

CHANGE YOUR LIFE. CHANGE YOUR WORLD.

ACTIVATED

Vol 22 • Issue 4

FINDING FAITH

The case for
Christ

The Atheist and the Bible

A meeting made in
heaven

Miracles from the Maestro

God can use
anything



EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A LOVE STORY

In the Bible, God often uses metaphors or word pictures to describe our relationship with Him; for example, a shepherd and sheep, a father and child, a vine and branches—and a bride and groom.

Although the Bible contains 66 books, commentators have often noted that it is really *one* book with a consistent theme. It is a love story. Like every love story, this one has a beginning, some ups and downs, and a dramatic conclusion.

This love story truly starts “in the beginning” when God created man and woman. He fashioned them exactly as He wanted, breathed the breath of life into them, and then admired His handiwork: “This is very good!”

Unfortunately, the man and woman chose to reject God's offer of an eternal, perfect, intimate relationship with Him and chose to wander away into selfishness and sin. Without God, humans who were created to enjoy intimacy with Him instead experienced loneliness, anger, and pain. Throughout the millennia, we tried all sorts of things to recover the feeling of fulfillment that this lost intimacy provided, but nothing was able to satisfy.

In the end, although it was we who turned our backs on God, it was He who initiated reconciliation. In His love, He knew that there was only one solution. Despite the cost, He chose to willingly send His own Son to lead the way back to Him.

What does that mean for us? It means Christianity is not a religion, nor a bunch of rules. Christianity is a relationship—and not any relationship, but a marriage, where there is meant to be intimacy, transparency, open communication, and shared dreams, goals, and desires. Jesus stands at the end of the aisle beaming and waiting for His beautiful bride to move to His side.

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A close-up photograph of a squirrel in mid-leap, its body stretched out and its tail blurred from motion. The squirrel is light brown with darker stripes on its back. The background is dark and out of focus. The title 'SQUIRREL POWER' is overlaid on the image. 'SQUIRREL' is in large, bold, yellow capital letters, and 'POWER' is in large, bold, blue capital letters below it. The author's name 'BY JO DIAS' is in smaller, blue capital letters to the left of 'POWER'.

SQUIRREL POWER

BY JO DIAS

“MISERABLE!” That was the only way to describe how I was feeling that day. My husband had had to travel—again!—And there I was alone with our four children. Finances were low, my health was bad, and my teenage daughter was going through a crisis. I prayed—oh, how I prayed—that Jesus would make things a little easier to bear!

Looking out my window at a grove of trees swaying in the gentle breeze, I recalled other times when Jesus had encouraged me to hold on until He could work things out.

That’s when I noticed a little squirrel, squeaking away as he climbed up and down the trees, seemingly without a care in the world. I envied the little fellow.

My squirrel chose that moment to change tactics. Instead of running up and down the trees, he started

hopping from one tree to the next. He jumped over to the last tree in the cluster, and then looked at one more tree that stood apart from the others. He seemed to be deliberating.

I mentally measured the distance between the squirrel and that tree, and it seemed two or three times as far as he had been jumping. Here was a massive challenge.

“You can’t be serious, little fellow!” I muttered.

But he wasn’t looking for my advice. He ran the length of the branch a few times, squealing frantically. Then he stopped and eyed the distance once more, crouched, and leaped. I wanted to turn my eyes away. Surely this was going to end badly!

But no! He flew across that immense span and landed in the

other tree with the grace and glory that come from knowing one is meant to perform such feats. He chattered in victory and scampered farther up the tree, as if to his reward.

I knew then what had been missing. I had been so busy looking at my problems—measuring the distance between the trees—that I was afraid to let go and sail to the other side. I had lost sight of my Maker, my Savior, my Best Friend’s care for me.

As I watched the squirrel, now merrily chattering away in the treetop, I knew that Jesus had answered my prayer—not through a spectacular miracle, but rather the example of a happy little squirrel. The same God who took care of him was going to take care of me. ■

THE FATHER AND THE LOST SONS

BY PETER AMSTERDAM



IN LUKE CHAPTER 15, Jesus told the following story:

There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.” And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country.¹

This extraordinary request by the younger son would have shocked and scandalized the original listeners. The son was asking to receive the portion of the inheritance that he would

normally receive upon his father’s death, while his father was still alive and healthy. The listeners would have most likely expected Jesus’ next words to tell of how the father exploded in anger and disciplined his son.

Instead, the father acquiesced and divided the property between the sons. The younger son decided to sell his inheritance for cash, showing no concern for his father’s future and depriving him of a portion of the fruit of the land in his old age.

The older brother, who also received his portion of the inheritance at this time, received possession of the remaining land but not control of it. As the story continues, it becomes clear that the father was still head of the household and the farm.

THE YOUNGER SON’S MISFORTUNES

Jesus then described what happened to the younger son: **The younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there**

he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.²

Upon leaving his father’s house, the younger son went on to live a wanton and disorderly life, resulting in the loss of all that he had. After he had spent all his funds, a famine arose.

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.³

The original listeners would have understood to what depths he had sunk by his job of feeding pigs. Pigs were considered unclean according to the law, and later Jewish writings stated that anyone raising swine was cursed. To make matters worse, he was starving and envious of the pigs’ food. It was at this point that he “came to himself.”

1. Luke 15:11–13. All scriptures are from the ESV.
2. Luke 15:13–14
3. Luke 15:15–16
4. Luke 15:17–19
5. Luke 15:20
6. Luke 15:21–22
7. Luke 15:23
8. Luke 15:24
9. Luke 15:25–28



But when he came to himself, he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’”⁴

The son decided to return to his father to confess he was wrong and had sinned. Recalling that his father’s “hired servants” had enough to eat, he planned to ask his father to hire him as a servant.

THE HOMECOMING

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.⁵

The son had shamed his father before the whole village. It would only be just and right for the father to let the son come to him, walking

through the village facing the disapproving stares of the community. But instead, the father, full of compassion, runs to him, something which would have been considered undignified, especially as to do so, he would have to pull up his robe and expose his legs. The father’s first action is to embrace and kiss his son, before he even hears what his son has to say.

And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.”⁶

The son begins his practiced speech, but the father doesn’t let him finish. He orders his servants to clothe the son in the best robe, to put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet.

Besides conveying a message to the servants and the community, there was a strong message to the son as well. That message was forgiveness.

The father’s welcome was an act of undeserved grace. Nothing the son could do would make up for his past. The father didn’t want the lost money; he wanted his lost son.

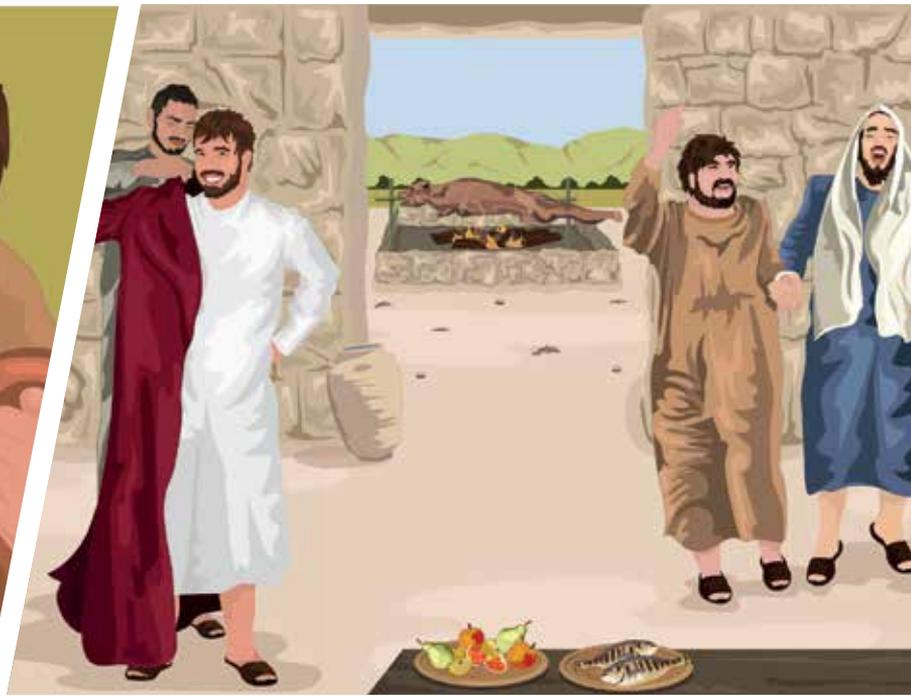
“And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.”⁷

Preparing such a large animal for a feast implies that likely most if not all of the village would be invited to the feast. And the father exclaimed his joyous reason for feasting:

“For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” And they began to celebrate.⁸

THE OLDER SON

Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.” But he was angry and refused to go in.⁹



At the end of the workday, after the festivities had started, the older son returned from the field. When he heard the circumstances of his younger brother's welcome, he was furious. The custom at such a feast would be for the older son to act as joint host with his father, but the older brother breaks with protocol and publicly refuses to enter the house and the festivities, and then argues with his father in public:

His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"¹⁰

10. Luke 15:28–30

11. Luke 15:31

12. Luke 15:32

The older son's response is filled with disrespect, bitterness, resentment, but how does the father react? Exactly the same as he did with his other lost son—in love, kindness, and mercy. He says: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."¹¹

Both sons have a broken relationship with their father which he desires to repair. Both sons need reconciliation and restoration with their father. Both sons receive the same love from the father.

The father's last statement expresses his joy that the younger son who was lost is now found. "It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."¹² The listener was left to imagine whether the older brother who was also lost would be found and restored, as we are not told the older son's response.

This parable tells us something beautiful about God, our Father. He is full of compassion, grace, love, and mercy. Like the father in the story,

He lets us make our own decisions, and no matter what those decisions are and wherever they may lead us, He loves us. He wants each one who has wandered away, who is lost, who has a broken relationship with Him, to come home. He waits for them and welcomes them with open arms and great joy and celebration. He forgives, He loves, He welcomes.

Each person is deeply loved by the Father. Jesus laid down His life for every person. God is gracious, full of love and mercy, and He has called us, as His representatives, to do as Jesus did—to love the unlovely and seek out those who are lost, to help restore them, and to respond with joy and celebration when that which was lost is found.

PETER AMSTERDAM AND HIS WIFE, MARIA FONTAINE, ARE DIRECTORS OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL, A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF FAITH. ADAPTED FROM THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE. ■

BY JOYCE SUTTIN

THE MANY ROLES OF JESUS IN MY LIFE



WHEN I WAS A LITTLE CHILD, JESUS WAS LIKE SANTA CLAUS TO ME. I knew He could see if I was naughty or nice. If I wanted something, I could ask Him for it and be really good in hopes of receiving it. Like my classroom and Sunday school teachers, He was someone to listen to and obey.

When I was older, I realized He was a Friend. I knew what I needed most of all was a friend who could help me navigate my young life. He became my Savior when I understood my need for forgiveness and asked Him to come into my heart.

When I was a teenager, Jesus became my Confidant. He was the One who I could turn to in times of need and someone who always seemed to understand. When I got lost, He was the Bright and Morning Star and the Light that showed me

the path back to the life He had prepared for me.

When I became a mother, I got to know Him as a Healer. He was the Bread of Life when we were hungry and healed our hearts when we were sad or struggling. Then as my children grew, Jesus was a wonderful parenting Counselor.

He was also my Mentor. He helped me find my place and led me to pursuits and hobbies that gave me a lot of satisfaction. When I faced difficulties, He was my Deliverer, my Advocate, and my Shield.

When I grieved over losses, I found that Jesus was my Comforter. Losing those I loved drove me to find that He was the Prince of Peace. When I lost my father, I began to see God's role as my heavenly Father, being there for me, supporting me, encouraging me, and protecting me. I could reach out to Him through

prayer at any hour of the day or night.

As I look back at my life, my many travels and the roads I have taken, I realize He's been there all along. He guided me as my Good Shepherd and sought me out when I was lost or wounded. He gently and lovingly carried me in His arms when I wasn't able to walk on my own.

Now I see him as Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, always present in my life from my earliest memories to my last breath. Then I shall know Him as the Resurrection and the Life, my Redeemer.

JOYCE SUTTIN IS A RETIRED TEACHER AND WRITER AND LIVES IN SAN ANTONIO, USA. CHECK OUT HER BLOG AT [HTTPS://JOY4DAILYDEVOTIONALS.BLOGSPOT.COM/](https://joy4dailydevotionals.blogspot.com/). ■



MIRACLES

FROM THE MAESTRO

BY CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER

IT IS SAID THAT THERE ARE THREE ARTISTS THAT GIVE US MUSIC: God, who gives us magical wood to make the instruments; the instrument maker, who after months of labor awakens the music dwelling in the wood; then the musical maestro, who liberates the music from its woody confines to set the listener free.

I witnessed firsthand an illustration of music's redemptive power when I visited a women's prison in Uganda. In some cases, these women were pregnant or lived within the prison walls with their children in tow, as there was no one else to take care of them.

I and a group of friends who were Christian volunteers had come to give the women some meaningful

entertainment in the form of some music, a clown comedy and magic show, and a skit that I was to perform. In searching for a theme that would be relevant, I realized after finding out more about them that many of the prisoners felt that they were worthless and their usefulness in life was over. They were now just surviving day to day in hopeless mode.

I came across the poem of "The Touch of the Master's Hand," which seemed perfect for the occasion. The story is of an old beat-up violin that is put up for auction. At first it only attracts bids of just a few dollars, but after an old man comes up and plays it, the violin fetches a high price. Why did the same violin change in value so drastically? It was the "touch of the master's hand" that played such beautiful music.¹

These women had great worth and were still able to "make beautiful music" in their lives if they let the Master touch them. We performed the skit in their local language using a real violin. I mimed playing it to a recording

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1. You can see a short dramatization of the story here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAovzddEfGI>.
 2. See Matthew 15.
 3. See Exodus 4.



from a violin maestro. After some simple directions, the audience played the part of the people bidding for the violin. Afterwards, many commented on how the story had given them new hope.

The story of how this poem came to be is also relevant. The author, Myra Welch, loved to play the organ in her youth, but because of severe arthritis, became bound to a wheelchair and could no longer play. One day she heard a sermon on God's power to use people in spite of their shortcomings and handicaps and said, "I became so filled with light that I wrote it in just 30 minutes." The fact that she could write it was an amazing feat in itself. She had to hold a pencil end in her twisted arthritic hands to laboriously bang out each of the letters on the typewriter keys. Nevertheless, she said, "the joy of writing outweighed the pain of my efforts."

Even an old and seemingly worthless violin can transform lives. Something as small as a few fish and loaves can be transformed into a feast for thousands by the touch of the Master's hand, as when Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes.² Moses found out that despite his inadequacies, something as common as a stick can be transformed into a rod of God to do mighty signs and wonders.³

CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER IS A SCRIPTWRITER AND MIME ARTIST WHO SPENT 47 YEARS DOING MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN 10 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES. HE AND HIS WIFE PAULINE CURRENTLY LIVE IN GERMANY. ■

THE TOUCH OF THE MASTER'S HAND

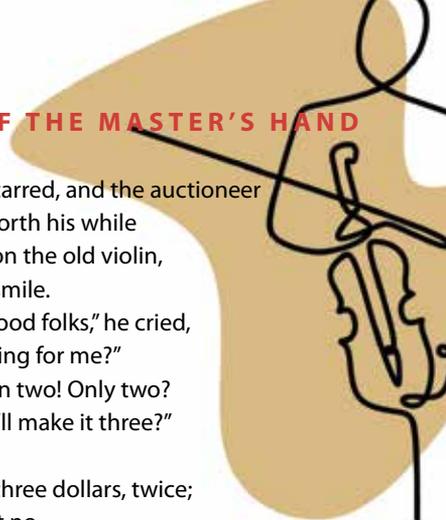
'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin,
But held it up with a smile.
"What am I bidden, good folks," he cried,
"Who'll start the bidding for me?"
"A dollar, a dollar. Then two! Only two?
Two dollars, and who'll make it three?"

"Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;
Going for three..." But no,
From the room, far back, a grey-haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening the loosened strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet,
As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said: "What am I bid for the old violin?"
And he held it up with the bow.
"A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two?
Two thousand! And who'll make it three?
Three thousand, once; three thousand, twice,
And going and gone," said he.

The people cheered, but some of them cried,
"We do not quite understand.
What changed its worth?" Swift came the reply:
"The touch of the Master's hand."
And many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and scarred with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd
Much like the old violin.

A "mess of pottage," a glass of wine,
A game—and he travels on.
He is "going" once, and "going" twice,
He's "going" and almost "gone."
But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought
By the touch of the Master's hand. ■



POINTS TO PONDER

JESUS AND ME



Faith in Jesus Christ is the soul's flight into the city of refuge.

—*Hugh Binning (1627–1653)*

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow
strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

—*Helen H. Lemmel (1863–1961)*

Be Lord
within me to strengthen me
without me to preserve me
over me to shelter me
beneath me to support me
before me to direct me
behind me to bring me back
around me to fortify me.

—*Lancelot Andrews (1555–1626)*

All the peace and favor of the world
cannot calm a troubled heart; but
where this peace is which Christ
gives, all the trouble and disquiet of
the world cannot disturb it.

—*Robert Leighton (1613–1684)*

Union with Jesus Christ is the
foundation of our hope.

—*Jean-Jacques Picet (1655–1721)*

Being confident in how much
Jesus loves you won't just make you
happier; it will be a stabilizing force
in your life. When you are assured of
His love for you, when you are aware
that He is intimately concerned
about your welfare and happiness,
then that knowledge will give you
peace in your heart and steady you,
even when you face disappointments,
heartbreaks, difficulties, or anything
else that life sends your way. His love
is the only thing in the world that
is absolutely perfect and unfailing.
There are a lot of things that are
nice, beautiful, and wonderful, but
nothing is perfect like His love. He
is perfect, and so is His love. It's
durable, dependable, and forever!

—*Maria Fontaine*

To me, Jesus is the Life I want to
live, the Light I want to reflect, the

Way to the Father, the Love I want to
express, the Joy I want to share, the
Peace I want to sow around me. Jesus
is everything to me.

—*Mother Teresa (1910–1997)*

Rest of the weary,
Joy of the sad,
Hope of the dreary,
Light of the glad;
Home of the stranger,
Strength to the end,
Refuge from danger,
Savior and Friend!

—*John Samuel Bewley Monsell
(1811–1875)*

Abide in Me, and I in you. As
the branch cannot bear fruit of
itself, unless it abides in the vine,
neither can you, unless you abide
in Me. I am the vine, you are
the branches. He who abides in
Me, and I in him, bears much
fruit; for without Me you can do
nothing.

—*Jesus (John 15:4–5)* ■

BY ELSA SICHROVSKY

Only HE knows

AS A CHILD, I often heard the saying, “Prayer is not the least you can do, but the most you can do.” I thought that any situation could be solved with earnest prayer. When my dad told nine-year-old me that our family friend Jim was diagnosed with cancer, I decided that I was going to pray really hard for him to get better. Jim had a wife and three children in elementary school—surely God wouldn’t be so cruel as to remove him from so many people who were depending on him. Every day, I set aside 10 minutes to pray for Jim. At first, there were encouraging signs that my prayers were being heard. The tumor was getting smaller, and he was feeling stronger. My prayers were working!

Six months later, however, things took a turn for the worst. Jim’s cancer had spread to other organs, and the doctor’s prognosis was grim. I started to wonder if I hadn’t prayed hard enough. Did I not claim enough Bible verses? More desperate prayers were prayed. One day, my dad said he had something to tell me about Jim. The pained look in his eyes told me to expect the worst. “Jim passed away a few days ago,” he said quietly. I burst into tears. “But Daddy, I prayed! I prayed as hard as I could!”

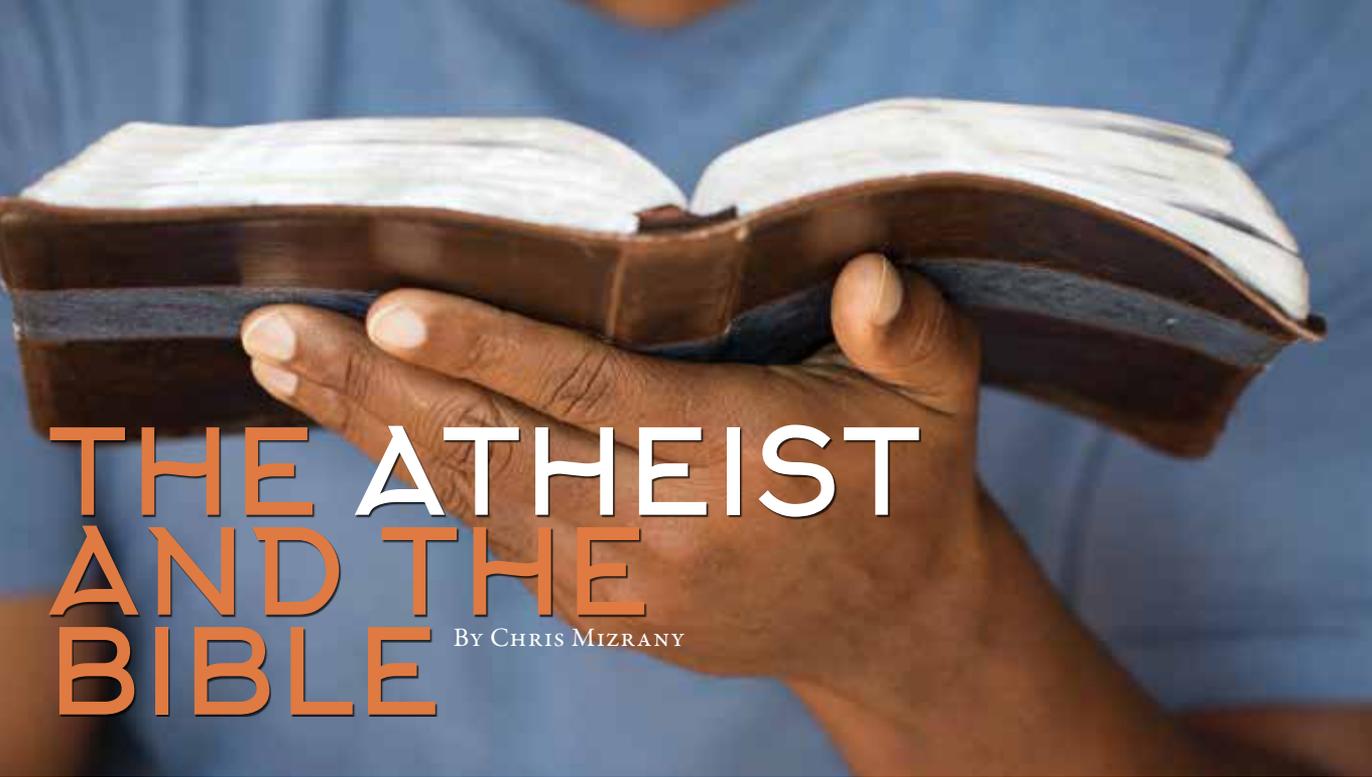
Dad looked at me sympathetically. “It’s not anyone’s fault. But God has a plan. Only He knows why.”

I couldn’t wrap my head around that explanation, though. If God is love, why would He take a husband and father away from those who needed him? Why didn’t God answer our earnest prayers? What was the use of praying if it didn’t fix things? Dad saw the questions in my eyes. “Prayer isn’t a magic potion that will fix all your problems. You told God about Jim, but God knows better than we do. You have to trust Him.”

As I got older, I realized that I couldn’t use prayer and faith as an instant fix to make life fit into my perception of what would be best. God sees the past, present, and future, so with my limited human perspective, I’m not always going to understand the way He works in people’s lives. One day in heaven, I’ll finally see the master plan behind all the seemingly senseless tragedies and frustrations of life. Until then, I have to put aside my longing for certainty and easy solutions and trust the only One who knows all the answers.

ELSA SICHROVSKY IS A FREELANCE WRITER. SHE LIVES WITH HER FAMILY IN SOUTHERN TAIWAN. ■





THE ATHEIST AND THE BIBLE

BY CHRIS MIZRANY

MY GOOD FRIENDS FRANK AND LISA WERE MANNING A STALL WITH VARIOUS GOSPEL BOOKS ON DISPLAY. They were also giving out tracts to those passing by. One man stopped, looked at the table, and exclaimed, “Oh, Christian stuff? I’m an atheist!” My friends just smiled and struck up a conversation, without confronting him on that basis. They spoke about art (the man’s sister was an artist) and hiking, life, and the economy, and just generally tried to be encouraging and positive.

By and by, the man’s sister came out of a shop and stopped as well. He introduced Frank and Lisa, and told her, “These are Christian missionaries who do good work. So have a look at their stuff if you want. I’m not interested, of course, because I’m an atheist.”

1. See Isaiah 55:11.

Turning to Frank and Lisa, he mused, “I must say, though, I love the song ‘Amazing Grace.’ I can’t explain why, but when I hear it, I tear up.” As he spoke, his eyes brimmed with tears. He continued, “Then I watched the movie *Amazing Grace*, and it was just ... incredible.”

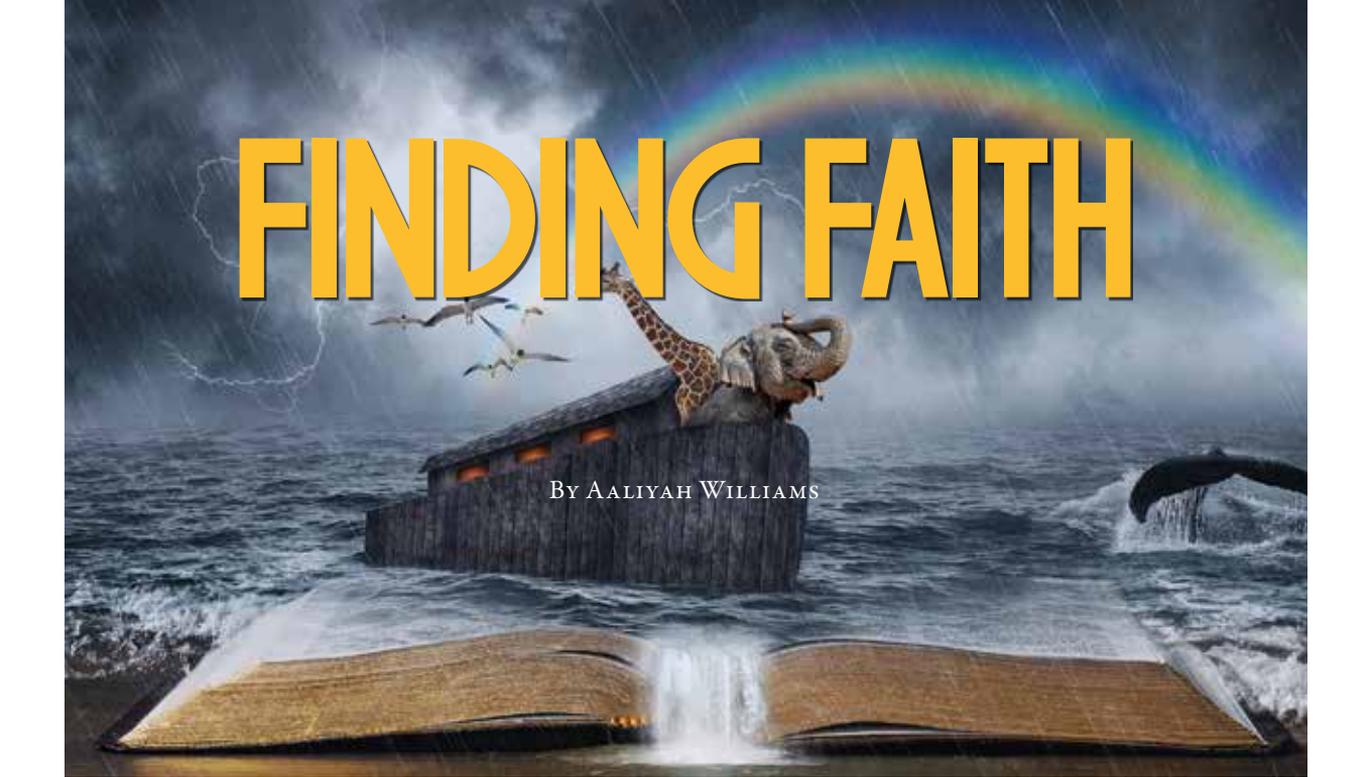
Their conversation continued for a few more minutes, when suddenly the atheist stopped midsentence and said, “You know what, I’m going to get one of your books! I’m going to get a Bible!” He picked one up off the table and said, “This one, I’ll take this one! I’m going to put it in my bag, and I’m going to read it!” He then looked over at his sister, who was standing by flabbergasted, and exclaimed, as if he couldn’t believe it himself, “Look at me, an *atheist* getting a *Bible*!” He chuckled to himself, took the Bible, and soon they both departed.

Needless to say, Frank and Lisa were in awe at how God works!

Frank later told me, “If there was anyone—*anyone*—that I would have wanted that Bible to end up with, it would have been an atheist! Now God can work in his heart and help him fully experience that amazing grace!”

Hearing this story encouraged me that, first, we really must never judge a person based on immediate impressions, and secondly, that God’s Spirit is fully capable of influencing even the most wayward hearts. God promised that His Word never returns void (without effect); it always accomplishes the purpose for which He sends it.¹ So that amazing interaction was perhaps just the beginning of an even greater life transformation in the future!

CHRIS MIZRANY IS A MISSIONARY, PHOTOGRAPHER, AND WEB DESIGNER WITH HELPING HAND IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA. ■



FINDING FAITH

BY AALIYAH WILLIAMS

ONE DAY, while browsing in a bookshop, I came across an encyclopedia with a section of Bible-related articles. I was curious to see how a secular scholar might depict the great men and women of the Bible, so I began to read some of the short biographies—the prophets Daniel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah; King David; Samson; the apostles Matthew, Peter, and Paul.

One after another, things I had accepted as fact were brought into question: Three people may have written the book of Isaiah; the apostle Matthew may not have written the Gospel of Matthew; Paul may not have written some of the epistles that have been attributed to him. On and on it went. With phrases like “mythological symbolism,” “legendary accreditations,” and “obscure visions,” the author went on to explain in great detail how the Bible shouldn’t be taken literally.

Adam and Eve should be thought of as “symbolic prototypes of mankind.” The book of Genesis was merely “a way for certain authors to express their theories on the origins of human life and cultural identity.”

I had only skimmed a few pages when a hollow feeling settled in my stomach. Part of me wanted to close the book, but another part kept flipping the pages, looking for some statement that reaffirmed my faith in the Bible. Then my eyes fell on the closing sentence of the entry on Jesus Christ. “In all the inevitable questioning over the biblical account of the resurrection of Jesus, one fact seems beyond dispute: Jesus’ disciples were prepared to stake their lives on its veracity.” And so have countless others down through the ages, I might add.

I felt vindicated, then ashamed at how little faith I had shown just moments earlier. That

closing sentence had driven out and slammed the door on the doubts that had entered and tried to take hold of my mind.

I realized then why so many people still have faith in the Bible, even after reading books like this encyclopedia, which can undermine faith through their skeptical and narrow views. It’s because through the Bible they have come to know its true Author, God, and His Son, Jesus Christ.

God is alive and well; Jesus not only rose from the dead, but He now lives in every heart that invites Him in; and the words found in the Bible are alive and powerful. How do I know these three things to be true? Because I have experienced them for myself. I believe the Bible because I have seen its effect in my life.

AALIYAH WILLIAMS IS AN EDITOR AND CONTENT DEVELOPER. ■



BY KEITH PHILLIPS

MEETING MY BEST FRIEND

I WAS 21 WHEN I READ THE BIBLE FOR THE FIRST TIME.

Someone had suggested I read the Gospel of John first, but I knew so little about the Bible at the time that I didn't understand the Gospels were four separate accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. So I started at what seemed the more logical place, at the beginning of the New Testament, with the Gospel of Matthew.

By the time I got to the Gospel of John, I was fascinated with Jesus. He had the perfect answer to every question and always knew exactly what to do. But more than that, He seemed to understand me and know exactly what I needed. I realized that His words are powerful and alive, He is alive! His words reached across nearly 2,000 years and touched me in a way I had never experienced before. When I finally came to John 15:15—"I have called you friends,

for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you"—I felt He was speaking directly to me. Jesus called me His friend! I got so excited I couldn't sit still. I wanted to tell the whole world.

I had prayed to receive Him as my Savior a few months before, but nothing much changed until I began reading His words with an open, receptive heart. His words were powerful and alive and, best of all, personal. And it got even better. Some time later, I discovered that Jesus can still speak directly and personally to the hearts of His followers today and provide tailored guidance for our lives and situations.

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God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.—*John 3:16*

If you haven't yet received Jesus' gift of eternal life and begun a personal relationship with Him, you can right now by praying the following:

Thank You, Jesus, for giving Your life for me. Please come into my heart, forgive me for the wrong things I've done, fill me with Your Spirit, and give me Your gift of eternal life. Amen.

BY MARIE ALVERO

THE PATIENT ONE



LIFE IS A CONSTANT STREAM OF CONTRADICTIONS—things to hold on to, to let go of, to fight for, to give up. We're told to try harder, to give ourselves a break, to loosen up, to make better choices, to just say yes, to just say no, to settle, to not settle. And to make matters worse, there's always someone saying something like "just listen to your heart." Right!

Sometimes I take these confused, overcomplicated feelings and carry them over to my relationship with God. Am I serious enough with God? Do I know enough scripture? Do I worship Him with both spontaneity and reverence? Am I praying in faith? How do I even know that I have faith? Why do I not hear God's voice more clearly? If I had

more faith, or love, would I hear Him speaking to my heart? Honestly, when the relationship feels this complicated, I feel like giving up.

I'm sure that God watches me in this state with some humor, and probably a great deal of tenderness. I can imagine Him saying, *Remember, I said you would find Me when you look for Me¹ and that if you come close to Me, I will be close to you.²*

I've recently been facing some big decisions that affect my work, family life, and children. I've been conflicted on what the right choices are and swayed by emotions and opinions nearly every day. I've also been praying and earnestly looking to God for answers. Still, at the time of writing this, I can't report that I've confidently made the best decision, the one God wanted me to make.

Rather, I can report that I'm learning. I'm seeing my weaknesses

and growth opportunities. I'm seeing God's grace meeting me in my lacks. It continually amazes me how unhurried, unstressed, and unbothered God is.

In my searching for scripture to guide me, I have been pulled into the Psalms, once again. Because in just about every Psalm, David shows his unedited heart to his God. Whatever state he is in, he speaks it to God. And there, in his weakness, he knows God, like this statement: **"I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me."**³ And that is enough.

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1. See Jeremiah 29:13.

2. See James 4:8.

3. Psalm 13:5–6 NIV

FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

MEET ME IN THE MORNING

You do well to take time with Me first thing in the morning, for without Me, you wouldn't go far. I am wisdom, I am strength, and I am love.

As I told My disciples, you can find rest for your spirit and strength for the day in Me.¹ It can be a temptation to carry on in your own energy rather than taking the time to pause and enter into the realm of My Spirit, but that's not how you will be the most effective. I have promised to renew the strength of all those who wait on Me.

We can be like two friends who are happy at the thought of just being in each other's presence, even if no words pass between them. As you think about Me, turn your heart toward Me, and meditate on My goodness to you, you will enter into My presence.

So take time each morning to draw close to Me. Reach out to Me in prayer and reading My Word.

1. See Matthew 11:28–30.