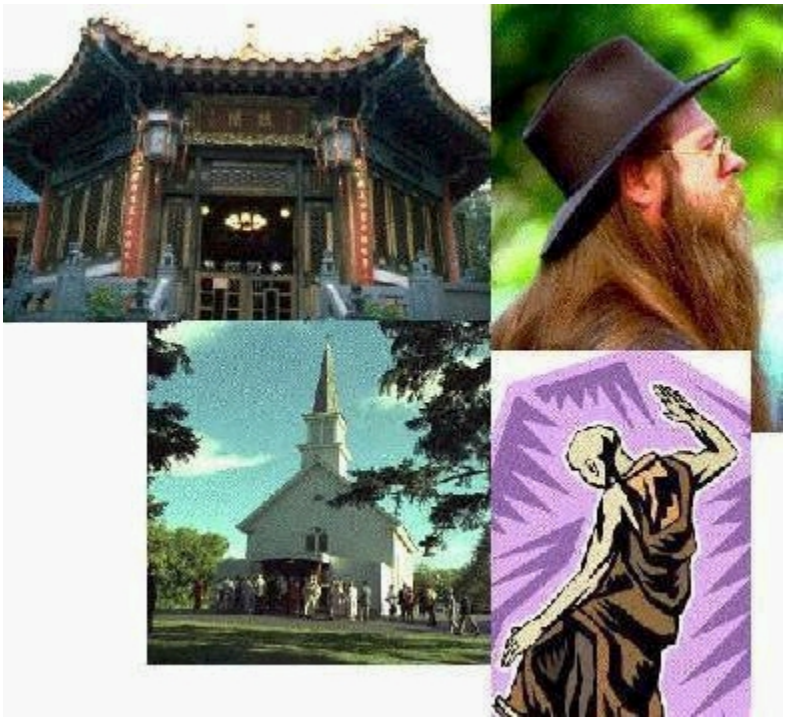
Virtual Christian Magazine
Hope And Encouragement For The Real World

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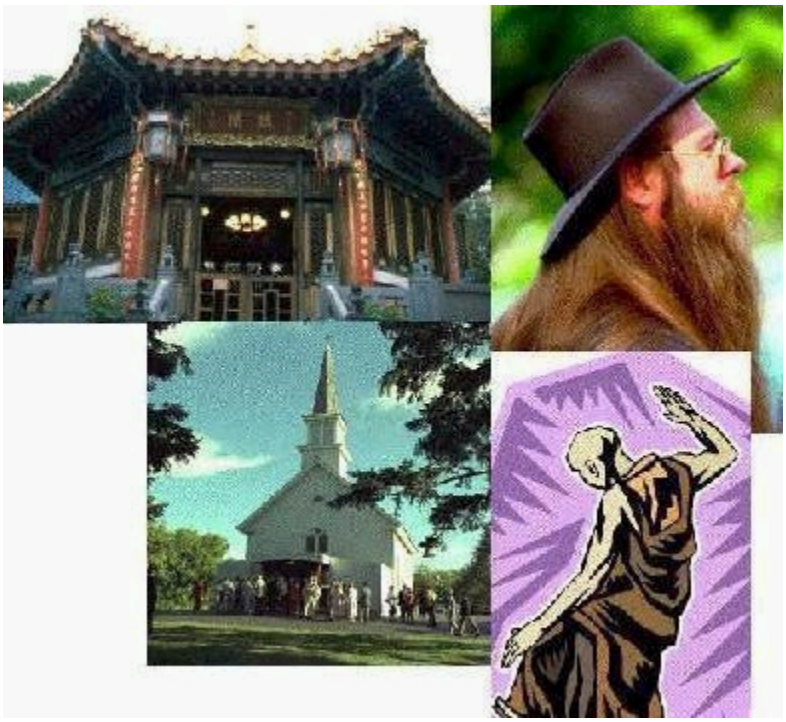
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Many Paths to God?

By Mike Bennett

Sincere people worship God in so many different ways. Does a loving God look at all these paths as equal? If not, what does He have in mind?



IT WAS A "GET TO KNOW YOU" VISIT with my new doctor, and since I work for a church, the conversation touched on religion. The doctor didn't know much about the United Church of God, so he asked several questions trying to understand where it fit in the panorama of Christian religions.

He mentioned that as a Jew, married to a Catholic, he is fascinated by all the competing flavors of Christian churches, each with different nuances, as he sees it, of doctrine. "Yet they all think theirs is the way that leads to heaven, and everyone else goes to hell," he said. He said that's much different from what he is used to. In his synagogue people have lots of different opinions, but they all get along and meet together.

Today many Jews, and actually many Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Hare Krishnas and lots of other people, believe that God is not exclusive -- that there are many paths to God. This "enlightened" view seems to be the culmination of man's quest for tolerance and true brotherhood, after millennia of hatred, bigotry, pogroms, forced conversions and inquisitions.

God certainly doesn't want hatred and bigotry. But is it possible the "many-paths-to-God" approach is not exactly what God wants -- that He has a plan that is even better?



Are there many paths to God? Those who believe in and study the Holy Bible run across many scriptures that seem to clearly say no. In Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus talks about the narrow gate, and says that only a few find it. Verses 15 and 16 identify false prophets who lead people into religious beliefs with bad fruits. God doesn't seem to be calling everyone to His way now (John 6:44). Acts 4:12 goes so far as to say about Jesus Christ, "For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

But millions, even billions, throughout history have not heard Jesus' name or understood His message. Would our loving, merciful God allow so many to miss out on the promise of salvation? The Bible tells us that God does not play favorites (Acts 10:34-35) and "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). Many Christians struggle to understand how that loving fairness will be applied to the billions throughout history who have not professed the name of Christ.

An answer to the dilemma

How will people from so many different paths all have a chance? Studying the "feasts of the Lord" (Leviticus 23) and how Christ and the apostles discussed them gives a fascinating insight into how God plans to offer salvation to people of all paths -- animists, atheists, Buddhists, nominal Christians -- everyone!

Many Christians are unaware of the deep meaning conveyed by the Holy Days of the Bible. But a number of passages in the Old and New Testaments explain the steps in God's plan of salvation in relation to these celebrations that Christ and the New Testament Church continued to keep. Consider this brief summary.

The first festival in the spring is the Passover, which Paul explained represented Jesus Christ's sacrifice: "For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7). This awesome gift makes salvation possible -- it makes it possible for sinful man to be forgiven and enter a relationship with God.

The second festival, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, continues to explain the process of conversion, as those who are called respond to Christ's merciful sacrifice by repenting and seeking to get rid of the sin, represented in many places in the New Testament as leaven. Paul discusses how sin acts like leaven in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8. "Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (verse 8). Also, as the Israelites came out of Egypt during the Days of Unleavened Bread, Paul compares crossing the Red Sea with baptism (1 Corinthians 10:1-2).

Pentecost plays a major role in the New Testament as the day when God poured out the Holy Spirit, starting His Church (Acts 2). The Holy Spirit makes possible the miracle of writing God's laws on the minds and hearts of those who accept Christ's sacrifice, repent and are baptized (Hebrews 8:10).

A future hope

These first three festivals show the way being opened for salvation and the Church age beginning. The next four festivals summarize the prophesied events that will make it possible for all to have a chance for salvation. They demonstrate Peter's statement: "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

The Feast of Trumpets is an annual reminder of the promise that Christ will return to establish God's Kingdom at the sound of the last, the seventh, trumpet spoken of by the apostles John and Paul (Revelation 11:15; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:52).

By comparing the sacrificial rituals of the Day of Atonement with prophesied events, many Bible students relate that day with the putting away of the instigator of sin, Satan, who has played a major role in separating man from God (Leviticus 16:21-22; Revelation 20:1-3). Also, this Holy Day again reminds us of the necessity of Christ's sacrifice for humans to be at one with God.

The prophecy of Revelation 20 continues with the peaceful 1,000-year rule of Christ and the saints (Revelation 20:4) portrayed by the harvest festival of Tabernacles. All those living during this time will have the opportunity to come and learn of God, and not learn war any more (Zechariah 14:16-19; Isaiah 2:1-4).

But what about all who have ever lived in the past who haven't had the opportunity for salvation? The last Holy Day provides an annual reminder of God's incredible love. Continuing in the prophetic summary of Revelation 20: "But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished" (verse 5, also see verses 11-12).



This resurrection and period of judgment is also talked about in Ezekiel 37, where God says "I will put My Spirit in you" (verse 14). So those who are resurrected will have their chance to repent, accept Christ's sacrifice and receive the Holy Spirit. No matter what path they had been on in this life, all will have the opportunity to experience the joys of God's path. Christ talked about the people of Sidon and Tyre, Ninevah and even Sodom having their chance in this period of judgment (Matthew 11:21-24, 12:41-42). All people of all times and all walks of life will have the chance to experience the truth, peace and fulfillment of following God's way.

This is a big subject, and this whirlwind tour can't do it justice. If you would like to explore this more in your Bible and learn more about God's merciful

plan for everyone, click here to request a copy of the 62-page educational booklet, *God's Holy Day Plan: Promise of Hope for All Mankind*. It's available free of charge in the public interest.

Do You Remember When?

By Robert Berendt

Wonderful memories. Painful memories. Why did God give us the capacity for memories? Will we ever truly be able to wipe away the evil and remember only the good?



MY WIFE, VALERIE, AND I WILL NEVER FORGET our visit to a World War II concentration camp named Mauthausen a few years ago. It is a contradiction in that the camp is located along the beautiful Danube River countryside of Austria and yet it was the scene of the suffering and death of tens of thousands of human beings. The survivors cannot forget what they saw and experienced. These painful experiences are so deeply etched in the mind that they affect a person for life. Rape, abuse, persecution and suffering all carry scars that stay with humans.

But good memories stay with us as well. I am part of a club made up of people who grew up together in the Coal Branch of Alberta. The towns closed down close to 50 years ago, but hundreds of people come back every five years for a reunion and to recount the stories from the past. Those memories are enjoyable and we bask in their warmth.

Memories bring us to God

Our minds also contain memories of shameful things we may have done and sins we have committed. At the right time God revives those memories for us to lead us to Him.

Our loving Heavenly Father created us this way for a great purpose. Paul writes about some reasons in his book to the church in Rome. Romans 5:3-5 tells us, "And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." Verse 8 tells us, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Memories are indelible in our human minds. These imprints are needful because they keep us from repeating mistakes and they also remind us that the Creator judges our every word and act. Jesus said, "But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment" (Matthew 12:36).

King David expresses his agony at remembering his sin in Psalm 51. In verses 3 and 4 we read, "For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against

You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight -- that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge." Job expresses the necessary human response when he said, "Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6).

What God forgets

Once converted people recognize their sin and repent deeply, they can be forgiven by the precious sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Savior. Our problem is that often we do not forgive ourselves because we cannot forget. It does take faith to accept the forgiveness that is free and undeserved from God.

In Isaiah 1:18 God says, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Psalm 103:12 reassures us that "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." These scriptures are very reassuring. God tells us often of His love and forgiveness. He does not remove the memories of our past sins from us. We are left to walk in faith every day in the assurance of His promise. He says that He can "forget" our past lives.

Our dilemma is in trusting God fully and letting go of the guilt for sins we have committed in word, deed or thought. We are not created with the ability to totally forget our past. That may be why we sometimes wonder if God really loves us. We are frequently reassured by God, but our minds will not always set us free.

We know that a converted alcoholic is still an alcoholic by definition. He may never drink another drop of alcohol in his lifetime and be under full forgiveness for his past -- yet he cannot fully forget what he was. Former prostitutes, thieves, murderers and such can be forgiven, but their sins will ever be before them. One need only to look at the life of King David. He was forgiven for his sin, but his nation, family, friends as well as his personal life were all profoundly affected. He never forgot what he did!

Paul tells us that we are to be renewed daily (2 Corinthians 4:16). He was also inspired by God to tell us in Romans 6:22, "But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life."

Thus we see we are to walk in Christ's footsteps every day of our lives. Our guide is the Word of God. Though our past will not vanish from our minds, we can say "that is what I was -- I am not like that anymore." Walking with God every day is the only way to bury the memories and thoughts that sometimes plague us. We need to replace the bad with the good. The time does come when the past is only a distant memory and someday it will be totally removed.

Becoming like God

The Bible gives us a vision of a future when all who have received Christ will also have eternal life. Surely that will be the vast majority of all humans who have ever lived. It is

inconceivable that David would live eternally with Bathsheba and Uriah and constantly feel the guilt of his acts. There must be a time when humans will be able to totally remove unwanted memories from their minds.

God has this ability, as we have read. He can choose to forget. At this time in our existence, we cannot do that. John tells us, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:1-2).

In the end of the story, humans will be like God. We will have a different mind with much greater capabilities. One of those new developments will be the ability to erase our past sins from memory. We will also be able to "forget" any evil act done against us by another human.

That is a future worth remembering!

What I Learned in Jail

By Mavis Stucci

Teaching art to prisoners has been enlightening to me.



I HAVE BEEN WORKING for the Department of Corrective Services for over three years now teaching art as a casual, part-time teacher. It is not like teaching workshops or in a school. Prisoners are not children. Nor do they play by the rules -- unless they like you, or are particularly interested in the course you are teaching.

Jail is a way of life for many inmates. That, and drugs. You wonder why. It's not a great life. Yet one habitual offender told me, "Jail is not so bad, miss. You get a decent feed and you get to meet the brothers again." Another told me he couldn't cope on the outside, so he robbed a bank to get back in. "I just threw the money about," he said, "and people were grabbing it all around me. I'm glad to be back."

The system isn't corrective. The recidivism rate is very high. Those who do rehabilitate have a strong desire to change their life focus, widen their perspectives, use their opportunities and run with it. It's not easy, but they win in the end and I salute them.



Others, on the other hand, learn how to manipulate the system, seeking out the corruptible in order to satisfy their own agendas and solving problems according to their own rules -- the same rules that got them into jail in the first place. They don't care who it hurts. These individuals are notorious for self-justification (even to the extent of believing their own lies) and they have awesome egos.

The rest keep their heads down and try not to be noticed. If they're lucky, they get through without too many bashings. The jail culture is like a violent village. Many inmates are related. Most keep to their ethnic group if it's large enough. Everyone keeps

up-to-date on crime reports and is well aware of what's happening -- even in other jails.

If I think about the crimes my students have committed, I find it difficult to relate to them. I've found it's better to just accept them as they are when I'm with them. There will be a day when they will repent and be redeemed to a relationship with God. I learned many years ago that, in terms of eternity, this life is less than a breath.

Wasted lives are in direct contrast to the hope and joy for the future God gives us in the Bible and through His Holy Days, which remind us that God's plan for humanity is indeed all inclusive. (See "Many Paths to God?" in this issue.)

What I am learning

Somebody asked me what I was learning in jail. After I had thought about it a bit, I realized I'm learning not to be complacent with my life, but to use it as fully and wisely as I can, while fighting my shortcomings.

In jail, life seems somehow more intense, like being in a war or someplace where you need to be very alert and able to recognize instantly what is good, and what is evil. Quite often the education process surprises me and I think that God is teaching me wisdom. (Naiveté may have its charms, but it's not particularly prudent.)

One of the obvious things about jail, particularly with inmates, is the criminality of wasted lives. In Scripture "waste" is translated from several Hebrew words that mean, literally: desolation, spoiling, destruction (Zephaniah 1:15; Isaiah 59:7), vanity, futility and ruin (Genesis 1:2; Isaiah 45:18).

A wasted life

Tim (not his real name) is an example of a wasted life. He is one of my students. One day he came to class early and while we waited for the others, he said, "Do you know what I did for my 46-cents-per-hour today? I folded cardboard cartons!" He shook his head and I watched his eyes fill with tears. The previous week he'd cleaned hair out of reconditioned shavers and depilatory tools destined for resale as "specials." "I actually hid behind a carton and cried," he continued. "We should be building house parts for poor people -- or growing hardwood seedlings for plantations to save logging rainforests, or vegetables for soup kitchens!" He put his face in his hands and raged.

> Tim was studying for a degree when he was arrested for a murder he'd committed 10 years earlier. The jury had wept for him and asked for clemency, but the judge, horrified at the killing of a pedophile by such a savage boy, declared that an example must be made. Tim's appeal looks promising, but who can restore his lost innocence or the years he has wasted in jail or the destruction of so much of his potential?
>
> There are too many wasted lives, too much potential destroyed



by, at times, outright ignorance, but mostly by outright sin. In this world the loss seems permanent, but God has other plans. There is a world to come and a time of redemption described in the prophecies of the Bible.

My experience in jail has made me very aware that I must not resist God's guidance in favor of justifying my own way. I have to ask myself, Am I using the resources God gives me, or wasting or abusing them? No Christian can afford to squander energies, talents, gifts of the Spirit or time that ought to be spent in prayer or study or fasting or any other offerings dedicated to God.

Prison makes me very aware that Jesus exhorted us to work while it is day (John 9:4). Do harvesters waste the last hours of daylight? No, they work their hardest as the day ends. The night has not yet come for us, and we need to keep working on ourselves and to be a light to this dying world! If we waste our opportunity to work now, how shall we be judged for our reward when Christ returns? What opportunities will we have let go by where we could have benefited others (Luke 19:11-27)?

Let us work with all that we've been given to use, wasting nothing, so that when we stand before Christ we will be invited to take part in God's great plan for humanity by helping to restore others to God's way of life. It's something to look forward to!

Mavis Stucci, is a member of the United Church of God in Sydney, Australia. This article first appeared in the September-October 2000 issue of United News Australia.

"Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime Bag?"

By Jay Turner

First, consider this cautionary tale to avoid helping a drug addict feed his habit. Then, in the second article, consider some lessons about effective giving learned by an international aid agency.



CHRISTIANS ARE A TENDERHEARTED, compassionate lot. God tells us over and over again in His Word that we ought to be kind, gentle and generous. But we're also supposed to be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). It is very easy to mean to do well but to actually do harm.

Our hearts go out to people who are suffering and we want to help. But we must be cautious in how and when we try to help. I've found that you could give money to a beggar and go away feeling satisfied, when your attempt to help has only lined a drug dealer's pocket. Or you could be humiliated by a predator who doesn't want a meal, but who will do a professional job of raking your heart over hot coals to extract money from you for his next drug fix.

Over the years I've come to realize that I just can't give cash to people who are likely to be substance abusers. Someone who is yearning for that next drink or fix isn't going to waste good money on food. Whatever I give will only extend the suffering of that person and give him or her another excuse to not seek help.

I found I couldn't even safely give anything that could be exchanged for cash. I gave a drunk a heavy coat one cold winter day, and the next time I saw him, he was wrapped in the same inadequate windbreaker, shivering. When I asked him what happened to the

coat, he just looked away and sobbed. He had sold it. He admitted that when you've got to have a drink, you'll do things that don't make sense -- like sell the coat off your back on a cold night. So I gave him a coat too shabby to be worth selling. In spite of encouragement to get help, he never did. The police found his body some months later.

One day last summer I was on my way into the supermarket when I was approached by a man who told a sob story about just having driven his family to this state from 1,000 miles away. Now he was out of money and his children hadn't eaten today. I told him I would be glad to sit down and have a hamburger with him and his two boys. Then he produced the other five children and his wife. I started to be a little suspicious. I kept telling him that there would be no money in it for him. The burgers were what I was offering and that was all. But he kept plying me with urgent pleadings for money.

When the burgers arrived, his wife tried to return them to get the money. I told the fast food restaurant supervisor not to give them a refund or exchange, and then made a quick exit. They made a scene and were hustled off by some security guards. Evidently they were well known by the local merchants and someone had called the security guards. I went home humiliated and hurting, but wiser. I had meant well, but all I had accomplished was to annoy the local merchants. But now I was more aware of urban predators.

The situation is not hopeless. There are safe and effective ways to help those in need. You can make a difference. The first thing to do is to ask our Heavenly Father to intervene in that person's life. Another thing you can do is to contribute to an aid organization whose effectiveness is known. A single handout may make you feel good, but it does not really help those who are facing long-term problems and addictions. Find out about the shelters and aid agencies in your area and point those in need to the appropriate one. For many problems, it takes day-to-day interaction over a long period of time to really help those who can be reached -- and that can really best be done by those who have the time and the training.

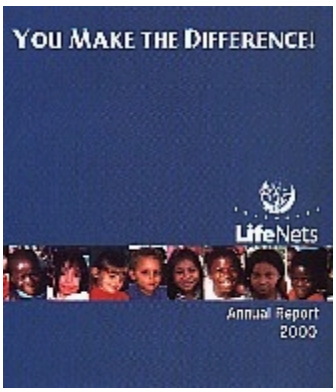
Please don't let these stories scare you off from giving, but hopefully after reading this and the accompanying article, your aid can be given wisely and effectively.

Avoiding Aid Mistakes and Ensuring Healthy Results

By Victor Kubik

The founder of Life Nets (lifenets.org), an international aid agency, shares lessons learned in making charitable aid truly helpful.

It has been rewarding to find ways of helping those in need with the help of enthusiastic volunteers. In the process, we have learned a number of vitally important lessons that have ensured that our aid indeed brings healthy results.



These lessons help neutralize objections often made about charitable work, such as:

- Aid won't go to intended recipients.
- It will make people more dependent.
- We don't really know who the recipients are.
- We are feeding a handout mentality.

To avoid these problems we have learned the following:

- *There must be a genuine need before aid is given*. This takes careful and thoughtful appraisal. Often those needing help most are not the ones asking. And those asking may not be the priority.
- *Provide only the kind of assistance that will result in self-sufficiency and not in dependency*. Mistakes can be made by giving cash grants to people that result in them asking for more. This kind of help can actually defeat an aid program. The most successful contributions are those for the greater good of a group, income-producing methods, microloans, helping children or in-kind benefits. There should never be a never-ending promise to keep on helping. We believe in a hand up, not a handout.
- *Aid must be distributed in a fair and equitable manner*. A group receiving aid can be destabilized by favoritism. People quickly find out who's getting what and from whom. It's vital that there be local coordination by the pastor or a responsible individual to oversee agreed-upon equity.
- *Recipients must be accountable for the aid received*. Beneficiaries of aid must make plain how the aid has been used and how it has improved their condition. Often small loans are best because the repayment process teaches accountability. A loan should be made for income-producing purposes.
- *Those receiving aid must be willing to be educated in how to better themselves--they must do their part*. In Zambia, for example, we are initiating an education program for proper care of the animals that are being donated. People must be willing to change methods that caused failure and be willing to adopt methods that will ensure success.



- *Aid must be culturally appropriate*. We must not bring aid that draws undue

attention to the donors or beneficiaries. Again using Zambia as an example, we must help the people plow better with animals and not introduce tractors that are nowhere to be seen in the area.

- *Give what is really needed and make sure it's in good condition.* It is irritating and wasteful to give people things they cannot use or something that is not in working condition which they have to dispose of. It is far better to treat people with dignity and respect, as we would like to be treated.

Making a Difference, One Step at a Time

By Fred Crow

When your task appears too big, consider the story of the young man on the beach.



THERE WAS A WRITER who needed to clear his mind. He had run into a brick wall. His work was at a standstill. He had writer's block.

He moved into a friend's house down on a beach to get away from distractions, but still nothing was forthcoming. With his mind a blank, he got up from the desk to get some coffee and looked out a window.

He spied a fellow doing a very odd dance down the beach. He watched for a bit, but the dance didn't change. The fellow would bend over, stand up, do some gyrations toward the surf and stop, walk back and start again by bending over.

Intrigued, the writer walked outside. The fellow continued his actions seemingly unaware that he was being observed. Fascinated by what might be a logical reason for the odd dance, the writer began walking down the beach.

As he got closer, he began to realize that the fellow was picking something up and throwing it into the surf. He stopped near the young man and observed him bend over, pick up a stranded sea star, make a few odd steps toward the surf and fling the creature into the ocean.

The writer finally asked the young man, "What are you doing?"

"Saving sea stars." was the young man's reply, as he threw another into the water.

Looking around, the writer realized that hundreds and thousands of sea stars were high and dry and dying on the beach. The sand was littered with sea stars. He stated what might have seemed obvious to most, "Doing what you're doing won't make any difference."

Bending over, picking up another stranded animal and flinging it into the surf, he said, "It made a difference for that one."

The writer was struck by the powerful truth of that simple statement. A single act can make a difference. Because the fellow couldn't save all the sea stars didn't mean he couldn't save some.

The writer then bent over, picked up a sea star, and threw it into the surf. Forgetting his own problems, he spent the rest of the day with the young man "making a difference" one sea star at a time. That evening the writer's mind was clear and ready to return to work.

When we face a task that appears overwhelming, we may pull back from attempting to climb that particular mountain. Whether it's artistic, social, environmental, financial or personal, when we face a problem we may feel powerless to make a difference if it appears too big.

It is then we need to realize that taking small steps--doing small, even seemingly insignificant deeds--can add up. Taking small steps can make the difference in our own lives and in the lives of others. Doing what we can with what we have can make a difference if we continue on continuing on. Step by step. Insignificant. Seemingly without a difference.

Years ago an engineer hung a 50-pound weight from a rope. Next to it he hung a 5-ounce bottle cork. The cork was attached to a machine that would swing the cork into the 50-pound weight in a small arc.

Whap! Nothing happened. Whap! Nothing happened. The cork just bounced off the dead weight with no effect. The next day the cork was still bashing into the weight without visible consequence. The following day a vibration was noted in the heavy weight.



After two weeks the 50 pounds of dead weight was actually swinging in unison with the cork! The almost insignificant impact of the cork eventually made a difference and moved an object 160 times its own weight!

When a task appears too large, too overwhelming, too powerful--just start. Pick a point and begin. Just like the young man saving sea stars, just like the cork, your effort will make a difference.

Virtual Christian Magazine Editorial

Getting Things in Focus

By Mike Bennett

HAVE YOU EVER IMAGINED what it must have been like to be a wealthy, powerful king, like King Solomon? The common people, if they wanted to have music, had to sing it or make an instrument and play it themselves. Solomon, on the other hand, could call on dozens of singers, who probably had songs for his every mood. A king, if he was bored, could have dancers, actors, athletes--all at his beck and call!

Even more amazing, though, is that in the modern Western world we also have entertainment choices galore. Dozens of CDs, dozens of TV channels. A king like Solomon would have been amazed--we have options beyond his wildest dreams.

You may remember that Solomon started out wholeheartedly seeking God and His wisdom, and God blessed him with great wisdom and prosperity. But something went wrong. It seems that even wise Solomon let all his options distract him from God and God's way.

Distractions can trip us up, make us less effective and even keep us from the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, being focused can help us be effective in our priorities, achieve our goals and wholeheartedly serve God for all eternity.

In this editorial let's look at the subject of focus, of what we can do to avoid being distracted from the most important things in life.

Choking on things

Do you remember in the parable Jesus gave about the sower in Matthew 13? The sower scattered the seed on different kinds of ground. Christ explained that the seed represented "the word of the kingdom," or God's truth. Some of it fell on the hard roadside, and some on the rocky ground. But for the purpose of this article, let's read in verse 7 about ground that greatly resembles some aspects of our day today: "And some fell among the thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them."

Now look at verse 22 where Christ explained this part of the parable: "Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful." Mark adds "the desires for other things" to the list (Mark 4:19). Luke includes the "pleasures of life" to those things distracting us from bearing fruit for God (Luke 8:14).

It seems Solomon let his getting of things and wives distract him from his first love-from wholeheartedly seeking God. It's too easy in this day and age to also get distracted.

How can we avoid this tendency? I wish I could say I have found a silver bullet to help me avoid distractions and refocus--to concentrate--but I have to admit I found it hard even to focus on this article!

A little help from my friends...

No, I didn't find any easy answers for focus, but I did find that family and friends can help a lot. If I tell my wife I'm trying to cut down the time I waste on TV, she'll help me remember.

A friend at church also has helped me a great deal with encouraging words to help me refocus on what is really important.

First, my friend tells me that the most important thing for him is to love God with all his heart, soul and mind. I hear it every time I talk to him. He reminds me that nothing in this world--not movies, not new cars, not millions of dollars--is important compared to our relationship with God. As Matthew 22:37-38 says: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment."

Consider also the classic scripture in any discussion of priorities, Matthew 6:33. This section of the Sermon on the Mount talks about food and drink, nice clothing-all the things we need and want. God focuses us on the important things in verse 33: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

God wants us to have our priorities right, to seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness. He knows we can't do this on our own--we can even ask Him for His help to stay focused! Then everything else will fall into place.

Under attack

My friend also reminds me we're in a war, and Satan is always ready to distract us and attack us, whether with billboards or things on TV or negative comments from people we see. We can never let down our guard. We need all the protection, all the armor God provides. Ephesians 6:10-17 describes the armor of God--a life-saving reminder in the dangerous times we face. I can't cover it all here, but I hope you'll exercise your "sword of the Spirit," the Word of God, and review the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel on our feet, the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation. By remembering we're in a war, it can help us refocus and not be caught off-guard.

Another thing my friend reminds me of is how much we need the Kingdom of God. He thinks about the starving children in Africa. He thinks about those affected by the violence in the Middle East. He thinks about those affected by gangs and drugs and violence in our cities. He thinks about all the pressures and bad influences on young people today. He looks forward to a time without Satan's influence. Talking to him reminds me to sigh and cry for the abominations in the world, and to fervently pray,

"Thy Kingdom come!"

Revelation 22:20 expresses the longing the apostle John had, that my friend expresses and that we can all share as well:

"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming quickly.' Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

These reminders are the trunk of the tree. They are foundational principles of Christianity. Keeping them in mind can help us avoid the distractions that so easily beset us. They can help us in making decisions about priorities in our use of time, in our use of money, in how we live our lives.

With help from my friends I'm recommitting myself to focus--concentrate--and wholeheartedly seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. There are lots of things that can seem more urgent (those things that seem to demand our immediate attention, no matter how mundane and temporary), but there's nothing else more important.

Letters to the Editor

Money Problems



I want to truly thank you for this article on "Money Problems." I really should be the poster child for the article, holding up the "BILLS BURDEN" on the first page. I just want you to know I really appreciate this article, because for the first time, I really heard the message. I don't know why it took me so long, but I am thankful to our gracious Father in heaven that He opened my eyes.

My debt is about $5,000 with credit card and other miscellaneous debt...and I am a single mother living with my parents, who are much like your grandparents. I thank God for my parents who help me a lot. The pay will eventually be better than I am used to. Even then, I must learn to live within my means, to be an investor. Because if I do not learn from this I will go through it again! And I do not want to do that! I truly want to "escape the debt of slavery and become an investor."

-- Debbie



What a fool I have been all my life. I have constantly lived the "good life" worrying only that tomorrow I will wake up and there will suddenly be wealth at my doorstep and all I will have to do is take it. I am ashamed and I should be!

I recently lost over $50,000 in a bad investment of sorts, all because I didn't realize my selfishness. I have always been a Christian, but I have taken my faith for granted. I am working diligently to remedy that....

I have a wonderful wife and two beautiful, young children, all of whom I love dearly. My wife has stuck with me much longer than she should have. I have told her that I pray to God every day, that He just give me ONE more chance to love her and my children and be happy. I just need to find some ray of hope and light.

I wish that I had read your articles years ago and heeded your advice.... I would be in much better condition right now!

-- CP

The Amazing Engineering of the Dragonfly



Wonderful article! It really evokes praise for our Creator! It also stimulates desire to research not only the dragonfly but all of the magnificent creation known as "nature."

-- Dale Osborne

General Comments



I'm a member of the United Church of God in the Flint, Michigan, area. I just had to tell you that I really enjoy Virtual Christian Magazine. It has proved to be both informative and uplifting.

How blessed we are to have God's truth and be able to share it. I've been a baptized member for four years now and am very thankful that I have such a wonderful family of brethren. There is nothing that can compare or replace [God's] Spirit....

Keep up the excellent work.

-- Lynne Burton

But You Look So Healthy?



I would like to extend my empathy and appreciation to the author of this article. I completely understand!

I have been battling CFS for several years and, starting in March of this year, have been fighting for my life due to mercury poisoning. I am in my twenties, am married and have grown up in the church. Until the energy starting seriously ebbing about 20 months ago, I had always been active in the church, community, school, work, family. Gradually, I had to relinquish my involvement in many things simply because I could not physically or emotionally handle it anymore.

Oh, the exhaustion and depression! It can be absolutely overwhelming. You can't make anyone who hasn't gone through it understand. It's so morbidly draining in every way--physically, mentally, emotionally and even spiritually. It has been a tremendous struggle for me to go from perfectionism to being barely alive, but I would not trade the lessons God has taught me for anything. This trial, though severe and ongoing, has brought me out of thinking I had to be all things to all people and that it was never okay to say "no."

This article helps to educate the brethren, who for the most part are understanding and prayerful. However, I have been hurt by those within who have voiced or implied derogatory opinions on my sporadic or lack of attendance, methods of treatment and lack of involvement. I'm learning that you can't expect everyone to understand an illness that allows you to function somewhat normally at times and then completely retreat from life's activities and relationships at other times. It's sometimes lonely humanly, but we always have the ultimate comfort and empathy of Jesus Christ who knows all pain and whose hope is that all humans are made free from every infirmity forever!

I know that this encourages me to know there are others who suffer--yet not without hope--and are educating themselves and others about how to live with physical and mental torment but not to fear! Through God's guidance and healing, I am beginning to come out of the delicate balance of life/death, and am trying to move on. I feel that Christ is teaching me to not wallow in misery or to feel sorry for myself as I sometimes was, but to allow Him to free me from the shackles of the illness to go on living in faith, focusing on God and Christ, looking for our true eternal homeland as part of His Kingdom.

-- JG

Letters may be edited for length and clarity.