

CHANGE YOUR LIFE. CHANGE YOUR WORLD.

# activated

Vol 23 • Issue 10

## WORKING WITH GOD

How to thrive in the  
modern workplace

## Musical Woods

The violin's secret

## Peacemakers

Make the first move

## The Good Shepherd

I am valuable to God

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

### AN ADVENTURE WITH GOD

Most of us have a number of different roles or titles by which we're known—parent, child, student, coworker, teammate, spouse, friend, for example. Each of them sheds some light on part of our life.

Throughout Scripture, God is described using many different names and titles—literally hundreds. Some of the better-known ones include King (Psalm 95), Shepherd (Psalm 23), Healer (Exodus 15), Provider (Genesis 22), and Father (Romans 8).

This abundance of names and titles gives us clues about His character. In the culture of biblical times, a name wasn't so much an identifier as something that pointed to the identity of a person. God's different names tell different stories and offer insight into different facets of who He is.

As Christians, we strive to become more like God. The names we give Him help us relate to Him and understand Him. Understanding someone is often key to building a strong relationship with them. And a strong, intimate relationship is exactly what God seeks to have with each one of us.

“Come to me,” Jesus says, “all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus' invitation is to *all*. It doesn't matter where we've been or what we've done—we can give our burdens to Him and “find rest.” We can call upon His name and receive answers.<sup>2</sup> This issue invites us to draw closer to Him by getting to know Him better.

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1. Matthew 11:28–29 NIV

2. See Psalm 99:6.



# THE WAY HOME

BY SCOTT MONTROSE

I WAS LISTENING TO FRANKIE MILLER SINGING “A LONG WAY HOME” WHEN THE LYRICS TOOK ON PERSONAL MEANING.

♪ Oh, it’s a long way home  
In the night alone  
When your songs are all gone  
And your life runs on;  
It’s a long way home.

You are the only one  
Who can feel all the miles  
I’ve gone  
On my way back home. ♪

I’d heard that song many times before, but this time was different. It *does* seem a very long way home when you realize you’ve lost your way in life, like I had.

It began with one bad decision, which led to another. Before I knew it, I had spiraled downward. Entangled in brambles of selfishness and pride, I felt a gulf between God and me.

The first step on my way back to my Father’s arms was admitting to myself and Him that I had made a mess of things and needed His help. That didn’t turn back time or instantly make everything right—I still had a long way to go—but it was a start.

Another song began—Frankie’s raspy voice singing “You’re the Star.”

♪ You gave me hope  
When all around was lost,  
And I could see no point in trying. ...

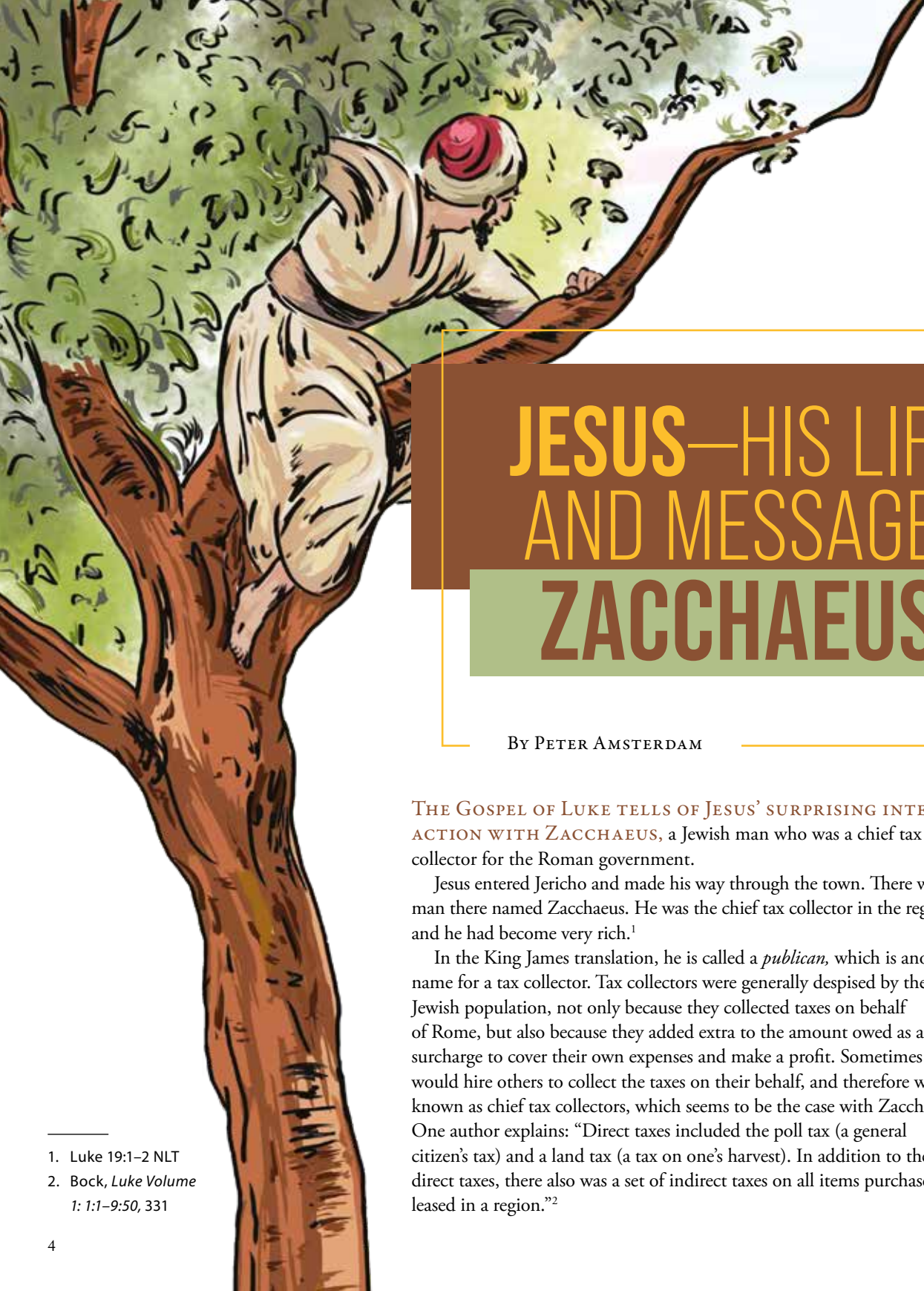
The road I travel is so clear  
Since you came into my life. ...

You’re the star  
The shinin’ light  
The mornin’ dawnin’ ...

Above the storm. ♪

Again, I’d heard those words dozens of times, but now they seemed to have been written specially for me. God’s love was the star, the light that broke through my darkness, my guiding light through the storm. He gave me hope when I saw none, purpose when I had none, and the will to keep going. Suddenly the road didn’t seem so long.

SCOTT MONTROSE IS A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN THE MIDDLE EAST. ■



# JESUS—HIS LIFE AND MESSAGE: ZACCHAEUS

BY PETER AMSTERDAM

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE TELLS OF JESUS' SURPRISING INTERACTION WITH ZACCHAEUS, a Jewish man who was a chief tax collector for the Roman government.

Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich.<sup>1</sup>

In the King James translation, he is called a *publican*, which is another name for a tax collector. Tax collectors were generally despised by the Jewish population, not only because they collected taxes on behalf of Rome, but also because they added extra to the amount owed as a surcharge to cover their own expenses and make a profit. Sometimes they would hire others to collect the taxes on their behalf, and therefore were known as chief tax collectors, which seems to be the case with Zacchaeus. One author explains: “Direct taxes included the poll tax (a general citizen’s tax) and a land tax (a tax on one’s harvest). In addition to these direct taxes, there also was a set of indirect taxes on all items purchased or leased in a region.”<sup>2</sup>

1. Luke 19:1–2 NLT  
2. Bock, *Luke Volume 1: 1:1–9:50*, 331

The city of Jericho was a well-known toll place, as a great deal of commercial travel between Judea and Perea passed through it, which meant that collecting taxes was a lucrative profession there.

He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd.<sup>3</sup>

Zacchaeus had probably heard some reports about Jesus' ministry, which motivated him to find out more. He faced a challenge, however, as there was a large crowd that prevented him from getting close to Jesus, and his short stature meant he couldn't look above the heads of others in the crowd. If he wanted to see Jesus, Zacchaeus needed to be resourceful, and resourceful he was.

So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way.<sup>4</sup>

This type of tree is similar to an oak tree, though with a short trunk and wide branches which make for easy climbing. An adult climbing a tree was likely looked on as rather undignified, especially for a person who had status, wealth, and position in the community. So his actions indicate that Zacchaeus was more than merely curious in his desire to get a glimpse of Jesus.

When Jesus got there, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down! I want to stay with you today."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus not only saw him, but also spoke to him. We're not told how Jesus knew Zacchaeus' name; He may have known it supernaturally, as He did when He "saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael said to him, 'How do you know me?' Jesus answered him, 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.'"<sup>6</sup> Or He may have known

because people were calling out his name; or perhaps He asked others what his name was.

Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. But the people were displeased. "He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner," they grumbled.<sup>7</sup>

While Zacchaeus was happy to have Jesus come to his home, the others present began to grumble and complain. In calling Zacchaeus a "sinner," the crowd was likely expressing their opinion about tax collectors and venting their feelings about the way they took advantage of those from whom they collected taxes. They also charged Jesus with associating with sinners.

Later that day Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "I will give half of my property to the poor. And I will now pay back four times as much to everyone I have ever cheated."<sup>8</sup>

Zacchaeus' statement is both about the present and future—he committed to giving half of his belongings at that time to the poor, and going forward, to pay back four times the amount if he acted unfairly toward someone. Zacchaeus' interaction with Jesus radically changed his handling of money; he moved from taking advantage of others to helping and serving them.

Zacchaeus' pledge to give half of his goods away and to restore fourfold to anyone he wronged went far beyond what was expected. In Judaism, giving 20 percent of one's possessions was considered very generous, and giving more than that was not considered prudent. If someone was found guilty of extorting a fellow Jew, they were required to pay back an extra 20 percent. His pledge showed that he had changed. He knew that he had defrauded others, and he committed to repaying those he had stolen from. In doing so, Zacchaeus became an example of how to generously handle money.

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."<sup>9</sup>

Because of Zacchaeus' change of heart, salvation came to him and his household. Throughout the book of Acts,

3. Luke 19:3 NLT

4. Luke 19:4

5. Luke 19:5 CEV

6. John 1:47–48

7. Luke 19:6–7 NLT

8. Luke 19:8 CEV

9. Luke 19:9–10 NIV

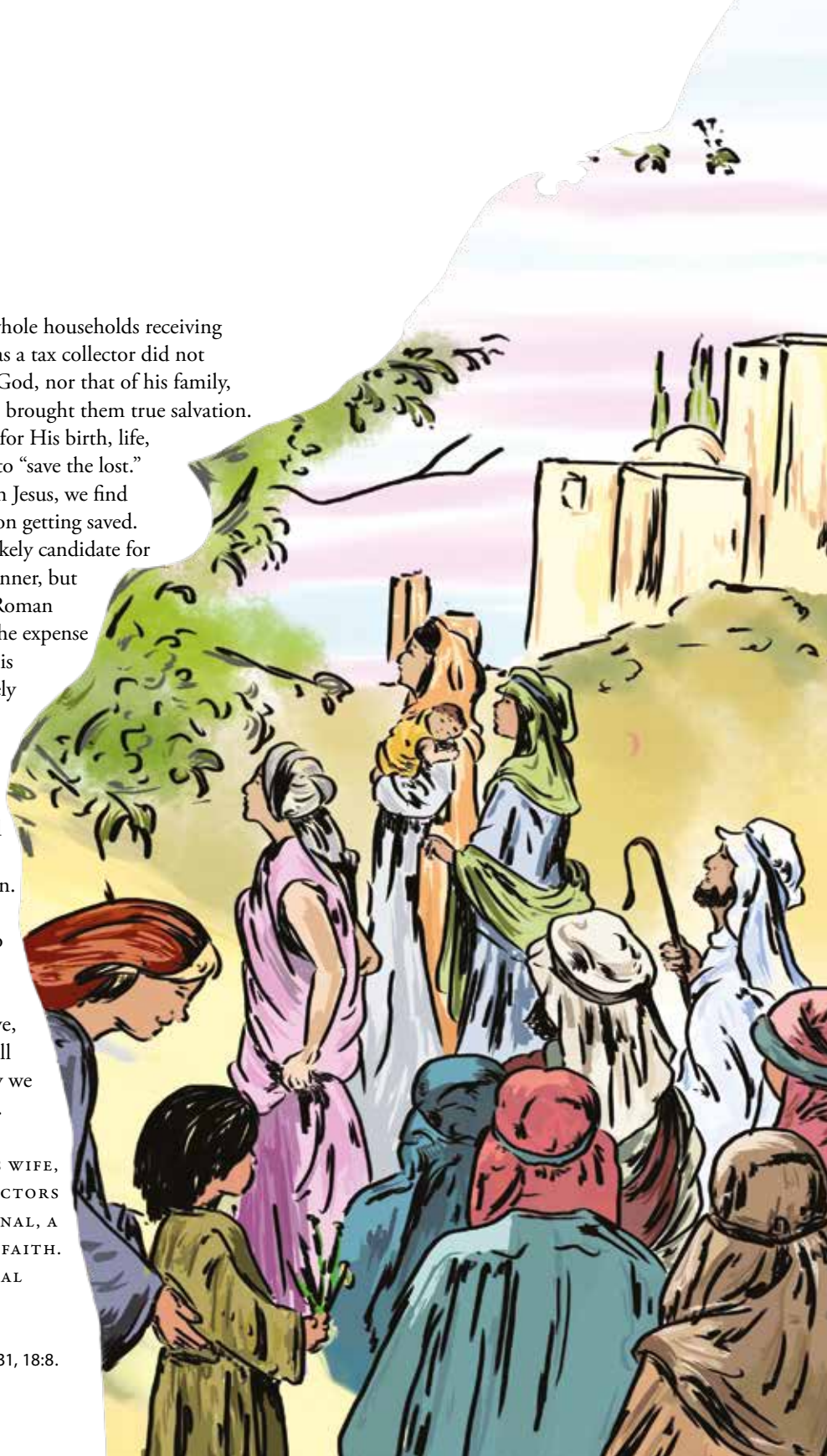
there are references made to whole households receiving salvation.<sup>10</sup> Zacchaeus' status as a tax collector did not hinder his potential access to God, nor that of his family, and his right response to Jesus brought them true salvation.

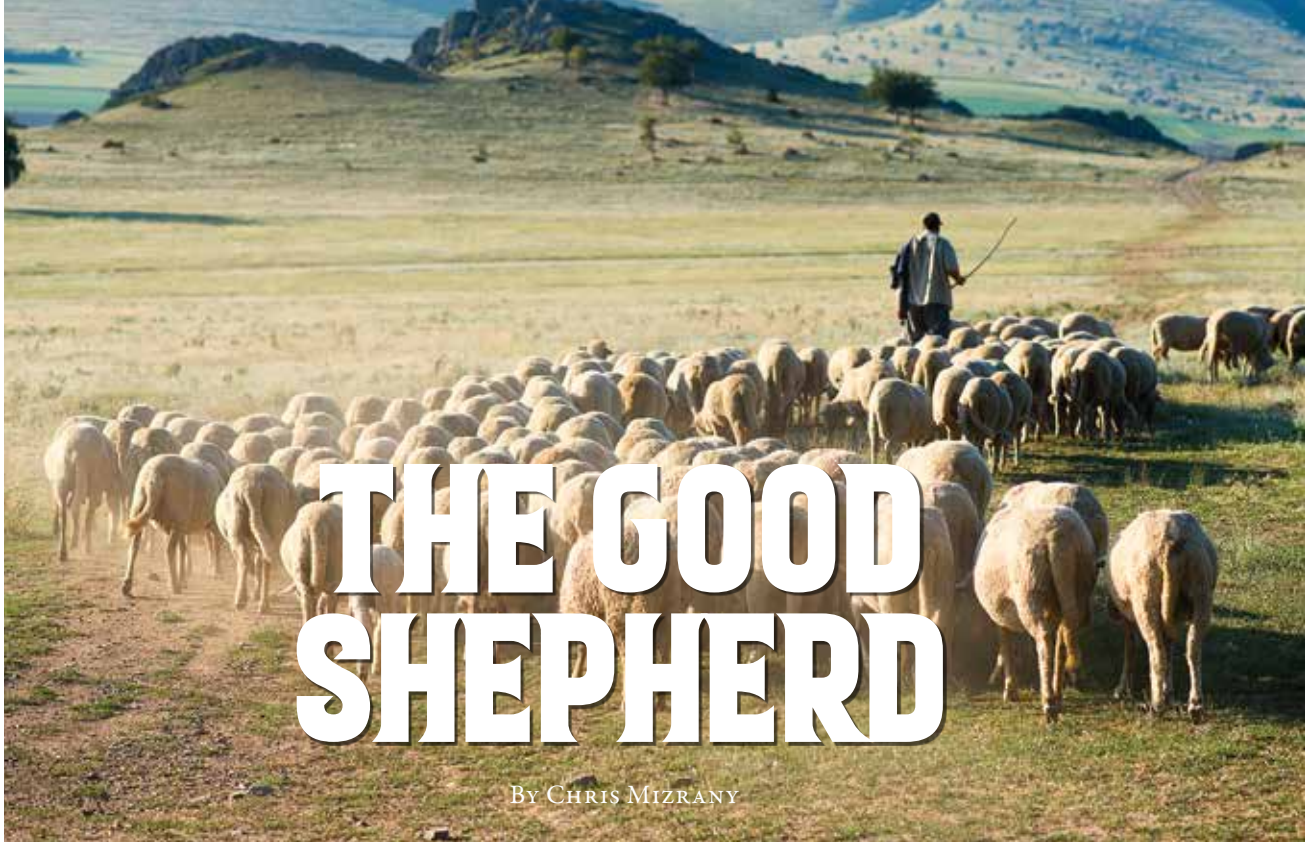
Jesus' purpose—the reason for His birth, life, death, and resurrection—was to “save the lost.” In Zacchaeus' interactions with Jesus, we find an example of just such a person getting saved. Zacchaeus seemed like an unlikely candidate for salvation. He was not only a sinner, but he worked for the oppressive Roman Empire, enriching himself at the expense of his own people. However, his encounter with Jesus completely changed his life. Jesus was willing to look beyond who and what a person was; He was willing to interact with someone despised and rejected by society and give him the opportunity to receive salvation.

May we all reflect Jesus when we encounter those who are looked down upon, and even those who have wronged us or others. May we show love, tolerance, and forgiveness to all we come in contact with. May we all do our best to be like Jesus.

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

10. See Acts 11:13–14, Acts 16:15, 31, 18:8.





# THE GOOD SHEPHERD

BY CHRIS MIZRANY

I'M PRIVILEGED TO LEAD A WEEKLY SUNDAY SCHOOL GROUP OF CHILDREN BETWEEN THE AGES OF 9 AND 13 in a low-income settlement just outside our city in Cape Town. Teaching them regularly challenges me to dig deep into the foundations of my faith and find ways to express biblical lessons in relatable ways. On one occasion, I planned to discuss the story Jesus told of the shepherd who left 99 sheep to search for the one that was lost.<sup>1</sup> I've heard and told the story many times, but I wanted to have an impact on these children's lives. The class had gathered, and I still wasn't sure how to build the lesson. And then, it came to me.

"If you have 100 cents, and you lose one, is that a lot?" I asked. Most of the children shook their heads, looking slightly perplexed. "And if you have 100 dollars, and you lose one, would you look for it?" More than half of the heads nodded; these money issues are something they face daily. "Okay, and if you have 100 *million* dollars, and you lose *one* million, would it matter?" Exclamations of shock

filled the room, and cries of "yes, of course!" mingled with emphatic nods from all. Now the moment of truth.

"Well, you and I are like that one lost sheep. There are BILLIONS of people in the world, yet when we are lost, Jesus loves and looks for us. To Him, we're worth more than we can imagine. We might feel like only one out of so many, but Jesus looks at us and sees value beyond measure." Silence prevailed for a few moments, then I continued. "I want each of you to say out loud 'I am valuable to God!' Now turn to the person next to you and say 'You are loved by God!'" With beaming smiles, they affirmed to each other the simple truth that we each matter.

And I learned once again that even the loneliest lost sheep is unquestionably loved by God. It's not about being the best, brightest, or most righteous. It's about trying and failing, going astray and being gently guided home. It's about being clods of dirt, yet amazingly desired as gems,<sup>2</sup> and being sought until we're found, because God wants each and every one of us in His fold.

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

1. See Luke 15:3-7.

2. See Isaiah 62:3.



# MUSICAL WOODS

BY CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER

IT'S SOMETIMES CALLED THE MOST HUMAN OF INSTRUMENTS, because it has the noble mission of expressing our deepest emotions.

It sings in its deep vibrant voice to touch our soul. In the most moving part of a film, a violin or cello often plays to emphasize the emotion portrayed on screen. As the famous violinist Joshua Bell said, “When you play a violin piece, you’re a storyteller.”

What makes this such a special instrument? Much study has been done over the last 300 years since the golden days of violin-making by the likes of Stradivari. Violins have been x-rayed, analyzed, and measured in a hundred different ways, yet the mystery lingers. Some things defy measurement.

High in the Italian Alps is a forest called the Musical Woods (*Il Bosco Che Suona*).<sup>1</sup> This is where some of the greatest violins are born. The trees endure a rugged climate. Lorenzo Pellegrini is a forest ranger—or forest gardener, as he prefers to call himself—who passionately explains how violin trees should grow. He said:

“Slowly, slowly, slowly! Up in these mountains, they grow so slowly that sometimes they stop growing

altogether. They just gather strength. There are trees up here that are a thousand years old. Can you believe that? And there should not be too much water. The tree’s heart should stay dry. That gives the best wood. Solid. Enormous resonance!”

We should remember this when we are going through our own dry seasons. The Master Luthier may be preparing us to become an instrument that will beautifully resonate and can move a listener to tears of joy.

In biblical times, there was a dry, arid region on the road to Jerusalem, filled with a type of “weeping tree” (dripping resin). As people traveled, they would pass through this weary, “weeping” place, but the difficult journey was worth it in the end.

What joy for those whose strength comes from the Lord, who have set their minds on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. When they walk through the Valley of Weeping, it will become a place of refreshing springs. The autumn rains will clothe it with blessings. They will

1. Watch a short documentary on these woods here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rXrCcYANv0>.



continue to grow stronger, and each of them will appear before God in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

In the same way, those who experience sorrow in this life—and who doesn’t?—can find strength in their faith in God. The journey of a faithful Christian through times of hardship can be a step-by-step expedition through “a place of refreshing springs.”

Back to the Musical Woods. The perfect tree is selected for its tonal quality by specialists like Marcello Mazzucchi, a retired forest ranger who calls himself “a tree listener,” and who says, “I observe them, I touch them. Sometimes, I even hug them. Look carefully and they’ll tell you their life story, their traumas, their joys, everything. Such humble creatures.” When he finds one that seems perfect, he points it out: “Look, it shoots up perfectly straight. It’s very cylindrical. No branches at the bottom. If you ask me, there’s a violin trapped inside.”

Mazzucchi takes out a borer, which is a manual drill, and twists it like a corkscrew through the bark. He listens carefully to the knocking sound the borer makes each time it hits a new tree ring. He pulls out a core sample, and after examining it carefully declares, “*Magnifico!*”

Jesus said that we have not chosen Him, but rather, He has chosen us.<sup>3</sup> But unlike the perfect violin tree, Jesus doesn’t pick people because they are good or perfect. If we look back on Bible heroes like Noah and Abraham, or the twelve apostles, we find that, just like us, they were full of flaws. But God

saw the potential in each one of them, something *magnifico* that they may not even have realized themselves.

Before cutting, Mazzucchi makes sure that there are tiny spruce saplings growing nearby for the next generation of violins. Removing an adult tree will let more sun in and help the saplings mature. “As soon as a tree falls, those younger trees who were suffering in the shadows can start to grow more quickly,” he says. And some of those will themselves become musical instruments to be played decades, or even centuries, from now. The tree dies, but lives on in its new form.

At just the right time, when all the conditions are optimal, the tree is cut into slabs and is put out to dry. The drying or seasoning time for a piece of violin wood is generally ten years or more, depending on its size and thickness. Fifty-year-old wood is even better.

The next time you hear the mesmerizing refrain of a violin, remember all that went into it. In like manner, perhaps you are a work in progress, and what you are going through now is just preparation for that magical moment when the curtain opens and the Master lays His bow upon your strings for you to sing your story.

CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER IS A SCRIPTWRITER AND MIME ARTIST<sup>4</sup> WHO SPENT 47 YEARS DOING MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN 10 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES. HE AND HIS WIFE PAULINE CURRENTLY LIVE IN GERMANY. ■

2. Psalm 84:5–7 NLT

3. See John 15:16.

4. <http://elixirmime.com>



# WORKING WITH GOD

BY MARTIN McTEG

**THE WORKPLACE CAN BE A CHALLENGING AND COMPETITIVE ARENA.** Too often, honesty and hard work can lose out to the pursuit of a quick buck and me-first politicking. But there *is* another way. The idea that the Bible contains specific guidance for the modern work life is not as incongruous as it might seem. As Joseph<sup>1</sup> and Daniel<sup>2</sup> proved, we can stand for integrity and diligence in the workplace, which can serve as a witness to others.

## HAVE A STRONG WORK ETHIC.

Give it your best shot. Instead of doing the minimum, put your all into your responsibilities. “He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Corinthians 9:6). “Those who work hard will prosper” (Proverbs 13:4 NLT).

Be a self-starter. Take the initiative. “Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise, which, having no captain, overseer or ruler, provides her supplies in the summer, and gathers her food in the harvest” (Proverbs 6:6–8).

Be honest. Bending the rules doesn’t pay in the long run. “Honesty guides good people; dishonesty destroys treacherous people” (Proverbs 11:3 NLT).

## DON’T DWELL ON NEGATIVES.

No job is perfect. “If there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Philippians 4:8).

1. See Genesis chapters 39 and 41.

2. See Daniel 1:19–20.

3. See Genesis chapters 37,39–41; Daniel chapters 1–2.

As for that hard-to-get-along-with coworker, the Bible instructs, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Contentions? “A fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back” (Proverbs 29:11).

Feeling restless and bored? God will refresh your spirit. “The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning” (Lamentations 3:22–23 NLT).

Feeling stressed and spent? “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). “Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

## BE PATIENT.

God blesses those who do things His way, but not always immediately and not only in dollars and cents. The Bible characters Joseph and Daniel both rose to top positions, but neither was an overnight success. It took years of faithful, patient work to show themselves trustworthy of greater responsibility.<sup>3</sup> “The blessing of the Lord makes one rich” (Proverbs 10:22). “Let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (James 1:4).

MARTIN McTEG IS A FORMER MISSIONARY VOLUNTEER, NOW RETIRED, AND LIVING IN THE USA. ■



# Less is Better

BY UDAY PAUL

**I VIVIDLY REMEMBER THE DAY IN MY EARLY TWENTIES** when I was sitting in the comfortable living room of my upper-middle class home and felt a void and restlessness within me that none of the plush surroundings or gadgets around me could assuage. In that fleeting moment, I sensed the powerful truth that material things cannot fully satisfy or give us happiness. I realized that our spirits will never be satisfied until they are in union with the great and loving Spirit who created them. As Augustine said to God in his autobiography *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”

We’re constantly bombarded with advertisements telling us to buy newer and better things. It doesn’t matter if we’re content with what we have, or already have more things than we need, or simply can’t afford more. We’re told that better things will make our lives better! But in addition to making our lives more stressful, consumerism also puts enormous stress on our planet. Mahatma Gandhi said, “There is enough on earth for everyone’s need, but not enough for everyone’s greed.”

Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471) said that “the happiness of man does not consist in abundance of this world’s

goods, for a modest share is sufficient for him.” In more recent times, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) echoed this when he said, “Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplify, simplify, simplify!” I too have found that having too many goods keeps me from enjoying what I have to the fullest, and that the simplest pleasures of life, which don’t cost much, provide us with the greatest happiness.

In the book of Isaiah, God says, “Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?”<sup>1</sup> We were created as eternal creatures; that’s why the temporality of materialism leaves us with an empty feeling.

The greatest and most precious possession we can ever have is eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”<sup>2</sup> Only God can satisfy the thirst and hunger of our spirits, because He created us with a space in our hearts that only He can fill. We enjoy that satisfaction in our inner being as we deepen our relationship with Him.

1. Isaiah 55:1–2 ESV

2. John 6:35 ESV

UDAY PAUL IS A FREELANCE WRITER, VOLUNTEER, AND TEACHER BASED IN INDIA. ■



# PEACEMA

BY SALLY GARCÍA

**I OFTEN FEEL DISCOURAGED WITH THE STATE OF THE WORLD.** I read the newspaper and watch the evening news report and sometimes I get just plain upset! Why is there so much discord—why can't people try to get along with each other? Yet, they say that when we point our accusing finger at others there are three fingers of our own hand pointing back to ourselves. So then I have to ask myself—*Have I done anything today to be a part of the solution, even if only in my own neighborhood?* The hopeless “*what’s the use?*” mentality is not only defeatist, but it just isn’t a great way to live our lives!

My friend Margaret tells the following story of an incident in her apartment building:

“In our building we have a chat group for residents. We use it for announcements, to sell things, and sometimes to vent our frustrations. A few days ago, a dozen or more people were angry about an opinion expressed in the chat. Ugly, strong, and offensive things were said.

“I was deeply saddened and upset and considered leaving the group.

“Then I had a feeling that this was the wrong reaction, and that I should share my feelings in the chat, even though I seldom participate.

“So I asked God to help me speak in love and courtesy to these people whom I don’t know and can’t identify, even though it’s possible we sometimes ride the elevator together!

“I wrote that it is sad to treat each other this way, that we need to be courteous—there is already so much violence and aggression on the street. We need to be able to return home after a long day and find a refuge of love among us. I also wrote that if we can speak courteously and kindly to each other we will create a climate of security and protection within our building.

“I was expecting a barrage of nasty and cynical replies. But no, there was a general silence and a couple of ‘likes.’ I was thankful for the likes and took the silence as a sign of respect—the subject was now closed.

“I could feel God at work, wanting to restore our hearts. Yesterday I shared in our online group an



# PEACEMAKERS

inspirational quote and thanked everyone for being such good neighbors. This time there were more likes and a couple of people also shared their wishes that we all would enjoy a good day! This was a first!

“Though I had felt timid, I was glad I had offered an alternative to the aggressive criticisms. And once again, *a little love goes a long, long way.*”

Margaret’s intervention was simple, yet it took a fair amount of courage and effort to say the right words to defuse a potentially complicated situation among the residents of her apartment building. It reminds me of the Bible verse, “A gentle answer turns away wrath.”<sup>1</sup>

SALLY GARCÍA IS AN EDUCATOR, MISSIONARY, AND MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN CHILE. ■

1. Proverbs 15:1 NIV
2. “Let There Be Peace on Earth,” Songwriters: Jill Jackson-Miller and Sy Miller, 1955

Let There Be Peace on Earth  
The peace that was meant to be  
With God as our Father  
Brothers all are we  
Let me walk with my brother  
In perfect harmony.



Let peace begin with me  
Let this be the moment now.  
With ev’ry step I take  
Let this be my solemn vow  
To take each moment and live  
Each moment in peace eternally  
Let there be peace on earth  
And let it begin with me.<sup>2</sup>

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.—*Matthew 5:9 NIV*

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.—*Romans 12:21 NIV*

Whenever you are confronted with an opponent, conquer him with love.—*Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948)*

It is not enough to win a war; it is more important to organize the peace.—*Aristotle (384–322 BC)*

First keep peace with yourself, then you can also bring peace to others.—*Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471)*

If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.—*Nelson Mandela (1918–2013)*



## START HERE

You can make a difference in others’ lives, but Jesus in you can make a bigger difference. If you haven’t done so yet, you can receive Jesus right now by praying a short prayer like this one:

*Jesus, I believe in You and invite You into my life as my Savior and constant companion. Please forgive me for the wrong things I’ve done, and fill me with Your Spirit of love. Help me draw closer to You through studying Your Word in the Bible. Amen.*

# THE CONCLUSION

BY MARIE ALVERO



THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES IS A WONDERFUL READ WHEN I GET OVERWHELMED WITH THE BIG QUESTIONS—what’s the meaning of life, what does God want from me, how should I react to this or that situation? The author of this book asks questions like mine: What is the meaning of life? If we all end up dying, what’s the point? What things really matter, and which don’t?

The style is beautiful, but the overall tone is somewhat pessimistic; for example, the famous phrase “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” is also translated as “Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”<sup>1</sup>

But in its last verses, the book strikes a more positive note: “Everything you were taught can be put into a few words: Respect and obey God! This is what life is all about. God will judge everything we do, even what is done in secret, whether good or bad.”<sup>2</sup>

That’s the clincher. “Everything you were taught: Respect and obey God.” Four little words that remind me to recenter God as the focus of my life.



So far, so good, but do we even know how to obey God? You can hear a lot of people sharing their views of what God wants from us, but you get the feeling that not all of them have actually taken the time to study and understand what’s at the heart of God’s instructions in the Bible.

God gave an impressive set of specific commandments to His people in the Old Testament to guide them in every aspect of their lives. Yet they continually disregarded what He’d instructed and reaped the negative consequences over and over. In the New Testament, Jesus taught that all the laws and the prophets depended on just two commandments: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>3</sup> But that can sound

1. Ecclesiastes 1:2 NIV

2. Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 CEV

[Jesus] died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them.

—2 Corinthians 5:15 NLT

We are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.—Ephesians 2:10 NLT

Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes.

—Ephesians 1:4 NLT



kind of vague, and we can tend to interpret the word “love” to mean whatever seems convenient or fits our personal worldview.

Sometimes, trying to figure out the right thing to do in every given situation can be pretty complicated, and I just want God to say, *Yes, you can do this*, or, *No you can’t do that*. But then I’m back to realizing that didn’t work too well for the children of Israel. So what’s the answer? How do you “respect and obey God”? I have concluded that part of the reason God didn’t just give us a list of rules to check off is because what He really wants is our hearts,

our time, and our efforts to love and get to know Him and pattern our lives around what we know about Him through the life and words of Jesus.

As complicated as the world seems, as hard as making decisions can be, and as much as I want to *know* how to navigate it all, things get easier and clearer when my deepest desire is to know and love God. Every time I prioritize that, things become clearer and simpler.

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3. Matthew 22:36–37, 39



## FINDING MY IDENTITY

BY RUTH DAVIDSON

WHEN I WAS A SCHOOLGIRL, I remember hearing a melancholic song that contained the lyrics, “Why was I born; why am I living?” At the time, I couldn’t imagine why anyone would even ask himself that question.

But as the years went by, I started to realize that everyone is looking for an answer, a reason for living. I could see that many people ask themselves questions like, *Why was I born?* or *What is my purpose?*

Some people sadly go through their entire lives seeking answers to these questions without ever finding them. But once we look to our Creator and His plan for humankind, we can begin to see what we’re here for and what we should do with our lives. It’s when we look beyond ourselves to the truth of God’s Word that we begin to see what life is all about.

When the *school bell* rings and the angels beckon you, the only thing you can take with you are the deeds you’ve done in love.

RUTH DAVIDSON WAS A MISSIONARY TO THE MIDDLE EAST, INDIA, AND SOUTH AMERICA FOR 25 YEARS. SHE IS NOW AN AUTHOR AND CONTRIBUTOR TO THE WEBSITE [WWW.THEBIBLEFORYOU.COM](http://WWW.THEBIBLEFORYOU.COM). ■

A photograph of a white lighthouse with a glowing orange light inside its lantern room, situated on a rocky cliffside at dusk. The sky is a mix of deep blue and orange from the setting sun. The lighthouse is the central focus, with its light providing a warm contrast to the cool tones of the twilight.

FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

# THE LIGHTHOUSE

My Word is like the beacon of a lighthouse, shining in the darkness to guide vessels through the sometimes dark and stormy sea of life and into My safe harbor. I placed it on the shore, facing the sea, so that as many as possible will see its light and be drawn to Me.

You are like a sea captain piloting his ship through rough waters on a dark night. If you had no light, you could not see the shoreline and your ship could be dashed against the rocks and lost. But because I love you, I send out My Word like the huge beam of a lighthouse to help you find your bearings. My light illuminates the dangers and points the way home.

My Word is a lamp to your feet and a light to your path.<sup>1</sup> Look to it for light and guidance, so you can make it safely to port no matter how dark the night or how intense the storm.

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1. See Psalm 119:105.