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Dragged down by addiction

Isaiah Ramos was only three years old when his father was sent to prison for 15 years, forcing his mother to raise four children on her own in the Bronx, New York.

"We went from shelter to shelter," Isaiah recalls in a Delafé Testimonies video. "There was no stability."

At a young age Isaiah was exposed to masturbation and pornography. He remembers going to church with his mother but at the same time "messaging around with the young girls in the church and just living a life of lust and secret sin".

"Once I hit an age where I could tell my mom, 'I don't want to go to church this Sunday', she let me stay home ... I began looking up to all the wrong men because my dad wasn't in my life. I started just chasing money and fame, caring about my clothes, idolising what I put on my body, trying to seek purpose in different sports, living a life of fornication, sleeping around with different women."

After graduating high school, Isaiah started pursuing a boxing career, which led him to a new obsession: gambling.

"When I got involved with gambling, it affected me so much. It

just made me depressed. It made me angry."

Isaiah also started smoking weed and before long, it became a daily habit – as did the gambling. When his gambling began affecting his career, Isaiah knew he had to stop. He resolved to quit gambling as his New Year's resolution. He managed to kick the habit – but found he replaced it with smoking weed more and sleeping around.

One night Isaiah was driving with a friend and they were popping pills to get high.

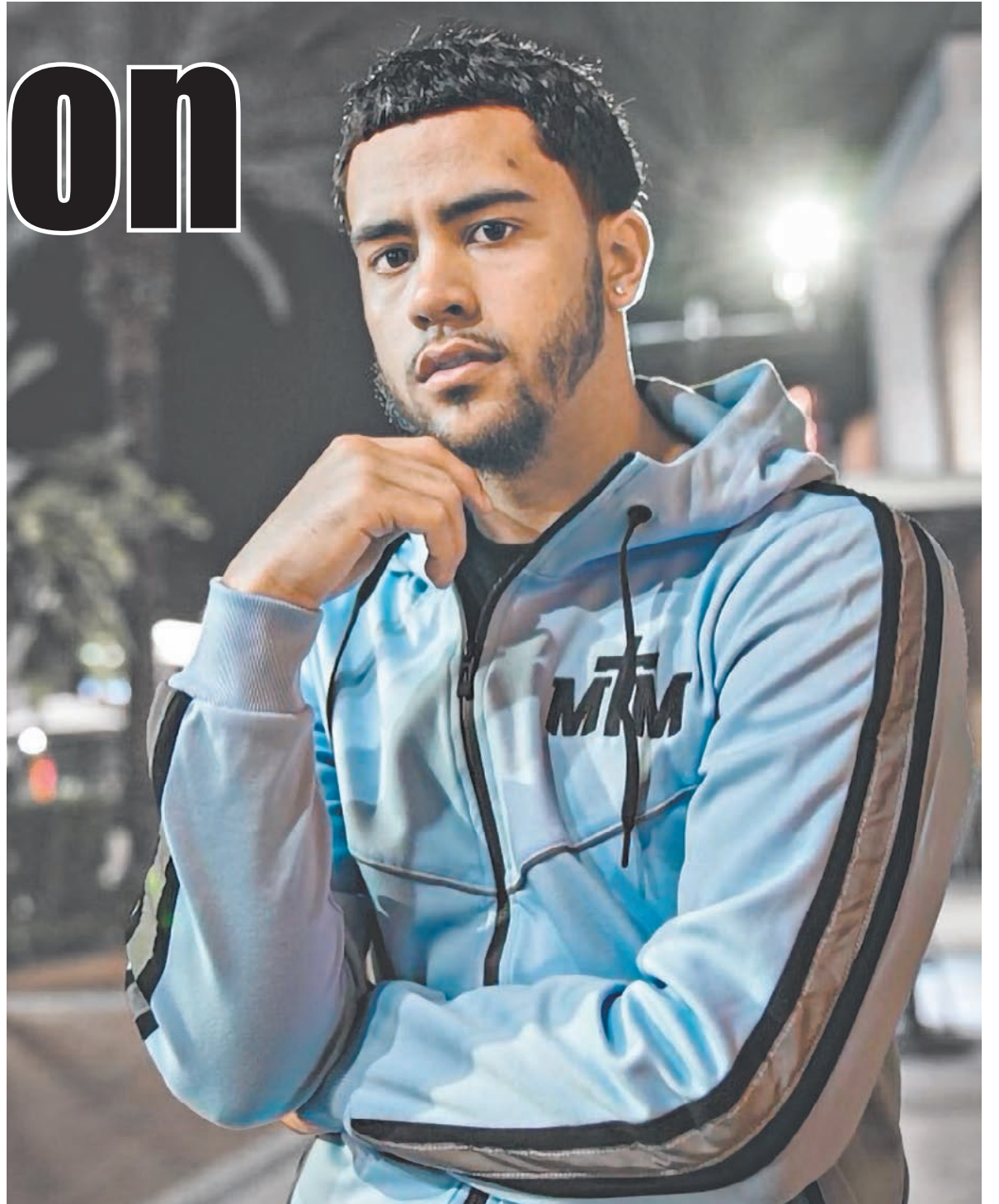
"I got into an accident and the car was totaled," Isaiah recalls. "I remember I got out of the car and just fell on the highway. I woke up in the hospital with IVs in my arm."

After that, Isaiah's lifestyle didn't change – he went right back to selling drugs, smoking weed, drinking and partying.

"But I started thinking differently. I started having thoughts like, 'Is God real?' 'If God is real [and I died], would I be in hell right now?'"

After a discussion with his grandmother about these thoughts, three words stood out to him: Relationship with God.

"I knew that I needed a relationship with God, I just didn't know how to do it."



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BACK PAGE

DAD ISSUES
STEVE WEATHERFORD

ARE YOU READY FOR THE AFTERLIFE?

BY GREG LAURIE

FULL House actor Bob Saget, 65, was found dead in his hotel room in Florida following a show on his comedy tour. This tragic event happened right on the heels of the death of beloved comedic actress Betty White, who died at 99.

Bob made this statement on Instagram after Betty passed: "I don't know what happens when we die, but if Betty says you get to be with the love of your life, then I happily defer to Betty on this."

He honestly added, "I don't know what happens when we die."

Death is something we all think about almost every day — some more than others. We should think deeply about death, but more importantly, the afterlife.

In older times, people commonly wrote a Latin phrase on the top of documents: "Memento Mori." It means "Think of death."

The phrase sounds morbid on the surface, but it's not. It served as a reminder to be aware that life ends, eternity is close and there is an afterlife.

I am not an expert on the afterlife, but I am a

student, not only because I am a Christian and a pastor, but also because my son, Christopher, died in 2008. I have thought deeply about what happens when we leave this life and enter the next one. Here is what has brought endless comfort to me: There is a Heaven, and Jesus has made a way for us all to go there.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying" (John 11:25).

My son believed in Jesus as I do. He is now in Heaven.

For the Christian, the moment we take our last breath on earth, we take our next breath in Heaven. Because Jesus died on the cross for my sins and rose again, I have hope for the afterlife. And I know that I will see my son again.

King David, who also lost a son too soon, wrote, "I will go to him, but he will not return to me" (2 Samuel 12:23).

My son is not just a part of my past; he is also a

part of my future. Jesus promised me that.

It is not a bad thing to think about these things deeply. Renowned author and theologian C.S. Lewis said, "A continual looking forward to the eternal world is not ... a form of escapism or wishful

thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do."

Think about death, eternity, and the afterlife. But think on it with the knowledge that death is not the end. There is an afterlife, but you need to be ready for it. Heaven is a prepared place for prepared people.

Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am, you may be also" (John 14.2).

Only those who are prepared to die are genuinely ready to live.

Now Betty, and Bob are in the afterlife. And one day, you will be too. You decide in this life where you will spend the afterlife. Choose well.

● Greg Laurie is the pastor and founder of the Harvest churches in California and Hawaii and of Harvest Crusades. He is an evangelist, best-selling author and movie producer.

“
Only those who are prepared to die are genuinely ready to live.
”

When life gives you lemons...



DO you ever run into roadblocks on your life journey? Do you ever get frustrated when things go wrong and your plans don't work out as anticipated? What seems like a detour can lead you straight to your destination.



Grace and Walter Lantz rented a rustic wooden cabin in the forest for their honeymoon. At the first dawn there, a woodpecker started its pounding on the roof.

The newlyweds couldn't sleep for the noise. But by the time they returned from their honeymoon, they were inspired to create a cartoon character, "Woody Woodpecker." Walter drew the pictures. Grace became Woody's voice.

Years later, at their 50th wedding anniversary, Grace remembered the problem of the noisy woodpecker and said, "It was the best thing that ever happened to us."

In 1859, a New York chemist travelled to Pennsylvania, to watch the drilling for oil. He was Robert Chesebrough, who watched

as the oil drillers cursed a colorless oily residue that stuck to their drills. Though it was a problem that gummed up the works, the oil workers smeared this stuff on their cuts and burns. It helped to heal. Chesebrough took this oily residue back to New York. By 1870, he was manufacturing what he had developed from that oily problem. He called it Vaseline Petroleum Jelly.



A violent storm posed a problem for the captain of a slave ship. He was John Newton, born in London on July 24, 1725. He transported slaves from Africa to America. On March 10, 1748, a storm frightened him so badly that he called out to God for mercy. The problem of the storm started a storm in his heart. He remembered his childhood faith. Finally, that inner storm gave him the opportunity to give up the slave trade.

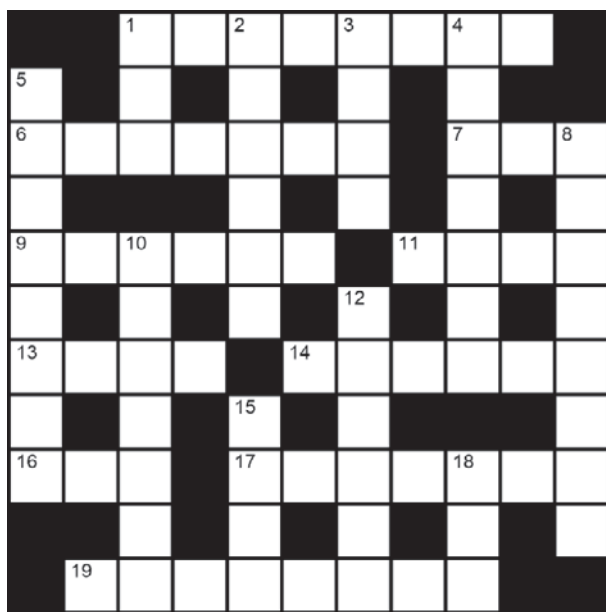
At age 39, he became a priest of the Church of England. He wrote a hymn called *Amazing Grace* to tell how God's love changed his life. 250 years later people are still singing it. That storm provided showers of blessing in his life and for many others in the years to come.

In each of these instances, a setback turned into an opportunity. Try to change your perspective on whatever difficult situation or trial you are facing at the moment; view it creatively and turn it into an opportunity to learn and grow.

*Hear my prayer, O Lord,
And let my cry come to You.
Do not hide Your face from me in the day of my trouble;
Incline Your ear to me;
In the day that I call, answer me speedily. - Psalm 102:1-2*

Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

- ACROSS**
- 1 Viewers, listeners
 - 6 Vast
 - 7 Bunk or berth
 - 9 Decay and disappear
 - 11 Like many old cellars
 - 13 Highway off-ramp
 - 14 Desert mammals
 - 16 Pull along
 - 17 Old as the hills
 - 19 Engine chamber
- DOWN**
- 1 Chair part
 - 2 Relating to Denmark
 - 3 Used for seeing
 - 4 A leaf vegetable
 - 5 Easiest to do
 - 8 Down-payments
 - 10 Network of trains



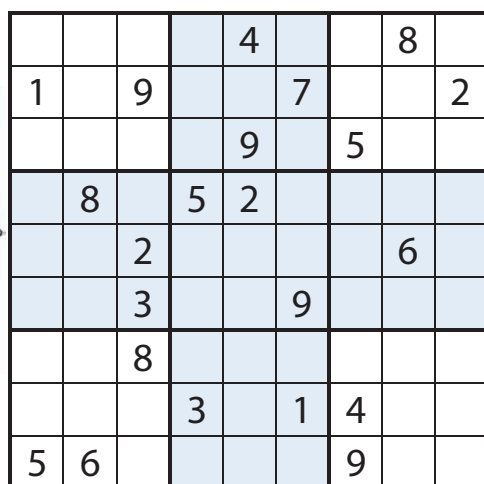
- 12 Waltzed, for example
- 15 Dry watercourse (North Africa)

- 18 Organ for hearing

SOLUTIONS PAGE 11



"Once I got my barking under control the neighbourhood fell in love with me."



Dragged down by addiction

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"When I got there I was so anxious," Isaiah remembers. "This was my first time in two or three years that I was about to go to sleep without smoking [weed]... that night I prayed. It was my first time in a long time that I prayed. I cried out to God, 'Lord let me sleep. Let me fall asleep without having to smoke, without having to have sex, without having to pop pills.' And He answered my prayer. I didn't just fall asleep, I slept like a baby."

In North Carolina, Isaiah attended church with his aunt. He recalls tears streaming from his face watching people worshipping God. The pastor preached about all the questions Isaiah had about God and how to have a relationship with Him.

"There was a man there that was sharing his testimony about how the Lord delivered him from his life of sin and that was a message of hope for me. It brought me peace. It was the truth, the good news that God was offering me a relationship with Him - a new life ... that day I made the decision, I said, 'God, I'm gonna give You my life.'"

When the pastor invited anyone who wanted to get baptized (submerged in water as an outward display of dedication to God) to come forward, Isaiah walked to the front of the church.

"I laid my life down and I knew it was a very major decision. I was ready. I wanted a new life. I wanted to change ... in that moment I knew there was hope. I knew that God was gonna set me free."

After that Isaiah began praying and reading the Bible every day.

"God began cleaning out my heart little by little, stripping away sins. He set me free from my pornography addiction ... He just began working in my heart; like I had no desire for it. I remember the same thing [happened] with weed. I wouldn't smoke because God was that peace that I needed."

Isaiah admits it wasn't a perfect journey and some sins were easier to give up than others. "I said, 'God I am gonna stop doing everything else but I'm not gonna stop having sex.'"

But he became so convicted that sex outside of marriage was wrong, he prayed to God to help him to change. "I didn't know how to do it, but I told God I was willing. God began working in my life and I began walking in purity."

Isaiah now shares his story in the hope it will help other people who are struggling.

"Jesus is the only way," he attests. "He's the only way to true peace. He's the only way to true love. He's the only way to find your purpose. He is the only way to heaven."

Isaiah Ramos



BE STILL

A Joyful 'toon by Mike Waters



"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth."

- PSALM 46:10 NIV

Wise words on suffering

YUVAL Noah Harari in his bestseller, *Sapiens*. "Happiness is not the surplus of pleasant over unpleasant moments. Rather, happiness consists in seeing one's life in its entirety as meaningful and worthwhile. ... A meaningful life can be extremely satisfying even in the midst of hardship, whereas a meaningless life is a terrible ordeal no matter how comfortable it is."

TRAILS and subsequent suffering in life are inevitable, unpredictable and variable. And while never pleasant, they become purposeful and profitable when responded to correctly [by using them as an opportunity to draw closer to God].

- David E. Stevens

IT has never been quite enough to say that God is in His heaven and all is right with the world; since the rumor is that God had left His heavens to set it right.

- G. K. Chesterton

GOD specialises in hard situations. He is most at work, most active, most powerful, most strategic when the odds are stacked against people; whether that's lifting people out of pits, storms, dry valleys, deep waters, shipwreck, islands, deserts, wilderness, even graves. God showed up and redeemed. Hope is not God's side hustle. God is there for you, and the harder the fight of life gets, the harder He is fighting for us.

- Benjamin Windle

WARREN Wiersbe states: "Our faith is not really tested until God asks us to bear what seems unbearable, do what seems unreasonable, and expect what seems impossible."

I'VE lately been reminded that when it's cloudy and you can't see the sun, we still trust that the sun is there. It's the same with God. He's still there, even when it feels brutal.

- Megan

"LIFE with God is not immunity from difficulties, but peace in difficulties."

- C.S. Lewis

"GOD allows us to experience the low points of life in order to teach us lessons that we could learn in no other way."

- C.S. Lewis

"LIFE is hard. Life is going to be hard if it's not already really, really hard. But I believe we can live so well in the hard. ... You have a stunning capacity to endure incredibly hard because of Jesus in your story. You are actually anti-fragile.

"With Jesus in your corner, you are so much stronger than you think; you can endure very, very hard things. You can stay in the hard, you don't have to leave. You can do it. You can do this, because of Jesus."

- paraplegic Katherine Wolf

Poet's journey to faith

From the time she was five years old, Traci Neal knew that her passion was to express herself through words, and from 13 she wanted to make poetry her career. That ambition would take 20 years to fulfil but in the meantime Traci learnt some life lessons that have made her poetry so much richer and deeper.

Growing up, the now 34-year-old was a shy girl who got teased by her peers and whose writing became an outlet from the bullying and low self-esteem. Unfortunately, she also tried to find acceptance through romantic relationships with the wrong sort of guys and ended up being the victim of domestic violence at 16 and rape at age 20.

During this time Traci admits to being fuelled by selfishness, pride, and greed.

"These traits escalated in college, especially when I turned 21. I partied, had sex with men and wanted to make lots of money. I drank the most I ever drank on my 21st birthday and was very drunk," she confesses.

Since Traci had grown up going to church every Sunday and been taught the Bible, she thought of herself as a Christian; but it took total brokenness to bring her to a place of wanting a real relationship with Jesus.

"I believed [wild living] would satisfy my soul. Instead, I felt super empty. After I graduated, I decide to give up partying, sex, and schemes to make money. All of it got old. I also chose to have a more 'stable' career. I decided to teach."

Traci then spent 10 years trying, unsuccessfully, to become a certified elementary school teacher.

"My divine intervention begins in Beijing, China," she shares. "I taught English to Chinese children for six months from 2012 to the early part of 2013. While over there alone, I realized my relationship with God was what was sustaining me in the midst of adapting to cultural differences."

Back in the United States in South Carolina, Traci did a range of jobs that she hated because they all involved cleaning something unsanitary. Although at the time she resented God for allowing her to suffer such degrading work, she now realises that He was developing a servant heart in her.

Things were hard on the romantic front too. Traci met a man and they planned to marry but just after her 27th birthday, her fiancé died at the age of 35 from a brain injury.

That pushed Traci into a very dark place where the world was not clear anymore.

"I felt lost and uncertain about life. I had prayed day and night for his healing but now I was angry because I felt Jesus had let me down," she recalls.

Interestingly, her response was not to reject God and walk away but to decide that since nothing — not love, nor partying, nor money, nor a career — had worked out as she had hoped, she would give the whole mess to Jesus and surrender her whole heart to Him.

"Suddenly, He did a miraculous wonder!" she attests. "Jesus showed me how tremendously He loved me. He restored me from my pain and loss. He even blessed me with a husband, not long afterwards — on my 29th birthday, Zach proposed."

"I also began to understand something of why I went through my season of brokenness — so that I can relate to the suffering, hopelessness and need of others."

Traci's poetry has, in the last few years, flourished and she has won two awards for it. Her poems have

highlighted what being a servant truly means and why serving others is a priceless gift. She loves to use her creativity as a witness of the goodness of Jesus, offering hope to the hurting that Jesus can make all things new, even as He did for her.

"Life can feel unfair," she admits. "Sometimes it may not make any sense but, never forget this, Jesus is a light to see you through your darkest days. When we open our hearts to Him, Jesus can show us the way."

"In my past, I could not imagine any of these things happening to me. I know God has a purpose for my life, even when I sometimes do not see greatness in myself. Pain is never a fun procedure, but often-times it is necessary for a person's development. If you are going through a time of suffering, I want you to remember this. Hold on to Jesus and refuse to give up. You are still breathing. Your heart is still beating. You are stronger than you think. May God bring you out on the other side of your sorrow." •



Traci Neal

The blood of Jesus

BY TRACI NEAL

My problems can feel like thunder clouds and waves of wonder. How do I escape thoughts in my mind? Where do I find peace to stop living blind? I cannot free myself. I am weak on my own.

The blood of Jesus makes me whole. The power of Jesus is unbreakable and unshakable. Now, I live to take a back seat. I will not allow Satan to put my life on repeat. My smile spells pure joy. I walk in victory. Jesus wins my battles. He breaks my chains. The blood of Jesus set me free.

I am a new creature with evident new features. Jesus in me will forever shine bright. He is my everything. I love being in His light! The blood of Jesus washes. Jesus can make anyone clean. Jesus is the way to God, the Father. Watch God move. Let Him take over your scene.

A life of loss, yet filled with hope

Tony Hickman knows what it is to suffer loss. When he was 14, his mother suddenly passed away from a brain haemorrhage. More recently, he has lost a sister, brother and niece to stomach cancer — something he has also battled with.

But he has found something that gives him hope and peace in times of suffering.

Tony's parents took him to church as a child, but it was a very old chapel and he struggled to understand anything. He knew God was real but he always thought God was angry, like his dad, who had a temper and regularly spanked his kids.

"Although I'm sure I heard about Jesus and God's love as a child, it had never truly registered that His love was for ME," Tony says.

After his mother's death Tony made friends with a boy from school with Christian parents, who invited him to attend a more contemporary church with them. "[There] I began to understand that Jesus died for the whole world," Tony says.

When he was 15, Tony read a book in which the main character, a scullery maid, asks a pastor how to become a Christian. The pastor told

the maid to pray: "Lord, show me myself." Although he didn't fully understand what it meant, he prayed the maid's simple prayer and in the months that followed, he became aware of the state of his heart.

"Although I hadn't committed much in the way of outward sins, I saw that my heart was indeed very sinful to God and I started to truly want to know I was forgiven," Tony explains. "This was a big battle for me as my parents taught me that God would only forgive a special few that He had chosen before they were even born. I was desperate to know whether I could be accepted or forgiven."

Tony attended yearly Christian youth camps and, during the second year of youth camp, he felt fully ready

to give his life to Jesus. He asked for forgiveness and invited Jesus to be his Lord and Saviour. However he struggled to truly know he belonged to God.

"The real knowing I was born of God and the joy of forgiveness only fully came a year later at the same youth camp when I was 18," Tony says. "I was sitting quietly praying in the tent after a meeting with everyone when



Tony Hickman before (above) his stomach removal and afterwards (below).

the Holy Spirit just came down unexpectedly and flooded my heart with his love and presence.

"I prayed and praised for what seemed about 10 minutes but when I opened my eyes, the tent was empty and looking at my watch I discovered I had been praising the Lord for two hours! I had such a joy after this that I jumped with joy and have many times looked back to that day when I have had other battles and it has comforted my heart to know how much He really loves me."

Among Tony's battles has been the loss of several family members. Six years ago his sister passed away from stomach cancer at 53 and the following year her daughter passed away at 31 from the same cancer. After this, members of Tony's family were tested for

a dangerous gene and 11 out of 14 had it, with an 80% chance of dying from cancer.

"My youngest brother decided to go into hospital and have his stomach removed as a precaution — he was not ill at all and had no symptoms," Tony says. "Sadly when they operated they decided not to remove it and sent him home with stage four cancer. He died a year later aged 51. Following this, I had biopsies and the consultant said I have some stage one tumours in my stomach and that I should seriously consider removal."

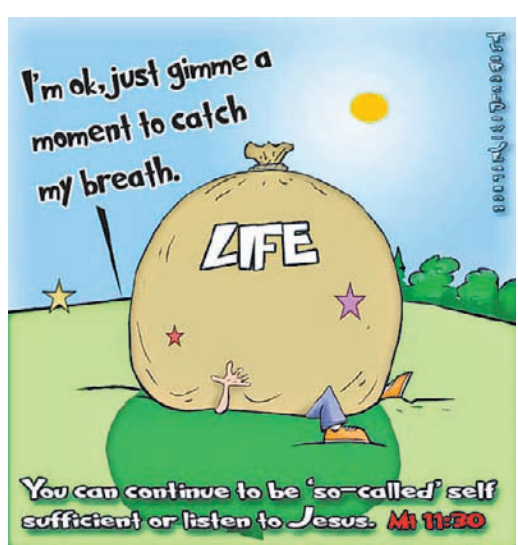
At the age of 63, Tony had his stomach removed and he began a

long and painful recovery.

"Many times, I was tempted to give up and at times wanted to die because I was vomiting daily, losing a lot of weight (30kg) and bile was burning my oesophagus every day so that every mouthful of food hurt all the way down," Tony explains. "I was so miserable. Yet, through it all, I was reminded of the goodness of God and the hope that I would recover. I would wake up each morning with a fresh hope and desire to get back to the church and help others who I knew were suffering. I am now back as a full time pastor and have gained back some of the weight."

Tony says his battles have enabled him to understand the pain and distress people go through in life.

"To anyone who is suffering, I want to say, you are not alone," he encourages. "Jesus suffered more than any of us and He is waiting for you to call out to Him. He truly loves you and will answer your call and give you strength. There is hope, and there is an amazing future in store for those who believe. It's a future with no more pain, suffering or tears. Ask Jesus into your life today. He will receive all who call on Him and He will not reject you!" •



“Jesus suffered more than any of us.”



Child star battled bulimia and binge eating

Celebrities who were thrust into the spotlight early on in life often grow up to struggle under the pressures of their initial success. Not many of them grow up to balance a healthy marriage, family and career. For *Spy Kids* star Alexa Vega, insecurity and stress led her to develop an eating disorder as a teenager that nearly robbed her of her life. Food gave her comfort and purging stopped her gaining weight. As her acting career progressed, she kept her bulimia a secret. But as an adult, Alexa found true comfort that has enabled her to be the happy, healthy wife, mother and actress she is today.

Alexa's acting career started when she was just four. "My mom used to be a model, and she was on a shoot," she explains in an interview with My Devotional Thoughts blog. "And her friend kind of snuck me into an audition, and I got the job. It was for a Burt Reynolds series called *Evening Shade*."

Her big break came when she was 11 and cast in *Spy Kids*, which was a surprise hit and led to two sequels. Alexa shot to fame and experienced the pressures that came along with it.

As Alexa grew and developed, her body changed and her weight fluctuated almost day-to-day depending on what she ate. Her producers called her agents, who called Alexa's mother, who bought her diet pills.

"Food had become my comfort," Alexa writes in her new book about her life, *What if Love is the Point?* "And with the other insecurities I was facing, finding solace in food helped to soothe my feelings."

Alexa began stealing food from the pantry and secretly eating it in her bedroom. Sometimes she would then throw up in the hopes she wouldn't gain weight.

"When women starve or overwork their bodies they stop menstruating," Alexa explains. "So my mom insisted that the fact that I continued to get my period meant I was still overweight — because that is what she had been told."

By 16, Alexa was battling a full-blown eating disorder, vomiting almost 20 times a day. In the years to come, it would only get worse.



Alexa PenaVega with her husband Carlos PenaVega at Universal Studios Hollywood, California, in 2020. (Photo by Paul Archuleta/Getty Images)

At 18, she was living in New York and performing in *Hairspray* on Broadway.

"Dancing non-stop on the show, while purging everything I ate, I quickly shrunk to 90 pounds."

At 19 she started a relationship with a movie producer, Sean Covey, who was 12 years older than her. She told Sean about her eating disorder and he vowed to help her. Due to years of bulimia, Alexa's body wasn't able to handle food and she was hospitalized while doctors worked out how to help her body function normally again. Sean and Alexa married in 2010, when Alexa was 21, but the couple divorced after two years.

After a season of dating and partying, Alexa decided it was time to settle down. A friend invited her to a Bible study and she decided to go. Before this, Alexa considered herself a "good person", prayed to God and attended church sometimes.

"I had no idea that if walking with God was about being a good person, we wouldn't need Jesus."

At the Bible study, Alexa instead understood that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross meant forgiveness of sins, and that was what enabled her to walk with God. Alexa gave her life to Jesus and her faith deepened. She also met fellow actor Carlos Pena at the Bible study. The two became friends, which eventually blossomed into something more. After a particularly stressful time when her brother was battling two types of stage 4 cancer, Alexa's eating disorder was triggered again. But this time, she gave her eating disorder to God once and for all, and He took it. Her desire to binge and purge vanished.

Carlos and Alexa married in 2014 and combined their last names to create a new family name, PenaVega. They now have three sons. Above everything, including her family and career, Alexa says her faith is the number one thing in her life.

"So many people we know are looking for satisfaction," Alexa and Carlos write in their book. "And yet the houses, and the cars, and the partying never fully satisfy. So many of us have believed the lie that if we just get the next thing, or the next person, we'll finally be happy. Finally be at peace. Finally be satisfied. But we can tell you that that's a losing game."

"All of us hunger for something that's real and sold. And because the two of us have tasted that satisfaction in Jesus, we can't not tell others about Him. So if you're ready to live a life of meaning and purpose, we hope and pray that you will encounter the love of Jesus for yourself."



Actress Alexa Vega (left) with her *Spy Kids* co-star Daryl Sabara at a film premier in Los Angeles in 2002. (Photo by J. Emilio Flores/Getty Images)

GARMENT OF PRAISE

A Joyful 'toon by Mike Waters



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www.joyfultoons.com

"Because the Lord has anointed [Jesus] ... To comfort all who mourn ... to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of despair." — Isaiah 61:1,3

Abuse victim had to expel 'seaweed' from his soul

BY BENJAMIN LAHOOD

For his dad, Tim Lasebnik was a piñata. He beat him repeatedly as if he was trying to tear out his insides.

"Dad was just an angry man," Tim says on a 100 Huntley Street video. "I guess I was his piñata. When Dad lost his cool, there was just no filter. There was no off button. He was truly brutal."

After being beaten and then locked in the furnace room in the dark for hours, 11-year-old Tim resolved to run away. He packed his little suitcase and the next day instead of going to school he went to a nearby township in Canada.

He was hoping to be adopted by a family or live in a commune, but instead he was preyed upon by a pedophile. The predator pretended to call some nurses to take him in. Instead, he took Tim to his apartment and raped him brutally.

Those two wounds — the physical and sexual abuse — became his deep, dark secret that was too painful to talk or even think about.

As he matured, Tim turned to drugs to deaden the pain that was choking his soul. He fell into Rochdale College's 1968 cooperative experiment in student housing and free college, but it degenerated into a haven for drugs, crime and suicide.

"I was doing everything I could to medicate the pain that I was feeling from my wounds: drugs, alcohol, sex, everything, and I became a drug dealer," he says. "Rochdale is where I would go to get my drugs."

One day, his supplier informed him, he could no longer provide the drugs he needed to sell and consume.

"Why?" Tim asked.

"Because I found the Lord and I'm not doing that anymore," he responded.

His response was completely off the radar for Tim, so he agreed to go to church and see what it was all about.

It was 1972, and St. Paul's Anglican Church was experiencing revival among the students. Thursday night service attracted upwards of 2,000 people, and Tim went home afterward and fell to his knees.

"I asked Jesus into my heart," Tim remembers. "And there was a change in me."

But the wounds were deep and rejuvenation was not easy, so he quit Christianity.

Tim didn't just walk away. First, he prayed.

"One thing I ask," he said to the Lord, "is that day when I stand before You on Judgment Day, please remember that I gave it my best shot."

He let go of God but God never let go of him.

Years later, Tim was married with a three-year-old son and older stepdaughter. He was visiting his brother-in-law at Lake Aquitaine, talking, sharing, eating. They lost track of time when his stepdaughter ran in frantically.

"I'll never see my brother again!" she screamed.

"Where's your brother?" Tim asked panicked.

"He is drowned in the lake..." Barefoot, Tim ran out into the frigid March waters.

He arrived to see a stranger coming out of the water with his son in his arms.

Tim grabbed the child, carried him to shore and tried to administer CPR. The child had been underwater for five minutes. There was no response.

"I cried out to God, 'Please don't take my son. I'll do anything,'" he pleaded.

Continuing in his attempt to revive him, Tim managed to expel not only water but also seaweed from the child's airways.

Eventually, the little boy coughed and cried.

"This stranger, I believe, to this day was an angel. He was an angel."

The story made the front page of the *Toronto Sun* two Sundays in a row.

More significantly, Tim came back to Jesus.

This time, he dealt with the wounds.

He went to a Christian retreat called Band of Brothers Bootcamp. Away from distractions, Tim searched deep within his heart, seeking healing for years of pain he harbored within.

"I was in a cocoon of love," he remembers. "God was speaking to me, 'You've carried that wound long enough. Give it to me.'"

Tim noticed the similitude as he expelled years of compounded pain choking his soul, and his son's expelling water and seaweed.

Could he trust God?

Tim dared to forgive — his dad, the sexual predator, himself and God.

"It was like that junk was just coming out of me, just pouring out," Tim says. "I had to forgive God. I had been angry at God for all those years." •

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Youth Truth

HOPE RISES OUT OF STRUGGLE

From homelessness to drug addiction, getting arrested and going to jail, death and loss, and a brain tumour diagnosis, TikTok star Cristina Baker has faced more than her fair share of struggles and pain. But along the way she discovered hope and now she shares the reason for that hope in 60-second TikTok videos for her 1 million followers.

Cristina's rocky childhood began when her parents divorced when she was seven. Her mother remarried and they moved to Bolivia. She says her stepfather was abusive and as a teenager, she turned to self-harm, alcohol and drugs for comfort.

At 15 her mother and stepfather sent Cristina to live with her father in Hawaii. Her father had been an oil company executive but when she arrived, she discovered that he was now addicted to cocaine and living in a tent on the beach. She lived with other family members for a while before being taken in by a family in Pennsylvania.

After she graduated high school, Cristina delved deeper into drugs.

"Things started getting really bad when I started doing cocaine," Cristina told Fox News.

"I started doing ecstasy and really heavy drugs. I came so close to overdosing and just being on the brink of losing my life so many times. But when you're entangled in addiction, you just don't care about your life. You're already in so much pain at that point that you start to not even care if you lose it."

She recalls throwing rocks at her drug dealer's window one night when she had run out of drugs. "He opened his window and yelled at me to go home," she writes on her blog. "I was getting 'out of control.' When your drug dealer tells you that you're getting out of hand, you know you've got a major problem."

When Cristina discovered she was



Cristina Baker with her husband Ryan and son Evan. INSET: Cristina in her gothic days.

pregnant, she planned to abort the baby, but was talked out of it by her drug dealer's girlfriend.

She found a job working in a call center and was able to provide for her new baby, Evan. When Evan was two, Cristina was pulled over by police for expired tags.

They found drugs in her car and she was arrested. She recalls crying out to God in the back of the police car, "God, if you're real, why are you doing this to me?"

While waiting for her arraignment, Cristina continued to work in the call center and use drugs at night. She also started planning her suicide.

Enter Hilroy. Cristina's call center co-worker Hilroy tapped her on the shoulder and told her he had a word from God for her and invited her to a prayer meeting.

At the meeting, Hilroy read from the

Bible and Cristina knew she was hearing the truth. With Hilroy and others gathered around her praying for her, Cristina put her faith and trust in Jesus for her salvation.

"At that moment, it was like the weight I had been carrying for over 20 years of my life was lifted," Cristina told Fox News. "I came in one way and left that room a completely different person. My heart was set on fire. I felt free. I wanted to turn my life around. From there, I went through a process of healing. It took a few months to get off the drugs, but I was ready to be free from it all — the drugs, the alcohol, all the things I was doing that were hurting me and others. I just felt like God was breaking the chains one by one."

In court at her arraignment, Cristina's lawyer said she would likely do time in prison. Cristina felt that God wanted her to speak to the District Attorney. Cristina spoke with him and at the end of their conversation, the DA told her: "We all make mistakes, have a good day." The charges against her were dropped.

Cristina continued attending prayer meetings at work and her relationship with God deepened. When her ex-boyfriend and son's father Aaron reached out to her, she asked for his forgiveness for things she did wrong and told him she forgave him too. She shared about her newfound faith and led him to Jesus over the phone. He sadly died in a car crash just two days later.

When Cristina discovered she had a brain tumour, Hilroy told her that God uses "the trials we

go through to minister to others to be a witness of His glory and power in and through us".

After her surgery, Cristina saw how God had used her trial. "My dad was an atheist, my mom was a non-practicing Catholic, and through my brain surgery, they both gave their lives to the Jesus," Cristina told JubileeCast.

During her ordeal, Cristina drew strength from her relationship with God.

"Going through brain surgery taught me to get my eyes off of the problem and set my eyes on Jesus. When the valleys of life come, they are an invitation to know the heart of the Father in a way we have never known Him before."

Now 37, Cristina is married to Ryan, who has adopted Evan as his son. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, Cristina began sharing prayers on social media.

“**Hope was a person.**”

"My heart behind these prayers was to share the Good News of the Gospel with people. That hope wasn't an idea or a circumstance, but that Hope was a person, and that all of our hope in this life is only found in Jesus."

Cristina's one-minute prayer videos, which can be found on TikTok at [cristina.baker](https://www.tiktok.com/@cristina.baker), have racked up more than 9.7 million likes. She has now written a book called *Hope in 60 Seconds: Encountering the God of the Impossible*.

The best decision I ever made

BY JOE HENKEL

I grew up in the church, but for a long time, I didn't understand the importance of church, let alone the Bible. I went through the motions. I tried to keep the traditions and rituals that I had been taught, but I felt lost and hopeless. I was a sinner... I was angry, I disobeyed, and I lied. I knew God was displeased with these sins. I was only eight, but I was already beginning to wonder about death and eternity. I knew I wasn't good enough to get into Heaven on my own. I figured I needed something more.

My parents encouraged me to read the Bible, so I tried, but it didn't really make much sense to me. I was fascinated by the stories I read about Jesus, but I didn't understand what it meant to "believe in Jesus." I also wondered whether my prayers were being heard. Still, every night, I thought about Hell, God, and salvation. One night, confused and worried, I got out of bed, found a Bible, and turned to John chapter 3.

When I read verse 16, something in me shifted. The verse reads, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." In that moment, I understood that salvation comes through believing in Jesus. I turned from my sin and put my trust in Jesus Christ. In that moment, I had certainty that God had forgiven me and saved me from the wages of sin, which is death. In place of the worry and restlessness I felt, God gave me peace, purpose, and joy. All fear was replaced by the knowledge of His promises. Though I now believed in

Joe Henkel

Christ, I didn't dedicate my life to Him; so, life was pretty much the same. Then, at age 13, I realized that God wanted more from me. So, I began to read the Bible and actually obey what it said. From ages 13 to 18, God matured me and I became determined to give as much of me as possible to Jesus. I started telling my friends and family about Jesus. My prayer life deepened and my mind began to more closely resemble that of Christ.

“**I wondered whether my prayers were being heard.**”

The last few years has been an incredible journey. I now serve as a pastor in a church in Dallas, Texas. I'm also working on a masters in theology. God has also granted me opportunities to travel to speak across the country. Along

with working in my church, I create videos on Instagram and YouTube. Following Jesus is the best decision I ever made. To those who don't know Jesus, I encourage you to explore Scripture and ask God to reveal Himself to you. "Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). We don't have to strive in this life; as we seek and follow after God, He provides for us and blesses us. •

As told to and edited by Adira Polite and originally published on Then God Moved

Love is a doing, not a feeling

THINK of your closest relationship — whether it is romantic or familial — if that person tells you that they love you but never acts on that feeling, how loved would you feel?

Love does, it is not some static feeling; it propels us to act on behalf of the other. The impulse of love is to give and put the needs of our beloved ahead of ourselves.

Someone can say "I love you" 50 times over and it will mean nothing, unless they act on it.

So when the Bible says that "God so loved the world" is that just empty words? Or is it backed up by action?

Well, the next part of that well-known verse (John 3:16) gives us the answer. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life."

God's love gave us His precious, perfect and only Son, Jesus, to die on the cross to pay the price for all the wrongs we have done, in order that we can enjoy a relationship with Him now and into eternity.

And just in case you think "well, how could God do that to His Son?" Jesus was no victim.

He said in John 10:17-18: "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again."

No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."

So both God the Father and Jesus the Son loved us so much that they gave of themselves in order to demonstrate their heart for us.

John 15:13 says, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

And that is what Jesus Christ did.

Not only that, but God has given us this beautiful, colorful, wondrous world to live in, and each day gives us sunlight, rain, oxygen, sleep, strength and countless other blessings that we take for granted as 'normal life'.

In fact, the Bible explains that every good thing we have, comes from God.

All creation is shouting "God loves you!"

And that message is backed up by His incredible goodness and kindness to us. But because God loves you, He doesn't bully you into a relationship with Him but He invites you with open arms, His hands bearing the nail marks of where Jesus hung on the cross to pay the debt of your sin. Why not read His love letter today in the book of John in the New Testament? •



Cristina with her new book, Hope in 60 Seconds.



MY ANXIETIES VANISHED

BY MICHAEL
ASHCRAFT

For Mia Dinoto, the crippling anxiety attacks started when she was eight.

"I was diagnosed with OCD and anxiety. I got really, really depressed," Mia says on her YouTube channel. "I got panic attacks every single day. I would not leave my house. I was terrified to leave my house. I felt stuck inside myself. I was trapped inside myself."

Although raised in a Christian home,

Mia didn't know Jesus and found praying difficult, so she gave up trying. "Is my life going to be like this?" she asked her parents, who signed her up with a therapist three times a week.

"I got put on medication," Mia says.

She wavered between being able to function "like a normal person" and relapsing. In her teens, Mia was diagnosed with anorexia. "It consumed my life," she relates. "I no longer cared about anything other than what I ate, what I looked like, working out. All my goals, priorities and values got thrown away. I didn't care about anything else. I would do anything to get skinny and have the perfect body."

Mia argued with her family members and treated them rudely. "I got in fights with them every day," she says. "I pushed all my friends away."

"I got to a really unhealthy point where I was starving myself. I was malnourished. I still looked into the mirror and thought I was fat. It consumed my thoughts. My anxiety and depression came back worse this time."

Under the crushing weight of depression, Mia was exhausted and slept 16 hours every night. She would be outside in 90-degree weather with a jacket and comforter because her malnourished body felt cold; it didn't have the nutrients to produce heat to warm itself.

Her regular menstrual cycle stopped for a year. "My body was shutting down," she admits. "I didn't care about my health. I just wanted to be skinny. Saying it seems so stupid. Anorexia isn't just a health problem; it is a mental health problem," she now realizes. "It consumed me."

Her parents enrolled her in a strict, in-house treatment center, but it didn't work. Hearing a podcast about overcoming anxiety through chakra meditation and manifesting, she fell into New Age practices trying to get more balanced and "control her destiny."

Then she stumbled across a video that challenged chakra ideas from the Christian perspective. She considered herself a Christian and was startled to hear, for the first time, that chakra

was anti-Christian. Mia found out she was drifting ever farther from God. "I didn't want to do anything against Christianity," she says. "I watched a lot of videos, and I realized I was being pulled away from God because I was depending on myself to fix things and not the Lord."

Mia's brother started reading the Bible and this prompted her to do the same. "I had never read the Bible" before, she says. She read Genesis and Exodus. But it never progressed beyond being "a chore".

Finally, she stumbled across some videos about salvation and she was challenged to read the first four books of the New Testament called collectively "The Gospels".

"It completely changed my view of the world, my view of myself, my view of others and how I treat people, and just my purpose," Mia says. "For so long I was focused on myself and what people think of me. But I now know that none of that matters. The only thing that matters is what God thinks of you. We are His children."

As she applied the Golden Rule (to treat others as you want to be treated, which Jesus was first to teach), and as she learned about the command to love others, her interpersonal relations improved immediately and drastically. Her anxieties about the future disappeared when she read Jesus' preaching against worry. "God doesn't want us to worry about our future," she says. "He wants us to depend on Him. Once we trust Him with all our heart, He will lead our path. We can't do this alone."

"I used to be afraid of death," she says. "I'm not afraid of it anymore. I'm looking forward to that day to meet Jesus and live with Him spending eternity in the Kingdom of Heaven. That will be the best day of our lives, the day we meet Him. This life is not even a blink of an eye compared to Him." •



Mia Dinoto

“ I got to the point where I was starving myself. ”

Contact
Challenge!

Do you have a story to tell, a tricky question to ask or want to let us know how *Challenge* has impacted you? Email harriet@challengenews.org

I told a lie and found the truth

BY MARC PAMPLONA

I rejected Christ at a young age. I grew up in the Philippines, in a very legalistic, hypocritical religious family. My parents followed the Bible, but never lived it out. The love and selflessness just wasn't there. When I recognized my family's hypocrisy, I began doubting their faith. In middle school, when my parents divorced, I turned from God altogether.

Around this time, I noticed that I was attracted to other boys. When I acted on my desires, I felt a conviction of sorts — but, because of my family's hypocrisy and my own distance from God, I was able to ignore it. As I rebelled, I fell deeper and deeper into a dark spiritual and mental place.

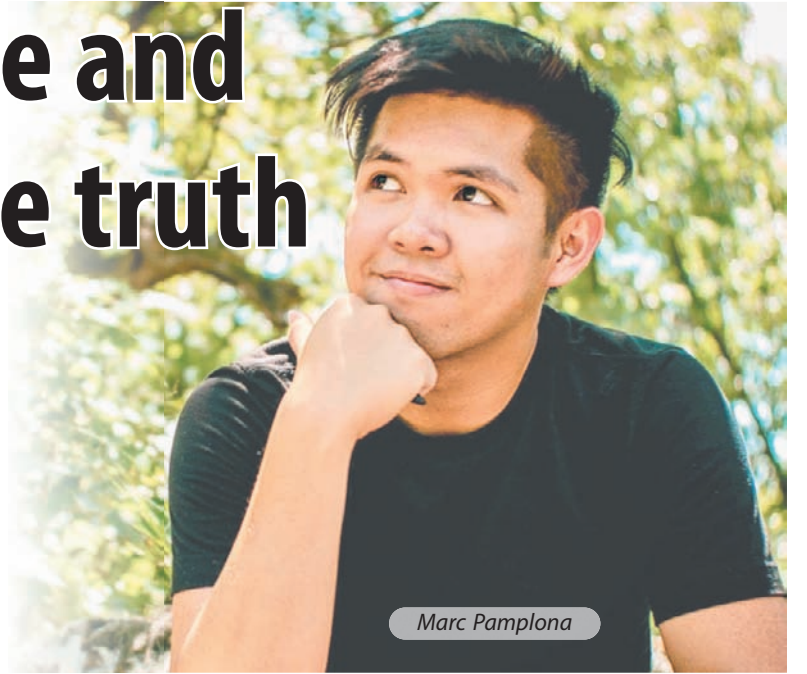
In ninth grade, my mom left for America. I eventually obtained a visa and followed her to the middle of nowhere in Oklahoma, where my mother met and married a drunkard. I witnessed his verbal abuse of her regularly. I'd already been in a dark place, but now that I'd left my comfortable life in the Philippines for a horrible life in America, I was totally depressed.

The peak of my depression came during the last two years of high school. To cope, I sought satisfaction wherever I thought I could find it; I was consumed by lust. When I wasn't involved in sexual sin, I was gossiping. I didn't merely engage with rumours — I started them. As a result, I gradually began losing friends one-by-one, and then senior year, I lost them all. This loss came alongside the expiration of my visa, which prohibited me from getting a driver's license, a job, or doing much of anything else. In my eyes, I had nothing to live for. I wanted to end my life, but for my mom's sake, I didn't. Instead, I graduated and left for college.

On the first day of college, a pretty girl named Savannah sat next to me. When I later found her on Instagram, I learned that she was a Christian. I quickly came up with a plan: I'd pretend to be one, too. I followed a bunch of Christian accounts on Instagram and made up stories about my "faith." I told so many lies to grow close to her, while secretly thinking her faith was foolish.

Then, in 2018, I came across a Bible verse on Instagram that struck me as true. I was so moved by the words; it freaked me out. I remember trying to backtrack and remind myself that God wasn't real and that the words were just words. But, as much as I tried, something stuck with me. Soon after, one of my new Christian friends played me the song *One Thing Remains* by Passion. Again, I was struck. I'd only ever heard traditional hymns; it had never occurred to me that worship music could be so enjoyable.

Thereafter, my friend invited me to a fellowship meeting at a large church. I'll never forget the day. As soon as I stepped into the auditorium, I was overwhelmed by the presence of the Holy Spirit. I don't know how I knew it was the Holy Spirit, but I knew. Midway through the service, the leader invited anyone who wanted to surrender their life to



Marc Pamplona

Christ to stand up. Distracted, I only heard the "stand up" part. As everyone turned to look at me, I realized what I'd done — and I also knew I meant it. God had been chasing me down and, in that moment, He finally caught me. When I heard the song *Reckless Love* at service a week later, I was moved to tears. The lyrics rang true: "There's no shadow you won't light up, mountain you won't climb up coming after me" — God was doing exactly that. The Lord had never left my side. He'd been with me through all of my sin and had even used my lust — and my deception — to bring me back to Him. He left the 99 to find the one (Matthew 18:12).

I went home that night and shared my new faith to my mother. Overjoyed, she exclaimed that she'd spent years earnestly praying for the Lord to touch my heart and lead me back to Him. Clearly, He heard her!

Shortly after, I was baptised. When I stepped into the water, I knew my life would never be the same. Sure enough, when I came up out of the water, I felt totally new.

Transformed. My faith in the freedom bought by Christ on the cross was solidified. The pain, the depression, and the anxiety was gone and in their place was the unexplainable peace of God. Later on, I felt Him embrace me and I so clearly heard Him say, "Thank you for coming back. I'm never ever going to let you go." I remember just sobbing; in Him, I had finally found the satisfaction that I'd been seeking for so long. Nothing — no boy or girl — could ever take His place.

I'm now walking in my purpose with full confidence that God is with me. Even in the middle of storms like the one we're in right now, we as believers can find total peace. God is sovereign and His love for us is unchanging. From the beginning of the world, He knew the troubles that would befall us. We should never lose hope, for Christ has said, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). •

As told to and edited by Adira Polite and originally published on Then God Moved

Help for youth mental health

ACCORDING to a study from Springtide Research Institute*, Gen-Zers are more likely to report mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression than other generations. However, it also shows that faith could be part of the remedy.

In the study, 57% of all 13-25 year olds and 73% of religious young people agree that their religious or spiritual practices positively impact their mental health. Almost three quarters of those surveyed who pray daily say they are flourishing, compared to 57% who never pray.

Of the young people who identify as "very religious", 74% say they agree or strongly agree that they are "in good physical and emotional condition," compared to less than half (42%) of non-religious young people.

Seventy percent of those who are currently connected to a spiritual or religious community say they have "discovered a satisfying life purpose," compared to 55% of those who no longer connected to such a community.

Of those who feel highly connected to a higher power, 42% say they are "flourishing a lot" in their emotional and mental health, compared to 16% of those who say they do not feel at all connected to a higher power.

However, the report says, "Young people make it clear that religion feels toxic when it is primarily presented as a pressure to live up to difficult expectations."

Thankfully, that is not the purpose of Christianity. In fact it is precisely because we can't live up to difficult expectations that Jesus came to earth.

God's standards are impossibly high because He is holy and perfect. But instead of punishing us for all the ways we miss the mark (sin), His Son Jesus took the punishment. He was crucified on the cross to pay the penalty, then resurrected three days later, defeating the power of sin and death.

Why would He do that? Because He loves you.

Maybe it is in understanding and receiving this love that young people are flourishing and finding a satisfying life purpose.

When you accept Jesus' sacrifice, ask for forgiveness for your sins and choose to follow Him, God sends His Spirit to live inside you. The Holy Spirit is also known as the Comforter. He gives us wisdom, strength and peace and helps us to resist the temptation of sin. Anxiety and depression and other mental health issues are overwhelming, exhausting and scary. Wouldn't it help to know you are never alone and that you have a Comforter strengthening you? If you would like this comfort right now, turn to the How do I Become a Christian? box on page 11. •

* Springtide's findings come from a survey of nearly 10,000 young people in the U.S. ages 13-25 conducted between November 2021 and March 2022 and contain a margin of error of plus or minus 3%. The report also includes qualitative data from interviews with over 100 young people.

BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

Peace begins with me

Last year was another challenging year in so many ways, with the war in Ukraine having created enormous instability among the nations – people do not feel secure. In many places around the world, millions of people do not truly experience peace, but live in a constant state of fear, war, and injustice.

And saddest of all, 2023 is not going to be any different.

We are blessed to live in a country free from war, but so many of us are “at war” in other ways. Families and friends are torn apart by bitterness and hurt, refusing to speak to each other. I remember my Nana and Dad had an argument which they both refused to resolve and resulted in

all of us not speaking with her for a period of about three years.

What about you?

Is there someone you love who you are no longer talking to because one (or both) of you were offended or wounded by what you or another has said or some other relational issue?

More personally, you may be “at war” with yourself over being rejected – or rejecting someone – again. Your personal war could even be a secret inner battle or habit which constantly robs you of peace.

Last month I wrote about the fact that people who have peace with God also experience peace in other areas of their lives.

Peace in our personal life is a natural by-product of having peace with God.

And I am absolutely convinced that people who have peace with God extend that peace to others.

A peacemaker is someone who has received mercy and gives mercy to others.

“Blessed are the merciful.”

In other words, peacemakers forgive. This is not to say they are perfect because forgiveness is a struggle for all of us, but there is a genuine desire in the peacemaker’s heart to forgive those who have wronged them. They understand they have no right to ask God to forgive them if they refuse to



forgive others.

A peacemaker is someone who is becoming “pure in heart.”

“Blessed are the pure in heart.”

Peacemakers don’t believe they are perfect. They are aware of their shortcomings and look to God to make them more like Him – they understand that peacemaking is a growing process.

This means they will approach their relationships with real humility by taking responsibility for their own failings and apologizing.

A peacemaker actively works to bring God’s peace to others.

“Blessed are the peacemakers.”

This is why Jesus says they are blessed: because they have experienced God’s peace in their lives, they want others to know this same peace and, they promote peace in their local communities and the wider world.

You (and your family) could demonstrate your desire to be a peacemaker by committing to the peace declaration I mentioned I had written a couple of months back:

“We the people of this community declare ourselves to be people of

peace.

“We believe peace begins with each one of us and that peace in our world and communities is achieved through multiple acts of love, courage, and kindness.

“Peace can be expressed through a friendly smile to a stranger, by helping a neighbor in need, standing up bravely for truth and justice, and respecting each other, regardless of culture or faith.

“Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers.’

“Therefore, we commit ourselves to being peacemakers in our community.”

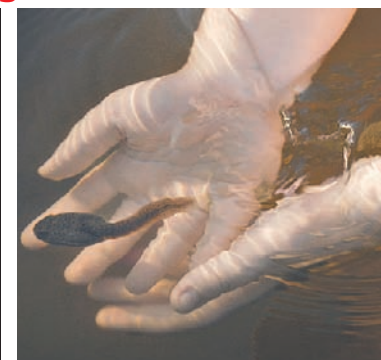
Why not write it out and have everyone place their thumbprints beside it, as a sign of your commitment to being a peacemaker?

And let’s not forget the reason we can have peace in our lives – with God and others – is because Jesus, God’s Son, died for our sin and rose again on the first Easter.

“Therefore...we have peace with God...because of what Jesus has done for us.” (Romans 5:1)

No God – no peace.

Know God – know peace.



RESCUE CHANNEL

BY MARGARET CURRAN

MY HUSBAND was fishing and I decided to wander further along the beach. As I rounded the corner I came upon a small stream which meandered through the coasthills and finally flowed into the sea. The water was brown and appeared devoid of life but as I watched I began to see that there was much activity.

Various bugs were busy on the surface and several dragonflies, with a blue streak down their backs, were resting on a reed or flitting to the next spot. Suddenly I noticed a moving shadow on the bottom of the stream, as a yabbie slowly wended his way along, daintily tucking morsels of food into his mouth as he went. Yes, it certainly was a stream of life and the day all around was full of life with bird calls filling the ear and sunshine and flowers delighting the eye.

But to my right, a disturbance was distracting my attention. Separated from the stream was a shallow pool and as I moved closer I saw it was filled with a frantic, heaving mass of tiny tadpoles. There they were, cut off from the life giving stream, with their water supply getting hotter and shallower every minute as it evaporated in the warm sun. Their doom was certain unless they could be re-connected somehow to the cool waters of the main stream.

I began to burrow in the sand and before long had created a channel between the pool and the stream. As I cut deeper and deeper into the sand, the stream water rushed in and formed a passage between the two, enabling the desperate tadpoles to cross to the safety of the stream. The channel had rescued them from certain death and opened up the way for them to their source of life.

In the Bible God explains to us that the troubles of mankind are caused by the fact that we are living lives that are cut off from our main source of life. Our source of real life – which the Bible calls eternal life – is God Himself. Man became separated from God because of disobedience to Him. The story of Adam and Eve tells us about that and every soul has disobeyed God in some way or another since, except one.

That one perfect person was Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Because He was the perfect Son of God, He was able to offer Himself to God as a substitute for every helpless sinner. He became our channel to God when He died on the cross for us. He took the penalty for mankind’s sin and died in our place. Now no man need live in a state of separation from God. Christ’s sacrifice for us has been accepted by God, who raised Him from the dead to prove it. Now through Him we can return to God.

We are already forgiven. The channel is already open. We just have to cross over and join that life giving stream of fellowship with God. Let us thank Him for the wonderful channel He provided in our Lord Jesus Christ and make known to those who still remain separated from, and unaware of it, the life giving love and grace of our great God, and Savior in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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HOW DO I BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

What? Salvation is an eternal relationship with God – now on Earth, and after we die, in Heaven.

The Lord Jesus says: “I tell you the truth. Everyone who believes in me has eternal life.” John 6:47
In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.
 John 16:33

Who? Anyone can gain the eternal life offered through Jesus Christ, regardless of how you have previously lived or what you have previously believed.

God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

Why? Because sin separates us from a holy God. Sin is all the wrong things we do, say and think, as well as our desire to be our own boss.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23

How? The Bible says you become a Christian by confessing with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead.

If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. Romans 10:8b-10

Ready to change your life forever? Here is a prayer you can pray, but you can also use your own words. The words are not as important as the heart attitude – which only God can see.

Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth,
 I acknowledge that I am a sinner. Please forgive me for all the ways I have disobeyed and defied You.
 Thank you for sending Your Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to live the perfect life I couldn’t, and die on the cross for my sins. Thank you that His blood was sufficient to pay my debt to You, and His resurrection proves that there is life beyond death. I accept that His sacrifice is all I need to get right with You - I bring nothing I have done but I give you everything I am. Help me to live for You. Please be my Saviour and my Master. Amen.

- What now?**
1. Tell someone - either a Christian that you know or email us at usaoffice@challengenews.org
 2. Use the resources in the green box on this page to find a Bible to read and more information regarding Christianity.
 3. Keep praying. Talk to God anywhere, about anything. He is always listening and you don’t need a formula.
 4. Find a Bible-teaching church to attend.

AS A NEXT STEP: Please send me: Bible Some ‘starting off’ literature Information on a helpful church

I have prayed this prayer.

** Please tick and write clearly **

Name _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Age, occupation (it helps) _____

Send to: Challenge Literature Fellowship, 2634 Drake Road, Lebanon Ohio, 45036
usaoffice@challengenews.org

All overseas enquiries are referred onto someone in their own country

The wise person knows that fulfilment does not come from seeking it directly but is, paradoxically, a by-product of keeping promises and sacrificial service.
 – Timothy Keller, *The Way of Wisdom.*

Want to explore more?

Here are some **free**, helpful, online Christian resources:

Online Bible - Olive Tree app (we recommend that you start with an easy-to-read version like the ESV)	
Audio Bible - Bible.is app , or Youversion Bible app	
Christian radio station - CBN radio app (different channels for all genres of music)	
Christian podcasts and sermons - Edifi app	
Christian movies/TV shows - Good. app	
Daily thoughts and inspiration - Our Daily Bread app	
Advice on specific issues, Bible reading plans and studies for new believers - Youversion Bible app .	
The Bible explained with visual aides - the Bible Project on YouTube .	
Alpha Film Series on Youtube - an online introduction to Christianity.	
For kids - Superbook Kids Bible, videos and games app	
Comic book Bible online- goodandevilbook.com	
More inspiring faith stories - back issues of Challenge News at challengenews.online	

Steve Weatherford #5 of the New York Giants in action against the Houston Texans on September 21, 2014 at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey. The Giants defeated the Texans 30-17. (Photo by Jim McIsaac/Getty Images)



Steve with his family after his Superbowl win.

PUNTING FOR DAD'S APPROVAL

BY GENESIS MENDEZ

Steve Weatherford — whose punting pinned the Patriots back deep in their zone to help the Giants win Superbowl XLVI (2011) — says all his heroics were a vain attempt to get the approval of his father.

“I was trying to get the attention of my dad,” Weatherford says on a 7 Figure Squad video. “During a lot of those amazing achievements, I didn’t really enjoy them because the reason I was achieving them was I needed some affirmation from the most important person: dad.”

Born in Indiana, Steve was raised in Baton Rouge. From an early age, he showed inclination for sports, playing football, soccer, basketball and track in high school. He didn’t enjoy the greatest relationship with his stoical, old-school-style father.

Steve proceeded to the University of Illinois as a kicker and punter. He also played track and was named *Sports Illustrated’s* most underrated athlete in the Big Ten in 2004. He walked on to the New Orleans Saints and played for four teams before landing with the New York Giants.

Punters are usually wimps, by NFL standards. All they have to do is kick well. But Steve had the build of a lineman as a punter. He maintained a maniacal workout and diet regimen that got him featured in

bodybuilding magazines.

On the outside, he was achieving his wildest dreams. But on the inside, he was losing battles. He watched porn and started taking perocet.

“I worked so hard to get into the NFL. I worked so hard to become the fittest man in the NFL twice. I worked so hard to (win the) Walter Peyton man of the year community service award. I worked so hard to become a Superbowl champion,” Steve says. “Looking back on my life, those were all predicated on getting my dad’s attention.”

Superbowl XLVI was a dream. The Giants were playing against Tom Brady’s Patriots.

Steve punted four times with such distance and precision that the Patriots found themselves in their own 10 and five yards — a marathon distance to touchdown. When the Giants came out on top, some observers called Weatherford the MVP (most valuable player).

Steve basked in the glory of his achievements. He looked over to Dad. He wanted so desperately for his father to clap him on the back, give him a bear hug and lavish patriarchal praise.

After the win, a picture was taken of himself with the Superbowl trophy and his family. “I remember handing that trophy to my dad, and he said, ‘That’s nice. Show your mom,’” Steve recalls. “He didn’t

even hold it.”

Dad’s apparent apathy took Steve from tears of elation to tears of disillusionment.

“The night that we beat Tom Brady in the Superbowl was the most depressing night in my life,” he says.

Today, Steve understands. “My dad was to me what his dad was to him,” he says.

Instead of wallowing in rejection, Steve used self-examination of his own father’s shortcomings to consciously break the cycle and become a physically and emotionally available father to his own children — playing games and going on fun outings with each one.

Steve also has a foundation to help kids who don’t have dads. From time to time, he takes 25 kids out to buy them shoes and talk to them about setting goals for life.

Steve accepted Jesus when he was 12 years old when he saw the Power Team, a group of muscle men who presented a show of feats (like bending bars or ripping phone books in half) and then gave their Christian testimonies.

But he had grown distant from God in the intervening years.

At a stage in his life when he was drifting, a friend invited him to a Christian retreat. Both he and his 12-year-old son attended.

The keynote speaker was electrifying. When he was done, Steve



Steve Weatherford in his 40s. He has found peace, approval and acceptance from Jesus, leaving behind the inner turmoil that led him to drugs and porn.

came back to Jesus with the same man who brought him to Jesus the first time.

Not only that, his son also accepted Jesus — at the same age and due to the same speaker that had originally led Steve to God.

Another strange “coincidence” was that Steve reconciled with Christ exactly 25 years to the day after he first accepted Jesus. It was a supernatural moment.

Steve was so impacted by the compounding coincidences that he decided to move his family to Frisco, Texas, where Keith Craft pastors. ●

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