope of eternal life. No matter what may come to pass in her physical life, her soul is preserved by the heavenly Father. All our anxieties had turned into peace and comfort.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Although the health of our daughter has provided many challenges, my wife and I have come to understand the truth of what Elder James wrote, that we could "count it all joy when [we] fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of [our] faith produces patience" (Jas 1:2–3). Though the trials are great, they have become an even greater testimony, strengthening our faith in our heavenly Father. They are times when God has shown His abundant mercy and compassion to us. We can only give thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ and continue to hold fast onto Him with joy, knowing that He holds all things in His hands.



RAISING GOD'S SERVANTS

Lawrence Chan—London, UK

Parenting is a challenge. We need to take care of our children, teach, and provide for them well past their early years. And as Christians, we understand that our responsibility extends beyond caring for our children's physical and emotional needs; we must also nurture them spiritually. Furthermore, when our children are baptized, they adopt a new identity in the Lord:

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father. *(Rev 1:5b–6a)*

Those who have had their sins forgiven through baptism have become kings and priests. In the Old Testament, the priesthood was a blessing and gift from God (Num 18:7). When God established the Aaronic priesthood, He instructed Aaron and his sons to separate themselves from the people so they could minister before God and perform His work (Ex 28:1). Today, as priests of the end time, purchased by the blood of Christ, we have likewise been called out and tasked with ministering before God. This role of priesthood applies not only to us but also to our children.

Therefore, an important part of raising our children in the Lord means raising them as servants of God. How should we undertake this task, and what attitude should we have? King David gives us a good example in how he equipped his son, Solomon, to serve God.

GOD IS THE FATHER OF OUR CHILDREN

Before Solomon was anointed king, David gathered all the leaders and officials of Israel. Knowing his time was near its end, David prepared Solomon to be king and to take on the work of building God's temple.

Now He said to me, "It is your son Solomon who shall build My house and My courts; for I have chosen him to be My son, and I will be his Father." *(1 Chr 28:6)*

If we replace Solomon's name here with our own or our children's, this statement would be equally true. Though it feels like our children will always be ours, our time as their parent is actually limited. God has chosen us to be His children, and He

remains our Father for all eternity. As His children, we are responsible for building up His house together—this spiritual temple, the church—so that it continues to grow and prosper until Jesus comes again (1 Pet 2:4–5).

We should have the mindset of Hannah, who gave birth to Samuel, knowing she would one day have to offer him up to the Lord. Likewise, we are raising our children for God, and when they are ready, we need to present them to Him for service.

INSTILLING HUMILITY

Furthermore King David said to all the assembly: "My son Solomon, whom alone God has chosen, is young and inexperienced; and the work is great, because the temple is not for man but for the LORD God." *(1 Chr 29:1)*

Firstly, David spoke these words to Solomon to teach him the attitude he would need as king. We tend to think of leaders as confident and knowledgeable, but David reminded Solomon that he is young and inexperienced. As Christians, we must be humble; only then can we accept and admit our limitations and weaknesses and recognize that we must rely on God. With God's help, we have strength to continue His work (2 Cor 12:9–10) and become sufficient for the roles bestowed on us (2 Cor 3:5–6).

"Even Solomon, who as king would hold the highest position in society, could not be an effective ruler and leader if he relied only on himself"

Secondly, David spoke these words before the assembly because he wanted the leaders to understand that they would need to help Solomon build a temple worthy of God. The leaders would go on to support Solomon by offering their money and precious stones. David and all the people rejoiced that they had provided towards the building works (1 Chr 29:6–9). This is a joy we also find when we serve together. As Paul tells us in Ephesians 4, we are all part of one body, and each part has its role. All parts of the body must work together, as the body cannot function effectively otherwise. Even Solomon, who as king would hold the highest position in society, could not be an effective ruler and leader if he relied only on himself.

Thirdly, David reminded Solomon that the work he was to undertake was important for God's glory. As servants of God, we must remember that our work is for God and His glory. We can prevent pride from entering our hearts by constantly reminding ourselves of this, particularly if we hold a prominent role in the church.

From Solomon's response to God in 2 Chronicles 1:7–10—"for who can judge this great people of Yours?"—we can see that he took his father's teachings to heart. Being reminded of his weaknesses, he asked God for wisdom and knowledge to lead the people.

Instilling this humble mindset is key to raising God's servants. We need to teach



our children these principles so we can serve God together with humility:

1. We must rely on God, not on ourselves.
2. The work of God is carried out together.
3. The work of God is important.
4. We work to glorify God, not ourselves.

SETTING A GOOD EXAMPLE

"Now for the house of my God I have prepared with all my might: gold for things to made of gold, silver for things of silver, bronze for things of bronze. …Moreover, because I have set my affection on the house of my God, I have given to the house of my God, over and above all that I have prepared for the holy house, my own special treasure of gold and silver." *(1 Chr 29:2–3)*

God forbade David from building the temple. However, because this work remained in his heart and mind, he did as much as he could by preparing construction materials. David declared the above words to the people and Solomon to set an example and show them that he had willingly offered his best to God.

In 1 Chronicles 29:5, David challenged the people, "Who then is willing to consecrate himself this day to the LORD?" The Israelites responded by willingly offering to God, and rejoiced with David in doing so (1 Chr 29:9). Our service to God should not be driven purely by compulsion or duty because, if this is the case, it will inevitably be half-hearted (1 Pet 5:2). Instead, we strive to serve with all our heart and soul, as Moses repeatedly reminded the Israelites (Deut 11:13). After all, God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor 9:7).

David was only able to effectively challenge the people to give their best to God because he first set an example. Parents are role models for their children—they grow up observing and learning from us. They pick up our habits, attitudes, behavior, work ethic, and countless other things. When they watch us, do they see someone who loves, serves, and places God first in their life? It is important that we set a good example of what it means to be a Christian so that, through us, they can build a solid foundation to become a good servant of God.

SUPPORTING OUR CHILDREN

Then David gave his son Solomon the plans for the vestibule, its houses, its treasuries, its upper chambers, its inner chambers, and the place of the mercy seat and the plans for all that he had by the Spirit, of the courts of the house of the LORD. *(1 Chr 28:11–12a)*

David helped Solomon in the building work by providing the plans for the temple. By doing so, David directly supported him, giving him a starting point and direction for his work.

As parents, we naturally worry about our children's future because we know they will need to support themselves one day. So we try to prepare them, and prepare for them, as best we can, whether financially,

academically, or by providing them with different experiences and opportunities to learn new skills. However, in preparing them to face the world, we can easily neglect their spiritual life. But their spirituality is more important because our degrees, jobs, and possessions will no longer matter in the end, while our spiritual lives are eternal (2 Cor 4:18). So we should not neglect to help our children mature in this regard.

When our children start to work for God, they, like Solomon, will be young and inexperienced. Divine work that seems simple and easy to us may seem daunting and difficult to younger members. So when our children become involved in church work, we must support them as best we can rather than leave them to grapple with tasks alone.

"Our support starts from an early age, in building up their belief and faith in God and teaching them God's words, so they have a firm foundation from which to serve when they are older"

In the church where I grew up, the religious education (RE) students in their early teens would be assigned to lead hymnal sessions before service. When it was time for my RE class to be put on the schedule, I was strongly resistant, so a sister substituted for me the first time I was assigned. My parents occasionally tried to encourage me, but I refused for many months, primarily because of a fear of being in front of others—a fear not unique to the young. Years later, my mother shared with me that, recognizing that I was stubborn in my refusal, they prayed for me until I was ready to take up the task.

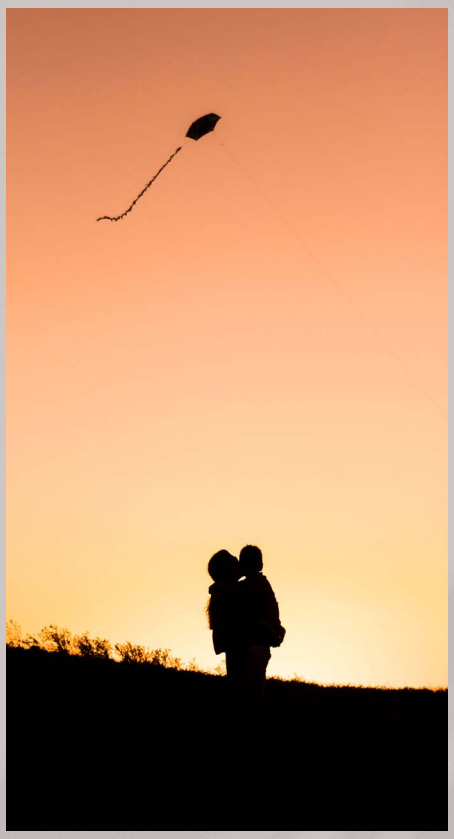
There are many ways we can support our children in serving God. These include:

- Helping them to find suitable opportunities to serve.
- Giving them opportunities to practice at home, such as leading hymn singing, prayer, and Bible study during family services.
- Praying together with them for their work.
- Helping them to plan and prepare.
- Giving them constructive feedback.
- Comforting and encouraging them when things do not go well.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION FROM WHICH TO SERVE

When I was my father's son,
Tender and the only one in the sight
of my mother,
He also taught me, and said to me:
"Let your heart retain my words;
Keep my commands, and live."
(Prov 4:3–4)

Supporting our children in their service does not begin when they are ready to serve. Our support starts from an early age, in building up their belief and faith in God and teaching them God's word, so they have a firm foundation from which to serve when they are older. Solomon remembered the words of spiritual wisdom



that David had imparted to him; they had served to influence and guide his life. By writing the Book of Proverbs, he did the same for his own son.

I have strong memories of my mother reading testimonies from *Holy Spirit Monthly* magazine as bedtime stories to my sister and me when we were young. We both looked forward to this and loved to hear testimonies—an enthusiasm I see replicated today in my daughter. Being young and not having our own experiences of God's power, we could be filled with wonder at the miracles that God performs on those who believe in Him. I remember, when I was a pre-teen, concluding that though I had not yet personally experienced God, I believed God exists because of all of the testimonies I had heard. This formed a building block in my belief and faith in God.

Even seemingly small acts should not be overlooked. Since my daughter was a toddler, my wife and I would tell her that we would pray for her whenever she was ill. After she recovered, we would mention how Jesus had helped her and thank Him together in prayer. Later as a young child, she would say the same thing to us when she knew we were ill or hurt. From such a small act, a simple faith grew—a faith that God is real and has the power to help us.

Establishing and maintaining a family altar is essential to building our children's faith from young. God commanded the Israelites to teach their children diligently throughout the day, even when walking or lying down (Deut 6:6–7). Similarly, there are opportunities in our daily life to speak of Jesus and God's word and to build up our children's faith.

CONCLUSION

From David's example, we can better understand the task of raising God's servants. It may seem challenging, but we do not bear this responsibility alone. Our heavenly Father, the Father of our children, plays His part in helping them grow. As David prayed:

"And give my son Solomon a loyal heart to keep Your commandments and Your testimonies and Your statutes, to do all these things, and to build the temple for which I have made provision."
(1 Chr 29:19)

After making his proclamations to the gathered assembly, David asked God to guide Solomon. As parents, we may teach and prepare our children to serve God, but most importantly, we need to pray and entrust them into the hands of God. It was through the blood of Christ that our children were made kings and priests; through God's grace, they are called to serve Him, build up His temple, and minister before His throne. Therefore, as we work to instill humility in them and set a good example of service, let us rely on our heavenly Father to raise His children as His faithful servants.



THE PATTERN OF SOUND WORDS

Eng Guan Tay—Singapore

Pattern of sound words
Sound through the ages
Faith of our fathers
Found in the pages
Voice of the Master
Through tempest and storm
Casts a calm luster
We see the Lord's form

Pattern of sound words
Taught by faithful men
Hear in love and faith
Teach to faithful men

Pattern of sound words
Sound through the fathers
Faith of our children
Found in the Scriptures
Voice of the Shepherd
Along ancient paths
Guides the little flock
Keeps our trembling hearts

Pattern of sound words
Taught by faithful men
Hear in love and faith
Teach to faithful men

References: 2 Timothy 1:13; 2:2; Numbers 12:8; Matthew 14:26–27; Deuteronomy 6:7; Jeremiah 18:15; Luke 12:32

True Jesus Church

ARTICLES OF FAITH

JESUS CHRIST

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

HOLY BIBLE

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

TRUE JESUS CHURCH

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

WATER BAPTISM

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

HOLY SPIRIT

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

FOOTWASHING

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

HOLY COMMUNION

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

SABBATH DAY

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

SALVATION

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

LORD'S SECOND COMING

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

CALL FOR ARTICLES

Issue #96: Spiritual Nurture: Prayer
Articles due: July 1, 2023

Issues 96 and 97 will form a duology dedicated to spiritual nurture. In each, we will look at one of two foundational aspects of our Christian life and faith—prayer and God's word—and how it relates to our spiritual cultivation.

Both prayer and God's word are so ingrained into our faith and worship as to be almost unremarkable. Kneeling to pray and reading the Bible can become merely routine, to the point that we absentmindedly mumble a quick prayer before we rush out the door in the morning, or we skip our daily Bible reading when we feel busy or overwhelmed. Even if we have an impeccable habit of prayer and Bible reading, we may take it for granted and not reap the full spiritual benefits.

The Bible tells us that both prayer and God's word are precious and powerful. They both play important roles in our spiritual cultivation, growth, and relationship with God.

In issue 96, we will focus on the role of prayer in our spiritual cultivation. We know that our merciful God hears and answers our supplications (Heb 4:16), but have we felt the impact of prayer, not only on our physical lives but also our inner beings? Have we truly experienced the transforming power of prayer?

How can we establish an effective prayer practice—one which supports and engages in the process of our spiritual growth, giving us strength to overcome our doubts and spiritual weaknesses (Mt 26:41; Rom 8:26; Phil 4:6–7)? How does prayer build up our holy faith and knowledge of God's will, enabling us to walk worthy of the Lord and bear fruit (Jude 1:20; Col 1:9–12)? How can we learn to cherish prayer and allow it to nurture a deeper, vibrant, and more active connection with God?

GENERAL WRITING GUIDELINES

Content

- Content should be biblically sound and adhere to biblical principles.
- The 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.
- Do not plagiarize the work of other writers or institutions, published either in print or online. Any quotations, ideas, or concepts taken from other sources must be properly referenced.

Grammar/Style

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

Manna only accepts submissions written by True Jesus Church members. 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: 2500–3000 words.

Doctrinal Study
A Doctrinal Study examines an aspect of True Jesus Church beliefs and may present it in comparison to other beliefs.
Article length: 2500–3000 words.

Exhortation
An Exhortation encourages and admonishes the reader in different aspects of the Christian faith.
Article length: 2000–2500 words.

Testimony
A Testimony recounts an experience in the Lord that will encourage and edify the reader.
Article length: 1500–2000 words.

Creative
Creative pieces include poems, parables, or short stories that illustrate a biblical teaching or idea. Keep in mind as you are writing: how will this edify the reader?

Submission Information

Please email articles as Microsoft Word documents to manna@tjc.org, including your name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number.
By submitting an article, you consent to it being edited and published in Manna, in print and online, distributed globally and promoted on social media. If accepted for publication, your article may also be edited and/or translated for other True Jesus Church publications and websites.

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Our Beliefs

True Jesus Church

CONTACT INFORMATION

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

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