



Bible Society

MAGAZINE



Opening The Bible

to all people everywhere
by all means possible

Sower

Helping put hope in
everyone's hands

Page 2-3

Eternity

I raced down mountains
... and crashed into God.

Page 10-11

Koorong

Be inspired and equipped
in your journey with Jesus

Page 33-39



More good news in new ways

Dear Friend,
I write to you from my desk at home, looking out to my back garden as the leaves turn and drop. The reds, yellows, oranges and fading green of the trees brings to mind the words of Ecclesiastes: “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.” We are certainly in an unusual time right now, a time actually named by the author: “a time to refrain from embracing.” (Ecclesiastes 3:5)

It is also a time for thinking differently, as we seek to connect with staff, our donors, our partners and our customers. What you hold in your hands now is a result of that thinking. Bible Society regularly publishes three magazines – *Eternity* newspaper, *Sower* and the Koorong catalogue.

Eternity is distributed all over the country ... to churches! People can no longer pick up their *Eternity* paper.

This time of isolation seemed exactly the right time to introduce our beloved supporters to a combined publication – *Sower*, sharing the news about our projects both locally and internationally; *Eternity*, telling the good news of Christianity; and Koorong – bringing to you the plethora of outstanding Christian resources that are available at the click of a computer key. This is a trial. If you like it, please let us know. Perhaps you have a great idea for a name?

We gather as a staff, via digital technology, every Wednesday. It is a time of devotions, of prayer and of encouragement. We pray for you, Bible Society’s donors and supporters, the lifeblood of this organisation. We pray for our partners both in Australia and overseas, and especially now as they struggle to fulfil their Bible mission due to office and project shutdowns.

Thank you for your prayers for Bible Society at this time and I would ask that you would especially pray that, in partnership with our donors and supporters, **we can pursue our vision to Open The Bible to all people everywhere by all means possible.**

We want all people to know the hope and solace that is found in God, so eloquently described in Paul’s letter to the Philippians 4:6-7:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”



Grant Thomson
CEO, BIBLE SOCIETY AUSTRALIA



Helping put hope in everyone’s hands

Coronavirus has changed the world. Well, not entirely. Just as our world needed hope before COVID-19 had such a devastating impact, it still needs hope. Meaningful, lasting, trustworthy hope. **The sort of hope that people everywhere have been able to find through Opening The Bible.**

Hope that you have helped to provide to people like a 65-year-old grandmother in China who used to think life was all about smoking, dancing and playing mah-jong.

A few years ago, Yuan Guiying was shaken when tragedy struck her family. Her son-in-law had a serious car accident and was fighting for his life in hospital. Yuan’s daughter remembered her friend sharing with her the good news about Jesus Christ, God’s Son, who came to heal and to save.

In her desperation, Yuan’s daughter prayed, “Dear Jesus Christ, please heal my husband and I’ll believe in you.” Miraculously, her husband began to recover quickly and she was convinced her prayers had been answered. She put her faith in Christ and persuaded her mother, Yuan, to do so. Instead of going for mah-jong parties during her free time, Yuan started to attend church and pursue the hope found in Jesus.

Yuan will never forget the day she held her first Bible, shortly after her baptism. Her local church gave out free Bibles, funded by Bible Society donors like you.

“I was a little overwhelmed when I held it in my hands, thinking to myself that this is no ordinary book; it is the word of God!” remembers Yuan about receiving her own copy of the Bible.

Thanks to generous Australian supporters, Bible Society Australia (BSA) has helped people like Yuan to Open The Bible all over the world. Even though the coronavirus threat has changed so much about how we live, work and relate, important and vital things remain the same. Such as Bible Society’s commitment to the big vision it set before COVID-19 swept our world: to Open The Bible to all people everywhere by all means possible.

“Can you imagine not having the words of the Bible in these difficult days?” asks Bible Society Australia CEO Grant Thomson. “At times like this, I’m more grateful than ever to have God’s word. I know you’re opening your Bible and trusting in our Lord for strength and peace.

“But what about the people who can’t Open The Bible today? Those too poor to buy a copy. Those

Please, will you Open The Bible for people everywhere?

And in China, your gift is worth DOUBLE today. All donations towards Bible work in China, up to \$240,000 and received before 30 June 2020, will be matched by a number of generous supporters.

By responding quickly to this appeal, your generous donation can be worth DOUBLE.

who speak a language with no Scripture. Those who were never taught to read.

“These people desperately need a message of hope in their lives.” As Grant Thomson emphasises, we can give hope where it is needed.

Today, you can Open The Bible for people everywhere – and you can DOUBLE your impact by directing your support to China. A number of generous supporters will match your donation to China, so every \$20 you give provides the paper to print close to 20 Bibles for Christians in China.

“The magnitude of the need of Bibles in China is overwhelming,” states Kua Wee Seng, Director of China Partnership. “Officially, there are 40 million Protestant Christians and 6.5 million Catholics. Unofficially, some estimates of the Chinese Christian population put it as high as 100 million. And there are still many Christians in China who do not have a copy of the Bible.”

Kua Wee Seng points out that China is home to approximately one in four of the world’s non-Christians. “They need the gospel ... They need the Bible. So we’re working towards the day when we can print and distribute enough Bibles for every [person] living in China.”

Yan Min was one of those people. When she moved to the city of Shanghai from Henan province for a better life, Yan Min was focused upon being part of the extraordinary economic growth China experienced during recent decades.

“I got a job as a sales manager in an IT company but I felt unhappy and unmotivated,” admits Yan Min. Despite achieving some of her goals, Yan Min had many questions about the meaning of life and



Will you help to Open The Bible to all people everywhere?

\$20

provides the paper to print close to 20 Bibles for Christians in China.

\$40

teaches up to four believers in China to read and provides them each with God’s word. (Tax-deductible)

\$66

provides six people with a Bible each, here in Australia or around the world.

\$136

teaches four people to read and write, and provides them each with God’s word. (Tax-deductible)

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why she was working so hard. Having visited her mother’s church in the past but “never embracing the faith personally,” Yan Min decided to seek answers to her big questions by buying a Bible from a Shanghai church’s bookstore.

“My eyes were opened and ears unstopped when I read Matthew 6:25 where Jesus says not to worry about life, what we will eat or what we will drink,” she describes. “All my burdens were lifted.”

From that day two years ago, Yan Min has devoured the Bible, reading it seven or eight times. She has become gentler, more joyful and lives life with hope.

Your support to China can also help Open The Bible to people in rural areas who are illiterate or semi-literate, mainly women and the elderly.

Bible distribution and literacy classes in China are among the many ways Bible Society Australia is helping to Open The Bible everywhere. And Kua Wee Seng reminds us of the significance of sharing such enduring hope.

“You have given the most precious gift anyone can give in this life – the word of God, the word of life, the word of hope to someone in China.” ●



Get on your bike - for Bibles!

Keen cyclist Chris Girvan thinks Bike for Bibles is the best way to combine his passions for supporting Christian mission and riding between country towns. Organiser of the Southern Slopes Bike for Bibles trip that covered 920 kilometres over eight days last October, **Chris and his team raised \$24,815 for the Bible Society's South African Bible-based literacy project.** By providing booklets to help develop basic literacy skills, there is hope for disadvantaged children to succeed in South Africa's formal schooling system.

Stopping off at rural towns including Boorowa, Gundagai, Tumbarumba, Henty, Junee, Young and Yass, the Southern Slopes riders enjoyed the opportunity to meet local church groups and enjoy a meal, friendship and encouragement.

"Not enough can be written about the generous Christian hospitality that was provided for us to ensure that we were all comfortable and rested for our overnight stay in each town," says Chris who adds that a highlight of the week's ride was the evening gatherings when personal faith journeys were shared.

"All physical endeavours have their ups and downs and our ride was no different," adds Chris. "None of our team will have forgotten the uphill climb from Tumut to Tumbarumba ... or the hours of grinding into a very strong headwind on the flat plain from Holbrook to Henty the following day."

While Chris admits that planning, preparing, training and fundraising for Bike for Bibles takes effort, he has no hesitation in recommending it as a worthwhile way to support a valuable cause.

Masterclass online

Building on our livestreaming expertise developed over the past two years, Bible Society is working on an online Masterclass experience for all students. Bible Society's Head of Mission, Chris Melville, says "students need opportunities to hear youth-focused biblical teaching more than ever. Masterclass has always been about boldly answering students' questions and objections regarding the Bible. These questions don't just go away during a pandemic, and we're determined to continue to both listen and speak to young people, as they grapple with what it means to live as a young Christian today."

Stay tuned to masterclass.org.au for updates and how to register.

Thank you for all you do

Bible Society Australia is honoured and humbled to partner with so many incredible people, just like you. Each story below comes from a telephone call between a Bible Society Australia (BSA) employee and the amazing people who support our work of Opening The Bible around Australia, and around the world.

“

A couple I called yesterday were sitting on their verandah reading their Bibles in the afternoon sun. They were so pleased to hear from Bible Society Australia and let me know they were staying well away from the virus. They gave thanks for the very important work that Bible Society does. When asked what I could pray for them, they replied, "Please pray that we would continue to be a blessing to people around us for as long as we can!"

“

The man I spoke with today recently turned 100 years old. I was so thrilled when we spoke, and I discovered how articulate he is when I asked him about why he supports Bible Society Australia. "I'm a Bible man – I love the work that you do and wish that all people had access to the Bible." He is also tech savvy and well connected to his church, which he has been watching on a tablet each Sunday morning. He was very thankful for the call.

“

The lady I spoke with and her husband are farmers in regional NSW. Although they haven't been too impacted by COVID-19, they haven't had a harvest in three years and are living from their cash reserves. She very much appreciated the call and responded gladly to our offer of prayer for this year's harvest, which will be in November. They have been supporters of Bible Society Australia for almost 40 years.

“

The lady I talked to on the phone sat a Bible Society Australia exam as a teenager. She won a prize, which has always stuck with her. She and her husband (now in high-care with dementia) ensured they always gave something to Bible Society, even when it was difficult. I thanked her but she "wished it had been more." Still, she was uplifted by my prayer of thanksgiving for the hundreds of Bibles they had enabled BSA to give away to people. She was heading to the dining room, and I had a sense of her floating down to lunch, in the assurance and joy of fulfilled purpose.

“

The lady I spoke with today has been very active during the coronavirus shut-down; playing tennis; tap-dancing; walking; and running the ESL ministry at her church over Zoom. She shared with me that she has updated her will to include a gift for Bible Society Australia: "Until I die and after it, I will be giving you money for your work. This is what God wants me to do. My late husband – we were very much going to do that ... So after he passed away, I made sure I did that. It may seem small, but small things add up." I thanked her for being a long-term supporter and for her late husband and herself being so generous for our mission.



Opening The Bible behind bars

“The Scriptures hold out the hope of change, the hope of eternal life and the hope of forgiveness. That’s a biblical hope; it’s not just an airy fairy hope,” shares Wally Pospelyj, chaplain at a jail in Sydney’s north.

It’s something that brings a lot of purpose, value and meaning to their lives. It gives them their true identity. It’s something quite substantial.” These powerful statements from Wally are frank summaries about the impact that Opening The Bible can have - on inmates.

Wally has served for 20 years as a chaplain in jails across metropolitan Sydney. Currently at Geoffrey Pearce Correctional Complex near Windsor, **Wally loves appropriately being able to Open The Bible with those on the inside.**

Wally is one of 77 chaplains – including some from other religions such as Islam and Buddhism – who are spread across 35 correctional facilities. And that’s just in New South Wales; many more chaplains bring the good news behind bars across Australia.

As you could imagine, Wally has seen a lot. But it might not be totally what you think. From helping people in remand with getting bills paid or feeding pets, to teaching convicted murderers how to go shopping upon their release, Wally also offers straight-shooting spiritual support along with practical assistance.

“Chaplains are often the ones who inmates see as being in the jails because we [actually] want to be there,” explains Wally, who was a police officer and Anglican Church minister before getting into prison chaplaincy.

“I really enjoy the work and the people I get to mix with. The guys in jail are a bit looser and you can be more blunt and up front with them.”

Corrective Services NSW chaplains don’t only work with inmates. Their pastoral service extends to staff as well. “Staff members I have connected

well with see us as a supportive role,” shares Wally.

Your giving can help to increase the impact of chaplains working in NSW correctional centres, as they bring a “calming presence and influence” for the benefit of inmates and staff. Soon, they also will have access to new custom Bibles. Created especially for Corrective Services NSW staff and published by Bible Society Australia, the new custom Bible includes extra practical materials relevant to their workplace. Pertinent content such as how to conduct remembrance services, or prayers for Correctional Officers.

Available to all staff, the custom Bible is similar to others distributed by Bible Society Australia around the country. NSW Ambulance chaplains will also be equipped soon with custom Bible versions for the staff they support. Chaplains with Australian Federal Police, as well as the WA and Victoria Police forces, already have a fresh supply of reprinted custom Bibles.

Rev. Dr Keith Mascord is Chaplaincy Coordinator responsible for managing the chaplaincy service across NSW. He happily confirms the Bible already is a common resource deployed by chaplains like Wally, across the state.

“The Bible is being opened regularly. People are doing Bible courses,” says Keith. “I have attended many chapel services where the Bible is taught. Inmates take part in the service by reading it, and often speak about its relevance to their lives.”

“Inmates are exposed to preaching and Bible studies; the Bible is being used all the time by the Christian chaplains.”

Along with leading daily chapel services, Wally

recently started an afternoon Bible study in his office. Inmates can stop by for 15 minutes or so and get stuck into God’s word. These times of Opening The Bible have been helpful for discussing hard questions, or to challenge inmates to actually read what the Bible says.

“The great things of the gospel are powerful in the custodial setting,” adds Keith. “The great themes of the Bible - of forgiveness, creation, redemption, new creation, our innate value as being made in the image of God - are instantly relevant.”

While Wally can’t testify to how some that he has supported are doing on the outside, he’s witnessed the lives of inmates radically changed by God’s Spirit and Opening The Bible.

“There’s a bunch of guys, over the years, who take it seriously, and say they are committed Christians,” says Wally. “For the most part, they live their life inside ... by honouring God with their lifestyle and decisions.

“When I look at the dysfunction and the backgrounds of the guys in jail – the abuse, the violence and all the other stuff - the Scriptures are the only thing that bring healing and release from that.” •



Will you help chaplains in corrections centres across Australia?

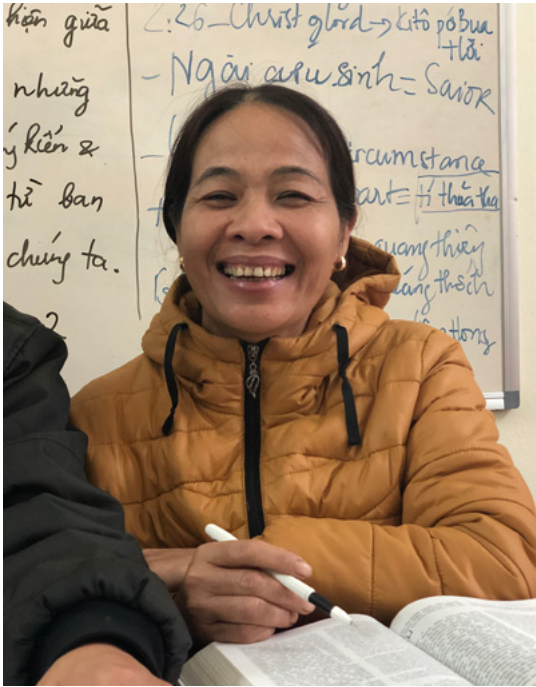
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VIETNAM

God’s word speaks to the heart

Phuong hardly smiled, almost as if she didn’t know how. But she knew suffering. Her alcoholic husband was extremely abusive. But for this Vietnamese villager who speaks Muong, a minority language of Vietnam, life began to radically change ten years ago – when she heard about God’s love in her heart language.



Phuong feels God’s word touch her heart when she reads it in her mother tongue.

including making the entire Bible available – for the first time – to the Tay ethnic minority group in North Vietnam in their heart language by next year. Supporters like you can help make this a reality, just as you can support the first Tai Don New Testament translation being called for by the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North), the largest Protestant denomination in North Vietnam. Set to be completed this year is the New Testament for the Black Hmong people group, another ethnic minority in Vietnam’s north. One of the local translators is Pastor Nathaniel. He is grateful to be part of the team and shares the necessity of this Scripture project: **“Black Hmong Christians want to be able to pass their Bible to the younger generation and be able to preserve their language and culture too.”** Thanks to supporters like you, the important work of translation in Vietnam continues - in the same way as you have already helped the international Bible Society fellowship to translate three-quarters of the 694 full Bibles now available



Every gift helps Vietnam’s ethnic minorities move closer to reading the Bible in words that speak to their heart.

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SYRIA

George leads the Bible Society in Syria. Recently, he sent this letter to Melissa Lipsett, Chief Operating Officer at Bible Society Australia, to share his team’s shock and distress at having to close their office during the COVID-19 crisis.



The Bible Society office has provided a symbol of incredible hope right throughout the long civil war so it was devastating to George and his team to have to close it. George writes: I don’t know what to say. We are in shock. Can it be true? The authorities have given us a day to close. Suddenly we must make so many decisions. Can we meet again? Where and when? Can we get that last Bible shipment off before the curfew? Can we buy bread? We had so many exciting things planned that had to be postponed ... We also realised this would be an important time to keep in touch with Bible Society volunteers and friends all over the country. During the last few years, internet, WiFi and phone-lines have come back to life ... Just as God speaks through his word, the Bible Society’s work enables more and more people to hear God’s voice of love and peace and reconciliation! In the hours before the curfew we remembered all the days we had remained open. We remembered when a shell hit the balcony of our building and it collapsed. Praise God, nobody had been hurt. And our minds went back when the ground had shaken so much, we feared it was an earthquake. Then we realised it was worse than that – a large bomb had been detonated below the famous old Suuq [“market” or “bazaar,” in Arabic]. Mostly, my thoughts went back to when a shell fell on the place my wife Nazek worked. She had hardly made it out of the building when she collapsed. Her legs wouldn’t carry her for months after that. I didn’t know what to do, but it helped me that Nazek encouraged me to wait for Jesus to raise her up and strengthen her legs. And, he did! So, what was our reaction to all these disasters? With the siege continuing in Aleppo and the invaders now being less than five hundred yards away we begged our global Bible Society friends around the world to pray while we took two large lorries with Bibles out of the beleaguered city without even knowing that there was a place to store those scriptures. Talk about FAITH! ... Our friend found us a place where we all felt a peace beyond understanding, and we unloaded our “riches” into this new “treasure house.” Once more we realised that God Is Good! •



MOZAMBIQUE

Lives change with lessons in literacy

Being able to read is one of the most basic, fundamental rights for individuals. Simply being able to write your name confirms your identity and dignity. Can you imagine the fear and shame felt by adults who cannot write their own name and are not able to read?

This is the reality for almost 13 million adults in Mozambique where almost half of the population are still illiterate, trapped in ignorance and poverty because they were not able to receive an education when they were young. Many of these adults grew up in the middle of Mozambique’s 15-year civil war where fighting caused the closure of schools. Life can be a desperate struggle for illiterate people in Mozambique. People like Maria. Maria is a widow with seven children and five grandchildren. Her husband died many years ago, leaving her destitute and needing to raise her children on her own. Maria is illiterate. She survives by growing vegetables for food. She is occasionally able to sell excess produce but is always aware her lack of education means she is easily cheated. Rabeca faces similar challenges to Maria. “All my life I have wanted to read,” she says. “I have seen the power it gives people. I have lived my whole life in poverty. My husband has no job and I spend a lot of time just finding food for my family.”

Bible-based literacy classes help to transform every aspect of daily life in Mozambique.

There are countless people like Maria and Rabeca in Mozambique. People who could only dream of learning to write their name, to count out the money they earn in the marketplace, or to read their Bible in church. That’s why the Literacy for Life program was created with the goal of developing literacy skills for adults in their mother tongue. The program is run by our partners in Mozambique and provides literacy, numeracy, life and health skills to people who have never had the opportunity to learn before. Operating in 17 groups across two provinces, six modules have been developed and the curriculum has been approved by the Mozambican Department of Education. The program employs 17 trained literacy facilitators. In 2019, 450 Mozambicans were provided with skills to read, write and to help them along the path to fulfil the plan God has for them. Each participant was also provided with a Bible. Maria and Rabeca were among the first students to enrol. “I love learning at the literacy class,” says Rabeca. “I am learning to read in Sena, my mother tongue and some Portuguese words as well. I want to learn as much as I can so that I can start my own business or get a job to support my family.” Maria’s smile reflects the delight she experienced when she realised she had just written her name for the first time. She is no longer dependent on others and can take more control of her life. Last year, Cyclone Idai ripped through Mozambique. Hardest hit was Beira – the second-largest city, which lies on the coast in the country’s centre – where the literacy project is located. About 80 per cent of the city was destroyed, impacting all of the churches where our literacy groups are held, as well as all of the participants. Thankfully, with the help of generous donors, Bible Society Australia was able to send emergency funds to assist the churches to rebuild, replace literacy resources and provide relief aid such as food packages for people in the communities. Your donations to “Where Needed Most” enable us to provide help and Open The Bible where your gift can have the most impact. This year, the goal is to reach more people with the opportunity to learn how to read and write. •



Will you help more adults in Mozambique live fulfilled lives, with great hope for the future?

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PRAYER POINTS: JUNE–SEPTEMBER

Join us in prayer

MAY 31-JUNE 6

Suriname

Please pray for Bible Society in Suriname, as they seek to reach children living in orphanages. Pray they may find creative ways to offer God's love.

Australia - School Ministries

Please join us in thanking God for the privilege to partner with teachers and students. The Barnabas conference streamed online in April with over 200 teachers discussed difficulties and opportunities.

JUNE 7-13

China - Encouragement

Please pray for our Christian brothers and sisters in China, and the Scripture Literacy project that helps rural Christians read the Bible and grow their faith.

Australia

Please pray for our Open The Bible EOFY appeal. Pray that our donors will be generous to enable both our work in China and our other work worldwide (Where Needed Most) to continue to flourish.

JUNE 14-20

Cambodia

Please pray that the 600 Bible literacy classes in Khmer will be only temporarily impacted by the pandemic. Pray too for the vulnerable people in rural Cambodia, that they may be safe and healthy.

Australia

Please pray for the board and senior leadership of Bible Society. Pray that God would grant them wisdom as they prayerfully set direction and vision for our work and see it through to implementation.

JUNE 21-27

South Africa

Please pray for students of George Whitfield College in Cape Town, South Africa. Please pray the college would manage to continue its important work.

Australia – Remote Indigenous Ministry Support (RIMS):

Please pray for Bible Society's Indigenous Scripture Grants Program. Pray that each Bible given away would be treasured as the precious word of God.

JUNE 28-JULY 4

Bible Translation

Please pray for Bible translation work around the world. 2,074 living languages have been identified as candidates for Bible translation projects.

Australia – Centre for Public Christianity

Please pray that the weekly CPX podcast, "Life and Faith", would continue to reach new listeners, particularly people who are sceptical about Christianity.

JULY 5-11

Middle East

Please pray that the Arab-Israeli Bible Society would be a voice of hope and peace in a place of conflict. Arab-Israeli Christians are a double minority with only 160,000 people identifying as such.

Australia – Koorong

Please pray for Koorong stores in their service to Australian families and churches.

JULY 12-18

Pakistan

Please pray for the women participating in the Beacon in the Darkness of Literacy program.

Australia - RIMS

Praise God that there has been an increase in requests from hospital and prison chaplains for Indigenous Bibles.

JULY 19-25

Mozambique

Please pray for those who are part of the Literacy for Life program. Pray that the literacy, spiritual and relational gains made through the program would continue to be strengthened.

Australia – Publishing

Praise God for the success of our 2019 publication, *Metanoia*, the story of a woman's coming to Christ.

JULY 26-AUGUST 1

China

As China emerges from the current crisis, please pray that UBS's many projects would recommence. Also, please pray for our Chinese brothers and sisters who are still without a Bible of their own.

Australia - Partnerships

Please give thanks for the many generous Christian organisations who have partnered with us.

AUGUST 2-8

Vietnam

Please pray for the translation work being done to produce Bibles in Vietnamese minority languages.

Australia - Churches

Praise God for the ministers who have worked hard to teach and pastor their people via digital technology, enabling church members to stay connected.

AUGUST 9-15

Cameroon

Please pray for the women involved in Project Esther - women who have escaped abusive situations. Pray that Christian support offered would see the women gain self-confidence to thrive.

Australia - Leadership

Please pray for wisdom and grace as the Bible Society leadership steers the organisation through an unprecedented set of circumstances.

AUGUST 16-22

Ghana

Please pray for the participants in the Literacy and Development program.

Australia – Church relations

Bible Society has run online events to allow our supporters to meet with and hear from local directors of international projects. Thank God for this.

AUGUST 23-29

Vietnam

Please pray for those involved in the Learning Through Listening project. Pray that their improved Bible literacy skills would open their eyes to Jesus.

Australia – Publishing

Please pray that all efforts made by the publishing team would help people to Open The Bible.

AUGUST 30 - SEPTEMBER 5

Iraq

Please pray that the stigma which surrounds illness in Iraq would not prevent people from being tested and treated for COVID-19.

Australia

Please pray for the newly formed BSA Marketing Communications team, bringing together BSA and Koorong's marketing and content teams.

SEPTEMBER 6-12

Egypt

Thank God for the continued efforts by the Bible Society in Egypt to reach out with a message of hope. Please pray that those who normally participate in the literacy project continue to grow in faith.

Australia - Grants

Please pray for the Australian Defence Forces. Pray that chaplains can engage people with the Bible and show love in a way that draws people to the Lord.

SEPTEMBER 13-19

South Pacific

Please pray that the economic impact of the closed borders would not be devastating. Praise God for the opportunity Bible Society has to support Christians throughout the South Pacific.

Australia – Eternity News

Thank God for the technology that has allowed *Eternity* journalists to continue listening to people and telling their stories.

SEPTEMBER 20-26

Bible Translation

Praise God that the whole Bible has been translated into 694 world languages. Please pray God would sustain those who work at this important task.

Australia - Scripture Grants

Pray that God would bless Bible Society's partnership with juvenile prisons. Pray that young prisoners will find the new life that Jesus offers.

SEPTEMBER 27-OCTOBER 3

Cameroon

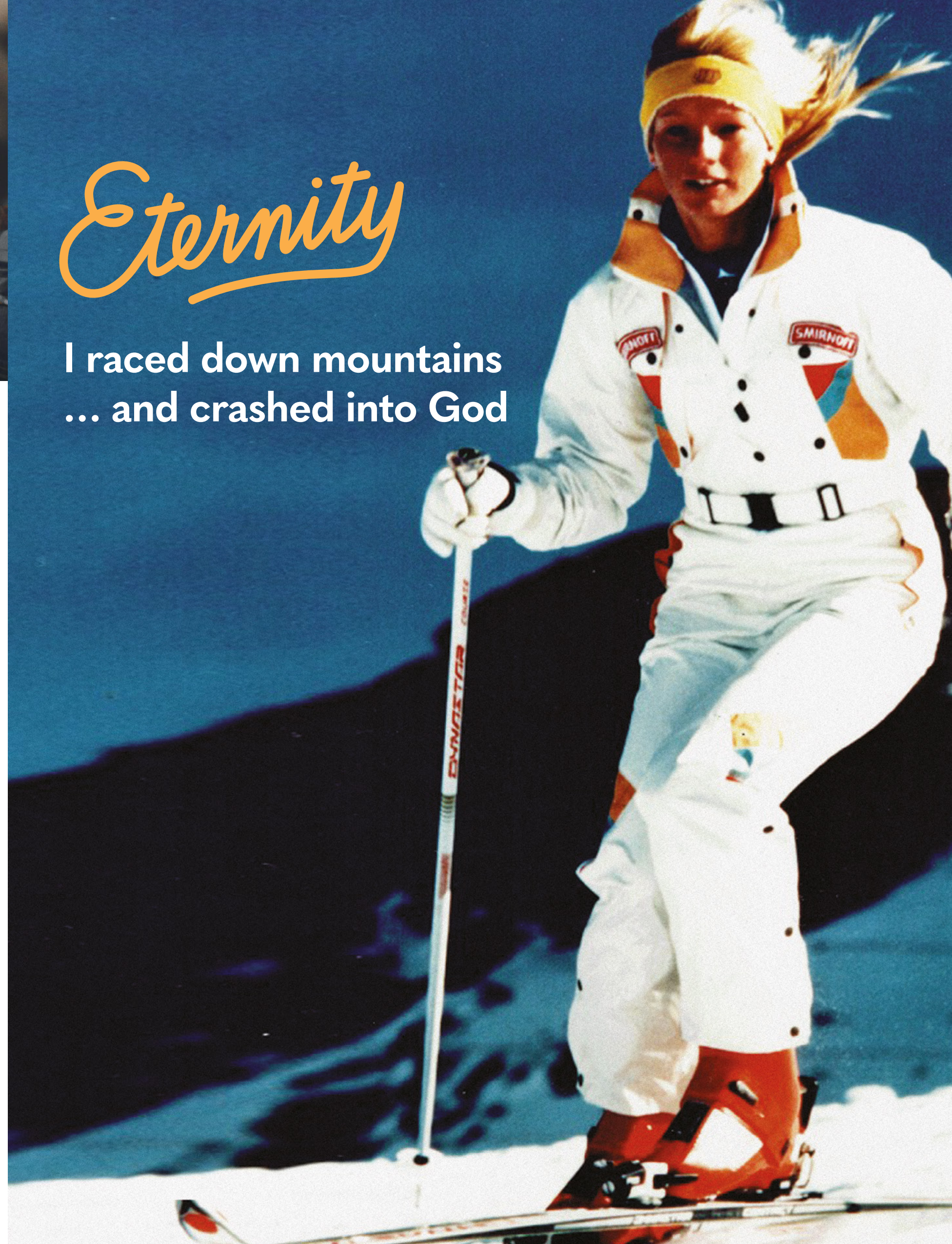
Thank God that children who have been victims of sexual exploitation have found healing through Project Esther, based on biblical principles.

Australia - Publishing

Please pray as Bible Society Australia develops a new youth Bible that will guide and grow young people in their relationship with Jesus.

Eternity

I raced down mountains ... and crashed into God



FAITH

"Everything I had was taken from me"

For most of her life, Iona Rossely strived to be the best. And she did find huge success but, as she *tells Ben McEachen*, God wanted more for her.

Iona Rossely has the need for speed. A bubbly Irishwoman now settled in far northern New South Wales, Rossely always has been in a rush to do things – and be the best. What she has done in one lifetime seems more than several people combined could manage. Without listing everything, Rossely has been a champion international speed skier and equestrian rider, Formula 1 team member, and co-ordinator of a global anti-slavery network linked with the United Nations, the Vatican and other faith groups.

But her obsession with finding meaning in competition and achievements has brought her to the brink. "God has stepped in to my life a couple of times and tried to stop me," reveals Rossely from her property at Tyalgum, on the NSW-Queensland border.

Where Rossely can see God stepping in are key moments which took everything she valued – and almost ended in death. But her life has been "amazing" ever since God totally turned it "upside down."

As she describes in her newly released memoir *Racing on Empty*, Rossely grew up attending a convent school in Ireland and felt Christianity only equalled religion and routine. If God was even real, he was distant and impersonal to Rossely. So she blasted into trying to control her own life and identity, through what she did.

From being a ski instructor, Rossely graduated to speed skiing – the sport of going as fast as you can downhill in a straight line. Competing for Great Britain, she was 1986 Ladies British Overseas Champion and New Zealand Ladies Champion. During that same period, she set her sights on qualifying for the Speed Skiing World Championships.

"If you had asked me the day before what would have been the worst thing ever to happen to me, it would have been what happened," says Rossely about what she refers to as "my big skiing accident."

"One ski came off at the top of a gully, so it was like jumping out of a block of flats."

"I fell for one kilometre," she recalls the terrifying experience of careening down a mountain at around 160 kilometres an hour.

"I just thought, 'That's it. I'm dead.'"

Rossely did not die. After an eight-hour operation and 28 metal screws in her shattered leg, Rossely began an 18-month recovery process to learn how to walk again. She was told there would be no more sport for her.

"Everything I had was taken away from me. A bit like people today where their whole lifestyle has stopped [due to COVID-19]. And I can totally relate."

Having sponsorship deals crumble with Alfa Romeo and Smirnoff Vodka, Iona knows what it is like to have everything change in one moment. And even as she fought against the loss, Rossely also can remember feeling "God's hand on that whole accident" – in a good way. As if she was being told something important ...

Rossely briefly listened out for God during her recovery process when a physiotherapist invited her to a Bible class. "That's how God gets in and

he knows how to point you in the right direction. But we have freedom to choose – and I chose to walk away. But he never, ever, ever lets go.

"My identity was in my sports.

"As soon as I was physically able, I jumped back in to trying to be a jockey."

Having found a new obsession, Rossely trained to join the Irish equestrian team for endurance riding. She and her husband Jeff, an international property developer, moved to France. They bought 19 horses. Rossely got cracking and became the top Irish rider at the World Equestrian Games.

Around her sporting pursuits and the fame and fortune it brought, Rossely also tried Buddhism, tarot cards, crystals and other things to give her the deeper meaning she realised she needed. But nothing resolved an emptiness she always felt in between chasing the next conquest or success.

"I was still racing but I didn't realise that my racing was more important than Jesus."

In France, Rossely met a radiant Christian couple and, again, she slowly started to listen to God's call on her life. "I saw Jesus in them and felt Jesus in them.

"We did the Alpha [evangelistic] course together and it was finally like the penny had dropped – and I understood.

"I had two-and-a-half years in this process of learning about who Jesus is. It was just wonderful.

"I was still racing but I didn't realise that my racing was more important than Jesus ... I would study the Bible, go to church, do communion, pray about anything – but I never, ever let go of the controls of my life."

About 12 years ago, as Rossely prepared for the World Equestrian Games, her horse became sick. Competing for another global crown was hobbled.

"I've never really failed in a sport, as such, and with the racing I already thought I would go ... and

be the No. 1 rider.

"You know, God was with me ... and it was like God had abandoned me.

"I really, really lost it. Emotionally, I cracked and I couldn't take that he could do this. I felt like someone had died in the family; I felt ripped open.

"When you are competitive and competing, your whole life is so obsessed with winning. You don't realise that until it's all taken away from you."

Iona was housebound and devastated. Christian friends wanted to pray with her. She refused:

"God's abandoned me and taken away what was the most important thing in my life."

"And they said, 'Yes. He has.'"

"But that's not what I wanted."

Two days later, she walked down the stairs in the farmhouse kitchen in France. Rossely saw her Bible and she has trouble describing what happen next "but it was like Jesus walked into the kitchen.

"He put his arms around me and said, 'I've never left you. I've always been with you. You walked away from me.' My heart broke, in a good way. I remember kneeling and saying, 'I don't want to keep living my life the way I've been living it. I want to be able to hand everything to you. Everything.'"

Iona always has felt a weight of expectation upon her, as if she is carrying the load of proving herself. "It was like this weight was lifted off my shoulders. I had this overwhelming sense of love and peace and freedom. In one split second, I'd say my life turned upside down.

"I came to the realisation that worldly possessions and fame bring fleeting happiness, but the emptiness I felt would remain until I filled it with the truth of who Jesus is and what he did for me."

Since that pivotal day, Rossely has studied at a Bible College, become a lay minister with the Anglican Church in New South Wales (husband Jess is Australian), and been involved with sport and not-for-profit pursuits. She loves preaching and being able to share the good news of what's been done in her life, and others.

While she is still a work in progress about sitting still in the presence of God and Jesus, she knows that the day the Holy Spirit came into her in the French farmhouse, is the day a fire of new perspective was ignited within her.



Iona Rossely in action on the ski slopes.



Iona Rossely and her horse Charlie.

"After that day when I opened the Bible, the words really spoke into my heart," shares Rossely.

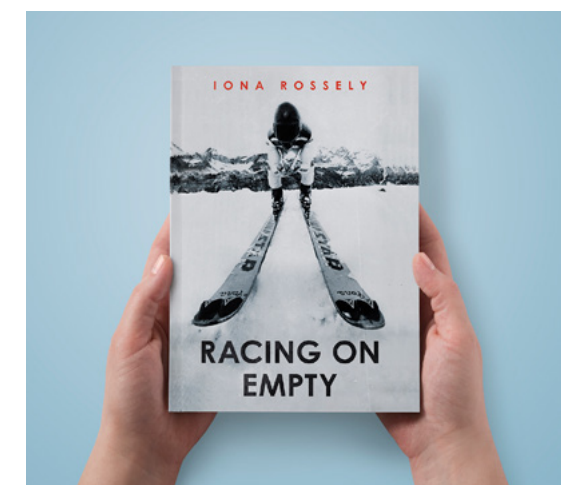
"When I used to read the Old Testament, all I could see was wars and people being killed.

"Now, I love reading the Old Testament because [I see] God's personality and character. You see how powerful he is and the wonders and acts he can do. And he is creator and he is the Alpha and the Omega ... I didn't see that before.

"My heart goes out to people who sit in church and who have not totally surrendered to God's will. Because when you do, and he steps in, you go back on the rollercoaster [of life] – but it's his rollercoaster. Which is a lot more fun, and safer. You feel so protected and you have that sense of freedom."

Convinced that she is free to keep the personality God gifted her with, driven and passionate Iona is committed to now live as the person God empowers her to be.

"My identity is now in Christ. My identity is not in me." •



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OPINION



Almost a third of 'no religion' Aussies open to discuss faith online

John Sandeman

Thirty one per cent of Australians who state they have "no religion" told researchers they would search online to find out more about faith or religion.

The figure is slightly higher for young "nones": 36 per cent of 18-34 year olds would also search online to explore the subject of faith further.

The online poll of 1280 people was part of the National Church Life Survey's regular Australian Community Survey research.

The new research was sponsored by Alpha Australia who are about to launch their evangelistic course online. Early signs – in addition to the poll – are that it will work.

Alpha, a short evangelistic course, usually runs with a group of participants sharing a meal and video presentation. This discussion format has been done by 500,000 Australians.

"We've had 348 churches register Alpha Online courses since we launched in March 2020 – and 15 per cent of these are churches that have never run Alpha before," Emily Papas from Alpha Australia tells *Eternity*.

"City on a Hill based in Melbourne (who had not run Alpha before) launched Alpha Online on April 20 in multiple locations across Australia. They have had an average attendance of 220 each week."

Nathaniel Truong, an Alpha Leader from Hillsong Church who has also already trialled the course online, is from a church that's done Alpha in a traditional format – and online. "The last time we ran Alpha physically at our church premises

whilst implementing social distancing, only two guests showed up. So when we then had 24 people online, we were pleasantly surprised.

"We saw leaders step up to lead in this new format and guests have genuine encounters with God.

"There is no limit to what God can do and I believe this is the greatest opportunity to reach people in the comfort of their own homes."

Introducing God, an evangelistic course produced by Dominic Steele of Village Church in Annandale, Sydney, was also being run in early 2020. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, it ended up transitioning to online for the final three weeks of that course. Introducing God has a similar structure to Alpha: dinner, video, discussion.

"We had to play it by ear, week by week" as coronavirus struck, says course leader Laura Riley.

"We got to the point where we could not meet together week by week, so we set up Zoom, fumbled our way through the first couple of weeks ... but it worked out pretty well.

"I wondered about Zoom, but it worked fine. We had built relationships over the first couple of weeks."

Asking around, Steele found out that the churches who were doing a relational course (such as Alpha or Introducing God) when coronavirus restrictions set in are pretty confident they can run these courses online. But Steele found churches who had not already made the leap are hesitant to begin with courses run online. •

Songtester

Obadiah Slope

Want to avoid "Jesus is my boyfriend" songs? Want to choose songs newcomers will understand? You might like to check out theberealtest.com which "analyses lyrics in Jesus' name".

Asking "What message does this song communicate?" and "Do the lyrics line up with the Bible", this site looks at the song rather than the brand that produced it.

Elevation Worship's "The Blessing" – which seems to be the Christian song of the coronavirus era scores a top mark 9.5/10, despite a lot of repetition which Vince Wright the Berean clearly is not a fan of.

"Christ Is Mine Forevermore" by St Pauls Church Castle Hill Sydney 9.5.

The much revived "It is well with my Soul" scores 10, and "Oceans" from Hillsong United another 9.5.

Lowest ranked song that Obadiah's spy found was Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah which scored a 1.5

Berea was the town mentioned in Acts 17, where the townspeople checked the Scriptures to see if Paul and Silas were telling the truth. Still a good test. •

theberealtest.com

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The murderer who found Jesus in jail

The confronting life of Bronson Blessington shows there is no one beyond the power of God's grace to save, heal and transform, *writes Anne Lim.*



Anne Lim
WRITER

Bronson Blessington ambles into the visitors' room of the South Coast Correctional Centre in Nowra, NSW, his head lowered shyly on stooping shoulders. The prisoner's bulky frame fills up his XXL white boilersuit, which is padlocked at the nape of his neck. As he tentatively approaches me, I'm struck by his open countenance, his clear blue eyes and ruddy cheeks.

He looks surprisingly young for a man of 47 who has been in jail for the past 31 years.

As Blessington perches self-consciously on a small stool bolted to the floor, he is gentle and respectful, asking questions about my trip from Sydney. It's hard to comprehend that I am talking to a man who was convicted of a crime so heinous, so appalling to the public imagination, that his sentencing judge urged that he "never be released."

For Blessington, who has been a Christian since the age of 16, it's like looking back at another person when he recalls how in 1988, at the age of just 14, he took part in the kidnapping, rape and callous murder of a young bank teller, Janine Balding.

Blessington and one of his co-accused Matthew Elliot, then aged 16, received life sentences, but because they were still children, the law at the time offered a slim prospect of release in the distant future if they were considered rehabilitated. (Stephen Jamieson, 22 at the time, also received a life sentence.)

With the crime coming just two years after the horrific rape and murder of beauty queen Anita Cobby, the public outrage against Blessington and his cohorts prompted the NSW government to begin a "truth in sentencing" campaign. In 1997, 2001 and 2005, it passed three pieces of retrospective legislation that ensured they would, in the words of then Premier Bob Carr, remain "cemented in their cells" for the rest of their lives.

Imagine everything you have done over the past 31 years, if you have lived that long. Now imagine Blessington's life, behind bars since childhood. He says it is like having been in a coma because he hasn't seen anything of the world and its changes. He doesn't even know how to operate a mobile phone.

When the teenage Blessington was first arrested, a female prison officer commented that he had the face of an angel, but in reality, his heart was a seething mass of anger, resentment, pain and fear.

Bronson as a boy: abused and alone

He was just six years old when his parents, Barbara and Steve, split up. After the divorce, his mother was so poor that she cried all night when he came back from the shops having lost the change from a \$10 note.

Blessington became obsessed with trying to get his parents back together and did all he could to disrupt a new relationship between his mother and a new "dad." Exasperated, his mother dispatched him to live with his father, after which he spent a few years shuttling between the two parents.

"I thought my mum would be lonely, so I moved back with her. I thought my dad would be lonely, so I moved back with him," he tells me.

It was while he was living with his father, who moved from caravan park to boarding house chasing work, that Blessington, frequently left alone, started to be sexually molested by four men, traumatic experiences that stoked his fear of adults.

By the age of 14, he was an alcoholic and petrol sniffer, truanting from school, getting into fights, stealing and, though illiterate, refusing to attend special needs classes. Finally, his dad and the school counsellors sent him for assessment to the Royal Far West Children's Health Scheme at Manly, a charity designed to connect country children with developmental services.

"At this time, I was in a full stream of getting molested every day on a daily basis," he says.

"I was going back and forth from parent to parent. I had gone to probably about 20 different schools at that time, so my mum had all the reports from the Children's Health Scheme and they were tabled at court. The report stated I had the maturity of a nine-year-old at the time; I lived in a fantasy world and that my sole object in life was to get my mum and dad back together.

"While I was at the Health Scheme, I never made mention about the sexual abuse because I thought I'd be in trouble, so it was pretty difficult, you know.

"So you can see by this that my life leading up to the crimes against Miss Balding was devoid of anything worthwhile, you know? And if you don't have the right people in your life, you're going to turn to the wrong people and that's exactly what happened."

The "sledgehammer incident"

The story of what happened on that dreadful day



▲
Bronson Blessington, second from left, aged 16, with friends at Minda Detention Centre, Sydney.

in September 1988 has been retold many times. In brief, Blessington absconded with another boy from a boys' home attached to Minda Remand Centre, Lidcombe, Sydney, where he had been sent because he was "uncontrollable."

"There was a guy there – he used to get bashed by his parents real bad – and it was his birthday, so we went on an excursion and we both took off," says Blessington. "Well, we met up with this group – we knew them for two days and then the sledgehammer incident happened."

He's referring to an "absolutely dreadful" attack on a boy called Wayne Purchase, after he and his friend teamed up with a bunch of hardened street kids at a homeless shelter at Central Station in Sydney. These included a 16-year-old with a long criminal history, Matthew Elliott, and 15-year-old Wayne Wilmot.

While demonstrating his agility with his fists, Blessington landed a punch full on the face on Purchase. The blood on Purchase's face provoked Elliott, high on amphetamines, to slam Purchase

"I went along with them because I had seen this guy's head being belted in and I took part in it and I thought 'If I don't do what these blokes tell me, they'll do that to me.'"



▲
The last prison photo taken of Bronson Blessington before photographs were banned in the prison system.

with a hollow sledgehammer, urging Blessington to join him. The pair hit the boy with everything they had, leaving him half-dead.

Though Purchase survived, the incident rattled Blessington and his friend so much that his friend asked him to come with him the next day to a music shop.

"I didn't understand at the time but, looking back, he was trying to get me away from this group. And if I knew [what would happen] I would have gone with him," Blessington tells me.

"I was a scared kid and I went along with them because I had seen this guy's head being belted in and I took part in it. I thought 'if I don't do what these blokes tell me, they'll do that to me.'"

The attack on Janine Balding

Blessington remembers drinking a bottle of whisky the day the gang rode the train network, finally getting off at Sutherland station in Sydney's south. He insists what happened next was not premeditated. It just unfolded with horribly tragic consequences. Contrary to a widely reported claim that Elliott and Wilmot had suggested, "how about we go and get a sheila and rape her?," Blessington says the plan was to steal a car.

When Janine Balding, then engaged and a month short of her 21st birthday, neared her car, she was approached by the gang and Blessington asked her for a cigarette. When she refused, he pulled out a knife and forced her into the back seat. As she was driven in her Holden Gemini to the side of the road at Minchinbury in Sydney's west, both Elliott and Blessington raped her at knife-point. She was dragged from her vehicle, gagged with a scarf, tied up, then lifted over a fence and carried into a paddock. Blessington held her down as Elliott punched her in the stomach while she drowned in a dam on the property.

At the time, Blessington couldn't comprehend the enormity of his crime.

"When I was arrested, I said to the police 'I'll take you to the scene' and they pulled me out of the car and we went throughout the trees and I see into the dam and I see a body floating. I couldn't at the time reconcile myself as doing that," he recalls.

"I was thinking 'Far out, I've seen a dead body.' I just couldn't grasp it, you know what I mean? You see something on TV – and back then, you wouldn't see dead bodies on TV – and my mind at the time was just scattered. Like, I just could not reconcile that I'd seen a dead body and that was all that was going through my mind.

"And over the years, when you do come to terms with it and you grow older and you mature, like, mate, I've been on my knees that many times bawling before the Lord over what happened and how much devastation I've caused the Balding family and people that they knew and things that may not happen now in the future, like children and grandchildren, and what my family has suffered. It's just such a catastrophic domino effect."

"I pray for the family every single day"

At this point, you may be wondering what happened to change a boy who in his words was "a detriment to society," into a man supplicating humbly

before God, fully repentant for the gravity of his sins and aware that he can never make amends.

According to Blessington, it's the fruit of becoming a "new creation in Christ Jesus; the old has gone, the new has come." (2 Cor 5:7)

"I've actually felt that and lived that. The old you dies, and the new you is being renewed; it's growing in love and the Lord's working in your life and he's forgiven you of your sins. It doesn't mean you're going to stop sinning, but he's working in your life to win back the strongholds that the Devil has to win back for his strongholds."

Whenever Blessington compares his younger self to the man he is now, he sees two people and cries.

"I see that confused young fella that participated in that, and I do cry when I think of that; and I pray for the family every single day because I know that they are still suffering. I see it every time that I see them on TV. I know that their suffering is immense, and you can't wrap your head around something so horrific like that.

"No matter how much you try, or you want to, make amends, I could never make amends. I could feed the world for a billion, trillion years and it wouldn't do one thing to make amends.

"The only thing is the death of Christ and him loving that poor lost boy so much that he went to cross and he took that sin upon him ... It's something I think of every single day and I'll never not think about it.

"I'll never not feel remorseful; I'll never not try and get better as a person because I've taken something that was precious to so many."

"I felt loved pretty much for the first time"

Bronson's life changed the day he attended a Bible study led by Jack Begnell, a Christian pastor from Cabramatta, who was unlike anyone Blessington had ever met before.

"You've got to understand that Jack's a real happy fella – I named him Happy Jack. He's never down, he's never sad ... and he's just an amazing person," he says.

"Jack Begnell didn't even know me, and he was telling me that he loved me and all these Christians were sharing their faith with me."

Blessington, who had previously jeered at Christians, felt for the first time what it was like to love and be loved, and his life changed in a single moment.

"Around this time, I was getting a bit persecuted

because of my size ... there were a lot of things that were happening in my life at the time with my crime, and before all that when I was getting molested from a young age. I just seen that God had a purpose and a plan and with all the suffering in the world, there was just no hope in that, so I gave my life to the Lord and I just became real happy.

"It was like when you fall in love with someone. It was like that and I never felt any happiness like that in my whole life, so it was like a gravity was pulling me towards the Lord.

"My life at that time was, like, sadness and pain and a world of my own kind of thing – and then it was like a star when it bursts into life. And that's exactly how it felt. I just felt happy, I felt loved pretty much for the first time. It was just amazing. All day long, before, I'd just dwell on the negative, and from that time on, I was thinking of heaven all the time, like every second of every day I was just thinking of the Lord. It was just amazing. It was the extreme of one end to the extreme of the other."

The afternoon he gave his life to Christ, Blessington went back to his cell and, in what can only be a miracle, found that he was able to read the Bible, albeit slowly. He began reading the Bible every day, memorising large chunks of the New Testament, especially the words of Paul, with whom he strongly identifies.

Singing praises to God in prison

Blessington says from the moment of his conversion he couldn't stop talking about what God had done in his life.

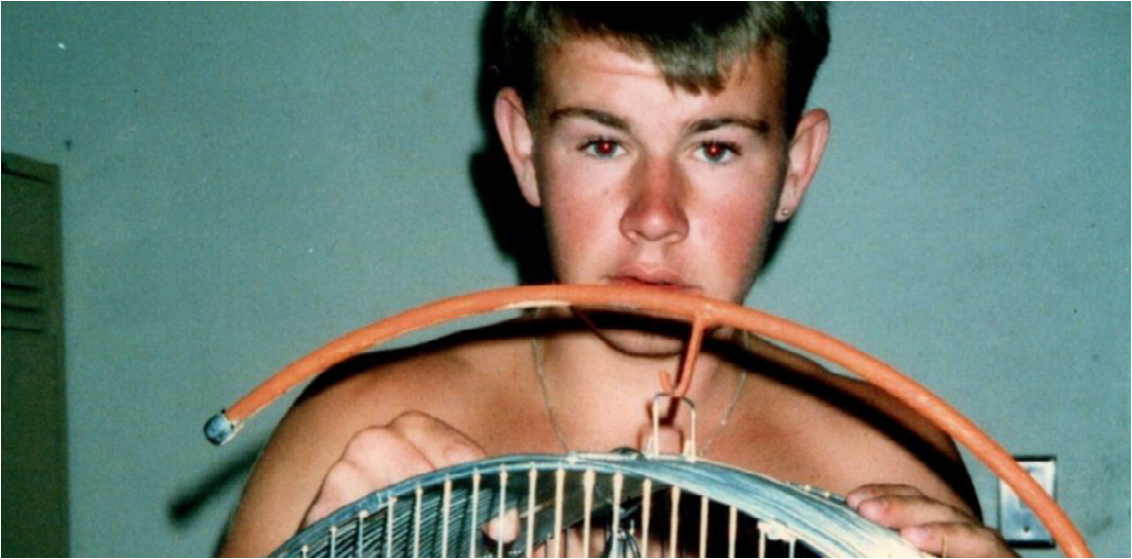
"I was witnessing non-stop from the time I became a Christian. I prayed to the Lord to give me the power to witness and you couldn't keep me quiet – I had to tell everyone," he says.

"Well, after about three or four months, there were probably 10 to 15 of us from the one pod meeting in the kitchen and we'd be singing praises to God for about half an hour; we'd sing and clap and everyone had grins on their faces and we'd really want to hear the word. It was the best thing that happened to us all week.

"There were different churches coming in. Jack would come in and some other church groups would come in, so we were going to church three times a week and the Lord did a mighty act there. Pretty much most of the jail was Christian or they wanted to know about him. That was the first real work of the Spirit that I've ever seen like that."

One night, after receiving his life sentence, Blessington was lying in his bed when he was visited by an extraordinary vision.

"I wake up and look at the end of my bed and I see two incredible dragon-like beings rolling around and they were fighting over me. One was a fluorescent red, and that was the bad one, and one was fluorescent yellow-and-orange and it was beautiful – and they were rolling around and they were fighting over me. And I saw it as God and Satan fighting over me, but it was probably two angels," he says.



"It was like my life at that time was like sadness and pain and a world of my own kind of thing and then it was like a star when it bursts into life."

Bronson Blessington

Terrified, Blessington got up, turned the light on and pressed the alarm to go to the toilet.

"I'm sitting in the toilet thinking 'what has just happened?' I went back to my slot and I turned the light off and jumped into bed and I heard a voice say, 'Get up and read and pray,' so I got up, turned the light on and I started reading the Bible and I prayed; then I turned the light back off and jumped back into bed. Now I hear a voice as clear as day – because I was still petrified – and the voice said, 'roll on to your side, my son.' So, I rolled on to my side and I fell asleep – I had the best night's sleep I've ever had in my life."

The next morning, he couldn't believe how tranquil he felt in his soul.

"It was just amazing. I've experienced a lot of euphoric feelings because of drugs and it was just better than any drug you've ever felt in your life. It was incredible – it was amazing; just lots of love and happiness and joy."

Good news bears fruit in the Devil's playground

From that time on, Blessington followed his deep desire to preach the good news inside the jail, and even developed a hope that, one day, he might help young people in the outside world avoid the mistakes he has made.

"In all my years, I've taken 2,500-plus Bible studies standing in the prison yards. That's not counting all the Bible studies when I've just

grabbed people and we've gone into a cell and we've had a Bible study," he says.

The jails where he experienced the most gospel fruit were also the most violent – Goulburn in southwest NSW and Parklea in northwest Sydney, he says.

"In Goulburn, there were a lot of murderers down there and I'd hold the Bible up in the yard and call out 'Bible study!' to these guys – and I was in the most violent yard. And there's no chance I've got that kind of courage! It comes from God, you know?"

While incarcerated at Parklea, "I was really on fire for the Lord and I really believe in seasons, like the Lord brings you into a season and you're praying with all your heart for two or three hours a day, you're reading like 10, 20, 30 chapters a day, you're singing praises to him. I was praying that much I had calluses on my knees at this stage at Parklea. And people were just coming up and saying, 'Oh, mate, how do I get into the Bible?' And so you talk to them and over a period of about six months, probably about 40-something people gave their lives to the Lord.

"I had a really close brother there and we bought a packet of biscuits, a packet of lollies, a thing of cordial and some peanuts. On Christmas Day we invited every single person in the wing to come along to a sermon. Anyway, there was 45 people and we were preaching about the death of Jesus,

even though it was Christmas Day – I think that's the greatest gift that the world has received.

"Well, people were walking away with pocketfuls of lollies and biscuits and bottles of cordial. Later on that day ... I noticed that where we had eaten outside and where I preached, sparrows were eating the crumbs from the biscuits ... things like that, you just know that God's real. I could not have done anything on my own in regard to my own courage or my own strength.

"Just to see God's hand move in a place like this – this is the Devil's playground. It's a spiritual intensive care ward and people are coming here to learn about crime and evil and then they're going out into the community and becoming urban terrorists."

"Without him I wouldn't be where I am today"

One of the many men he has helped to rescue from a dark path in jail is Mitch Dundon.

"He tried to show me a better way and the time we spent together in prison really done that for me, you know? He showed me a better life and now I'm on a really good path and I'm with a really good church, Salt Church, in Port Macquarie," says Dundon.

"Without him I wouldn't be where I am today ... He's just a wonderful person and just the little words that he'd send down, like he'd see me in the yard and I'd have something on my mind and he'd go and pray for me. And I'd feel that prayer from the other side of the yard without even knowing that he's praying for me, but you could just tell."

Over the many long years that Blessington has been ministering to his fellow inmates, he has also developed friendships with some amazing Christians on the outside, notably Simon Manchester, former senior minister at St Thomas' Anglican Church, North Sydney, who sent him books to develop his faith.

"The Lord, in his wisdom and mercy, has seen fit to save him and to begin to use him, so I have to bow my head at that point and say, 'Well, you know, why should I condemn him if the Lord has not condemned him?' Manchester says.

Another friend is Neil Holman, who met Blessington while teaching guitar at Minda Detention Centre, when Blessington was 16.

"Bronson was the most 'on fire' Christian I had ever met," says Holman. "The first thing he ever said to me was, 'Are you a Christian?' His enthusiasm for Jesus was beyond anything I had experienced before, or since and it made such an impression on me, that we're still friends 30 years later.

"I spent 30 to 45 minutes with Bronson in Minda every week for about a year before he turned 18 and was moved to the adult prison system. He spoke of Jesus a lot and shared a lot of Bible verses. He did most of the talking and ministering, despite me being seven years older."

Holman says that conversations in subsequent years were always selfless and focused on others.

"He's always encouraged me in the faith, and I



feel has given me far more than I can offer him. His knowledge of the Scriptures and his prayer life are beyond mine, despite me growing up in the church.

"In his phone calls and letters, Bronson's default is to encourage and build me up. It is rare for him to self-pity or ask for something other than prayer and most of those prayer requests would be for his inmates or sick friends and relatives."

Still behind bars

In 2015, Blessington applied for clemency under the NSW governor's royal prerogative of mercy – his last avenue to end his indefinite incarceration, which was found by the United Nations to be "cruel, inhuman and degrading" because of his juvenile status and a failure to consider his prospects for rehabilitation.

Five years on, the petition reportedly remains on the desk of the NSW Attorney-General.

Supporters, such as Holman and former prison chaplain Andy Thomas, believe it is time to balance justice with mercy.

"I believe it was just and fair for Bronson to go to prison for a lengthy period," says Holman. "His crime was evil and cruel. He took part in the rape and murder of a precious, beautiful and innocent young woman. It permanently broke Mrs Balding's heart. I met Beverley on two occasions. She was very gracious to me, but the impact on her was clearly devastating. The loss to Janine's family and friends is immeasurable.

"For the crime, damage done to her family and friends, protection for vulnerable people in our society, and a warning to others who might contemplate such crimes, a lengthy punishment was just and fair. Bronson would agree with this.

"I also believe it would have been just and fair for Bronson to have been released after 14 to 20 years. Even the sentencing judge acknowledged

that given Bronson's age, he had good prospects for rehabilitation.

"During a visit around the 10-year mark, I remember saying to my wife that any extra time Bronson spends in prison now is a waste. In my view, by the 10-year mark, Bronson was well and truly 'corrected' and NSW correctional facilities should have been proud of their achievement.

"A 31-year sentence (so far), for a 14-year-old, is infinitely inconsistent with comparable sentences. It's more than double the penalty received by most of NSW adult murderers.

"Adult men get half this for killing the wives they've pledged to love, cherish and protect. How does that compare to a 14-year-old street kid from a dysfunctional family and under pressure from older boys getting a life sentence?"

"Given Bronson's remorse, rehabilitation and time served, I believe it's just and fair that Bronson be released."

Cancer and not letting anyone down

Although he has already served the equivalent of two murder sentences, the only circumstance that would permit Bronson's release into the community would be if he were dying or incapacitated to the point that he could not commit a crime. This month, he received news from doctors that he has cancer and is awaiting his transfer to Sydney for surgery.

In a final phone call, Blessington reminds me that Australia is the only country that allows life sentences to be imposed on juveniles. Even the US Supreme Court ruled, in 2012, that mandatory life sentences without parole violated the Eighth Amendment. In 2014, the United Nations found that the sentences on Blessington and Elliott were in breach of Australia's human rights obligations and asked that the situation be reviewed. The NSW government rejected this request.

Blessington has many friends who stand ready to help him assimilate back into society and whom he is adamant he would never let down by reoffending.

"The Lord has given me some wonderful people, like real heroes of the faith that, if I let down, I'll be so ashamed," he says.

"It just shows you that if someone puts up their hand for Christ and they give all of themselves to him to do as he wills in their lives, he can do anything. He can open any door, he can work so powerfully through anyone, even someone like me that had no education, that was like the pits of all society, and someone that just did not deserve anything, any chance at all, and he still loves me. And that's amazing and how can I let him down like that?" ●

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Eternity

17

KCC One brings Bible-preaching ministry to all

Katoomba Christian Convention (KCC) has released KCC One—a brand new mobile platform which aims to make God’s word accessible world-wide. For close to 120 years, KCC has gathered Christians across age groups and life-stages, denominations and regions under the banner “all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The not-for-profit ministry hosts six annual conventions with the hope to see Australia transformed by Jesus Christ through the powerful preaching of the Bible. Now, with new technologies, they hope to see this vision unfold across the globe.

Available on iOS and Android, KCC One is a free app offering access to video, audio and transcripts of KCC’s extensive catalogue of Bible talks from the last 42 years. At a time when Christians across Australia and around the world have been forced to isolate, KCC’s rich library of over 350 expository preaching and topical talks allows users to hear from local preachers such as Peter Adam, Sam Chan, Simon Manchester and Kirk Patston as well as international preachers such as John Piper, Nancy Guthrie, Michael Ramsden, Paul Tripp, Don Carson, Helen Roseveare and Francis Chan. The app promises regular updates, including exclusive content.

Although COVID-19 has forced the cancellation of most of KCC’s 2020 live conventions, the ministry has been quick to adapt to online alternatives. KYCK Live was the premier livestreamed youth



event which attracted over 10,000 high schoolers from all around Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States and the United Kingdom. Preacher Brett Hookham taught from Hebrews 10 on the topic of perseverance—reminding youth to cling to gospel hope and to continue spurring each other on in ‘love and good deeds’, even in the age of social distancing.

For many, KYCK Live was a timely event that provided much-needed encouragement and fellowship—including a Missionary Kid serving in Japan with CMS.

“The worship made me miss being surrounded, encouraged and growing with a bunch of believers. There is something truly special about youth in Australia. Amazing how so many have come to gather.”

The video footage from KYCK Live has already been uploaded to KCC One and can be accessed by anyone from anywhere in the world.

KCC hopes its livestream events will bring Christian community and teaching to those without access while also serving to generate income to fund the ministry.

KCC is a non-profit organisation whose vision is to see God’s Word transform the lives of Christians from all over the nation and beyond. Everything we do is to fulfill this mission, and now more than ever, we can only do this with the support and generosity of our donors and volunteers. To find out more about the ministry of KCC or to download the new free app, visit www.kcc.org.au/one.

“If Coronavirus doesn’t kill me, hunger will.”

As the world responds to the many challenges presented by COVID-19, for millions, they are unable to find the same refuge or safety we do in our homes. It is at times like this that the vulnerable suffer most, and FEBC is most active. As a frontline global media ministry FEBC is speaking into homes and hearts, being the ‘voice’ that people trust, need and rely on, a voice that offers help and hope.

FEBC is providing doctors, psychologists, counsellors, government officials, along with pastors and prayer support teams, on-air and online, to speak into the lives of those in desperate need of emotional, spiritual and practical help. The responses have been overwhelming as the needs grow.

A team member in India shared “*At this time the needs are great and our resources are low. The threat just keeps increasing. Government restrictions are very severe. It’s incredibly sad for the millions of homeless and poverty stricken. We recently heard from a woman who threw her babies into the Ganges unable to bear the starvation any longer.*”

This is the heartbreaking reality of millions in India desperately trying to survive the pandemic. The unfathomable decision this poor woman had to make is one no mother should face, but COVID-19 is more than just a deadly virus. Given India’s vast population, many of the world’s poorest and vulnerable have little food let alone means to self-isolate, receive medical attention or



COVID-19 is more than just a deadly virus.

even wash their hands. Desperation and poverty do not go away because of Coronavirus. A migrant labourer shared “*if the Coronavirus doesn’t kill me, hunger will.*” A large part of the country’s economy depends on migrants, and because of the lockdown many workers from the north are stranded, homeless and hungry. Thousands have begun the arduous and perilous walk back to their villages. The impact of COVID-19 makes the need for support in India even greater.

How FEBC is helping in the fight against Coronavirus
Thousands of hours of additional programs are delivering life-giving information, words of comfort, counsel, prayer and hope to millions. Hearing the Bible in a heart language opens ears and touches lives. Our follow-up teams are not only speaking words of love but then provide practical assistance

through care packages and other real support. FEBC programs are reaching into areas that no one else can reach and are providing a lifeline.

The result – our teams are being inundated with calls. God has given us the privilege of being His voice, His hands and His feet. We would love you to partner with us and learn more about the work of FEBC across the world, to the unreached and least-reached.

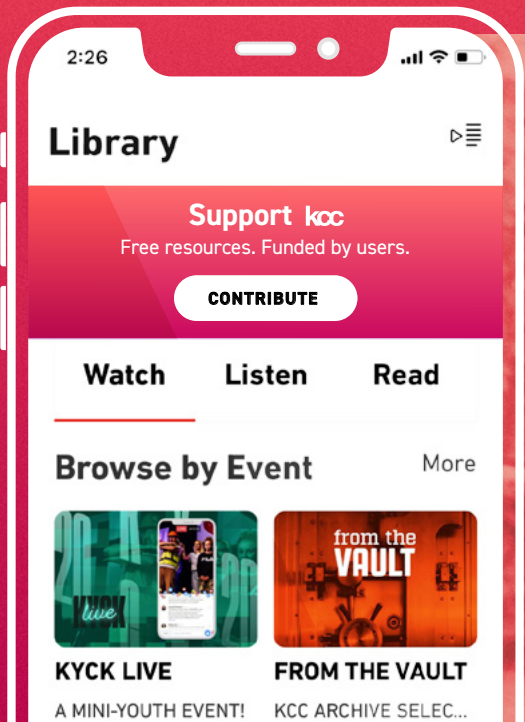
FEBC is seeking urgent donations to speak hope and give support to the most vulnerable in India.

For more information on FEBC’s work during COVID-19 or to give a tax-deductible gift this end of financial year, visit febc.org.au or call 1300 720 017 and give to FEBC COVID-19 Relief Programs.



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A new, free app loaded with content to help you deepen your walk with God.



KCC is not able to run any of its conventions or accommodation facilities until further notice. This means that we are facing a \$750,000 shortfall in 2020. Please support us by downloading the KCC One app, making a donation (and enjoying the talks!)

Every contribution – no matter how great or small – makes all the difference in helping to keep the app free, and the ministry going. Read more about KCC’s work and how to support at: kcc.org.au/impact.

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Sharing the Gospel Through the Power of Film

40 is a significant number for Christians. God’s people, Israel, spent 40 years in the wilderness after God brought them out of Egypt. Jesus himself spent 40 days and nights fasting in the desert—just as Moses had done before him. And this year, the “JESUS” film turns 40. To mark the significance of 40 years of this life-changing movie, let’s take a look at its remarkable history.

This story begins well before 40 years ago. Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, was thinking through the evangelistic potential of film way back in 1945. By 1974 the time seemed right to make the dream of feature-length film about Jesus a reality. After 5 years of research and production—to ensure the movie was an effective, accurate, and trusted cross-cultural tool for evangelism—the movie was released in 1979.

Filmed in over 200 locations around Israel, and featuring a cast of over 5,000 people, the “JESUS” film is the only major motion picture to be based on the exact text of the Gospel of Luke.

Fast forward to 2001, and the “JESUS” film is shown in every country around the globe. The film was viewed as a source of comfort to New York after the dark and devastating attacks of 9/11.

Today, the “JESUS” film has been translated into over 1,800 languages and viewed over 8 billion times all around the world. The team have partnered with more than 1,500 ministries, resulting in more than 500 million people coming to Christ. What an incredible legacy—and it’s still going!



Through the Jesus Film Project, there is now a library which includes more than 30 short and feature-length films. This library is freely available to be streamed online or via the newly-released Jesus Film app.

Geoff Folland, from Power to Change, formally known as Campus Crusade for Christ Australia, shares some of the ways the “JESUS” film app is being used today. “People are using it in short-film festivals, social media campaigns, home discussion groups and recently one of the short films (Falling Plates) was shown at a major outreach event,” said Geoff.


It’s also being widely used on university campuses. “Students can invite friends from different belief backgrounds and cultures to a zoom dinner. Now, they can share their screen and use the “JESUS” Film app to enjoy a movie and then engage with the gospel.”

Power to Change wants to share the powerful

resource of the “JESUS” Film app with you. And the fact that the now 40-year-old “JESUS” film has been recognised by the Guinness Book of World Records as the “Most Translated Film” in history shows just how seriously they take their goals.

Visit the App Store or Google Play to download the Jesus Film app and witness the power of forgiveness and unconditional love through this library of inspiration.

Connect with Power to Change online; powertochange.org.au, or contact Geoff Folland on 0432 250 802 for more information.



POWER
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In what do we trust?

Trevor Cairney
HEAD, MOORE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

The unfolding drama of the COVID-19 crisis in recent months has been tragic. The sheer horror of the pandemic unfolding day by day, nation by nation, claiming lives, destroying businesses, taking away jobs, closing schools and locking down communities, has been frightening. But as a counterbalance, in much of the world we have seen wonderful human stories of sacrifice for others. In the front line have been nurses, doctors, police, public health officials, community workers, scientists and churches displaying generosity and servanthood. But of course, we have also witnessed selfishness and disregard for others. Some in public life have shown great calmness and leadership, but sadly, others have been driven by self-interest. What are we to make of this?

Like you, I’ve witnessed the best and the worst of human behaviour. One of my most disappointing observations has been that many ordinary citizens, as well as some public figures, showed little concern at first about a virus that was ‘somewhere else’. But as we saw the daily scoreboards, and graphs for infections and deaths spreading around the world, reality began to emerge.

But what are people truly concerned about? Are we concerned about economic impacts, or instead the physical ramifications to millions of lives caused by this pandemic? Even now, as I try to negotiate a daily walk along familiar and once deserted paths, I’m dodging people with animals, scooters and bicycles, who seem oblivious to personal risk, and show little concern for risk to



others. There is no sense of civic responsibility and concern for the other. Might the lack of concern for the frail, elderly and sick, and many in distant nations, be the perfect counterweight to their human sense of invincibility and control of their own destinies? And now, in recent days, we’ve reached a new stage, where some demand their right to ignore all advice, and simply do whatever they want with no regard for others. Lord please hear our prayer that eyes might be opened to the reality that it is in you our God that we must rely, not self-rule. Might our God use this pandemic to cause many to recalibrate their lives, with Him at the centre?

We hope and pray that a cure will be found and there will be a steep decline in the numbers contracting COVID-19 around the world. The truth is, that even if we don’t catch the virus, we will be affected by it. I’m conscious that many Christian organisations have been directly affected. For some, it has meant doing new things, and trusting in

God to get them through. I’m praying for specific organisations doing good work. Some of our brothers and sisters may have seen death far too close to home. I hope collectively, that as Christians and Christian organisations our primary concern will be for those directly impacted by the virus. Not just those within our families, but also across our communities, our network of relationships, and indeed strangers in other nations.

Would you pray with us at Moore College that God will use this crisis to raise up more world leaders who look beyond self-interest? As well, might there be many within our churches who will be equipped and sent, to boldly proclaim our Saviour to the very ends of the earth.

Contact me if you’d like to know more either by email (FoundationHead@moore.edu.au)

Moore College equips men and women to present a sure and certain hope to a world in need

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. Matthew 28:19-20



Moore College prepares men and women to carry the gospel of salvation to the ends of the Earth. Will you partner with us in this great mission?

moore.edu.au/eternity



Persecuted Christians left to starve under lockdown

Pastor “James” went to collect the food that the Indian central government is providing to needy families affected by the Covid-19 lockdown. But the distribution was organized by local Hindu extremist groups who dominate the government in the state where Pastor James lives. They refused to give him anything unless he renounced his faith in the Lord Jesus. Of course, Pastor James would not deny his beloved Saviour, so he went home empty-handed to his hungry family.

“Not for Christians”
When another Indian pastor and some of his congregation went for their government food rations, local Hindu extremists and police violently attacked the small Christian group and threw them out, telling them that the food was not meant for Christians. Many Christians in India and, other parts of Asia and Africa, earn their living in low-paid jobs, without regular salaries. These “daily wage earners” are paid only for each day’s work they do, as in the parable in Matthew (20:1-16). When lockdown began, they lost their income. Too poor to have savings, they soon finished the meagre food stocks in their home. If they are prevented from getting government food aid, they have nothing. Lockdown for them is not about boredom and frustration – it is about real hunger, and the prospect of starvation.

Death by virus or by starvation?
“I would rather die from coronavirus than starva-

tion,” said one African church leader, expressing the view of many who venture out of their homes in desperation to seek food. Poor urban communities are also in extra danger of getting infected with the virus. Crowded together and with grossly inadequate water supplies, frequent hand-washing is next to impossible and there is no money to buy facemasks or hand sanitisers. But for rural communities, imagine the frustration of being unable to go to your little plot of land to harvest the crops you know are ready – and will soon be rotting if not gathered in. Some under lockdown are already eating the seed that they saved to sow for the next crop. Many poor pastors depend completely on the offerings of their congregation, but without Sunday services there are no offerings. In any case their church members now have nothing to give.

Locusts, floods and virus make a triple tragedy
To make matters worse, parts of East Africa and Pakistan are suffering from locusts on a scale unknown for decades. The insects, now numbering in the trillions, devour the crops while subsistence farmers are locked down at home, unable to do anything to tackle the swarms. “Christians are now hopeless,” said a Ugandan bishop, “If there is no intervention in form of relief, many ... are likely to lose their lives.” It has also been a season of extreme rains in East Africa, causing floods and landslides which have killed about 250 people. In Kenya, there are at least 116,000 homeless people. In this triple tragedy, the disasters impact each other. The huge numbers of displaced people are complicating the Kenyan government’s efforts to prevent the spread of coronavirus. At the same time, borders closed in the fight against corona-



An Indian pastor delivering food aid from Barnabas to his needy church members

virus are delaying the delivery of pesticides to locust-affected areas in the region.

Lockdown targets for terrorism
In West Africa, Christians staying obediently in their homes are “sitting ducks” for terrorist attacks. The militants are also spurred on by the fact that governments have switched their resources to combatting Covid-19; this leaves the militants free to launch their anti-Christian attacks with impunity. Some jihadi groups have even celebrated the new disease, describing the virus as a “small soldier of Allah” sent to attack his enemies.

The joy of saving forgotten lives
Barnabas Fund has already sent \$1.45 million to save Christians affected by Covid-19 lockdown in 24 countries. This has provided food for 250,000 people, hygiene products for 14,000 and support to 6,400 pastors.

Join with us, and experience the joy of saving forgotten Christian lives. \$20 could make a real difference to a destitute Indian pastor. \$38 could provide flour, cooking oil, facemasks and sanitiser for a family in Kenya.

BIBLE SOCIETY

Singing Sisters sing Scripture in Shangdong

Cynthia Oh meets Yuying and Yingli, who learned to read using the Bible, and now sing it joyfully.



▲ Sun Yuying and Sun Yingli enjoy singing God’s word at their Scripture Literacy Class, run by a local church.

Did you know Paul’s Letter to the Romans could be sung? Sun Yuying, 67, and Sun Yingli, 55 are participants of a Scripture Literacy Class run by the local church and supported by international funding, including Bible Society Australia donors. The sisters left me dumbfounded when they started singing the Book of Romans. “You just need to put melody into the words. It’s that simple!” said Yingli, who works as a school canteen cook. One may find it hard to imagine that this pair of sisters were barely able to read or write before they became Christians and attended the Scripture Literacy Class. “In 1983, my mother-in-law brought me to church. I was immediately attracted to the joy and peace of the Christians around me!” recalled Yuying, the elder sister who lives in a village in Shandong and was a corn farmer before her retirement a few years ago. After coming to know Christ, she then shared the good news to her mother and sisters. “Praise God that over the years, they have all come to receive Jesus as their Lord and Saviour!” said Yuying with a big smile on her face. They now attend a church in their village in Zibo county. Like many of their peers who were born in the

1950s, the Sun sisters did not have a chance to go to school. But that did not stop them from learning to read God’s word and knowing him. The two sisters slowly learned to read the Bible over the years by attending church services and Bible reading sessions at believers’ homes. The joy of salvation was evident in Yuying as she shared about her love for the Bible. “The word of God is life and light. I used to struggle with bad temper. Now because of God’s word in me, I have better self-control. People say I’m gentler now. As the Bible says in 2 Timothy 3:16, ‘All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.’” The Sun sisters were overjoyed when the church recently gave out free Bibles – sponsored by international donors such as you – for their Bible literacy classes. “We are thankful to the kindness of our overseas brothers and sisters. “Scripture literacy classes not only teach us how to read and write, but more importantly, they also teach us about God’s truth. And God’s truth protects us from the lies of the evil one,” said Yingli. ●

China’s Bible printers are busier than ever

John Sandeman

The world’s largest Bible printer, Amity Printing Company (APC) in Nanjing, China, was back printing Bibles when much of the world was still in lockdown. The first project to roll of the press for Australia after China’s national lockdown ended was a print run of the Australian Defence Force CEV Bible – in its traditional camo cover. Amity Press is printing new supplies of the waterproof New Testaments which Bible Society provide to the Army and Air Force. And waiting in the wings will be a range of Bibles for the Federal, WA and Victorian Police. Two groups which are frontline in the local COVID battle and looking after vulnerable people will get Bibles for the first time: NSW Ambulance and NSW Corrections staffers. On behalf of APC, UBS China Partnership asked supporters to “thank God” for the return to work. “With the support of the Chinese authorities, Bible production has resumed for the churches in China and for other countries, with stringent measures put in place. Please pray for the protection of the staff against the virus and for the continued production of the Bibles.” Logistics and supply chains have resumed and distribution of Bibles to the main distribution centres have also re-started in late March. In China, Bibles are sold mainly through bookstores in churches. Some people thought that perhaps you would have to wait for churches to be fully back to be able to get a Bible. But the bookshops are already open and *Eternity* has been told that “Christians are able to go to the church bookstores to purchase their Bibles. Many have flocked into

these church bookstores over the weekends.” Churches in China have not resumed their formal activities, including services and other meetings. (This also applies to all religious sites in China.) Meanwhile, just like in other countries, churches in China adapted to the Coronavirus outbreak. Some city churches began to share live-streamed worship services and recorded audio sermons with their church members. Christians also shared prayers and Scriptures via social media to encourage one another. Believers are also spending more time in prayers and reading the Bible at home. The main difference with Australia was that China’s churches were ahead of us. Amity holds the world record for printing Bibles, passing the 200 million Bibles mark in November 2019. And they are producing Bibles faster and faster. The first 100 million Bibles to be printed by the Nanjing-based company took 25 years, with the 100 million milestone passed in 2012. “Our believers love the Bible, looking to God’s Word as a lamp to the feet. They read the Bible to obey the truth, glorifying God and benefitting people, bearing witness in community service ...” Rev. Xu Xiaohong, Chairman of the National TSPM Committee of the Protestant Churches in China, told the 200 million celebration. Amity Printing Company is a joint venture between Amity Foundation, a Chinese Charity founded by Chinese Christians, and the United Bible Societies. ●

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OPINION



Technology: from foe to friend

Mark Stephens applies St Paul's long-distance lessons.

For the last decade, we've expressed anguish over how devices are destroying our relationships. In a 2017 article in *The Atlantic*, the US sociologist Jean Twenge provocatively stated that most surveys of teens and their use of technology pointed to the reality of "a lonely, dislocated generation."

But desperate times call for desperate measures. And in our desperation, the tools of technology have become a lifeline for connection. My son can no longer hang out in a playground. But he can socialise with his mates over Discord (what a name for an app that connects people!). Surprisingly, he may well come out of this crisis with stronger friendships. My daughter is playing Skribbl.io with friends over Zoom. Some of those friends are interstate and overseas.

For myself, I have participated in four different game nights with friends I might normally see once every three months. There have been bouquets in the rubble of this mess.

Yet, for all my success in connecting over technology, I'm still an awkward character. Nowhere is this more painfully obvious than my expressing affection from a distance. Let's be honest, Zoom does a passable job at keeping me efficient. But my microphone is muted when it comes to saying how much you mean to me. It turns out that Zoom is not one of the five love languages.

I find myself put to shame by the apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul's life was filled with long-distance relationships. The reason there are 13 ancient letters from this apostle are because he needed to find ways to be present in the lives of his churches, even when far away. Like most ancient people, he preferred face to face. But when that was impossible, Paul's way of being present was by writing letters.

Letters were expensive and time-consuming. There were long delays in communication between author and recipient. Little wonder, then, that Paul's letters are task focused. But sometimes, and more often than you realise, Paul spends precious space on expressing affection.

As exhibit A, I point you to the end of 1 Thessalonians, chapter two. Paul is addressing a freshly formed gathering of Christians. As one of the founders of this gathering, this church, Paul had been forcibly separated by an outbreak of local hostility (you can read the details in Acts 17:1-9).

At best, Paul has probably had a few months to try and teach these people the basics of the Christian faith. So, he writes a letter. There is so

much that probably needs to be said - questions that need answering, content not yet covered.

But Paul makes sure to waste some space on expressing affection. Here is just one example: "But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you" (1 Thess 2:17).

When Paul says he feels "orphaned," it calls to mind the image of having your child torn away from you - like those enforced separations which still so painfully occur in our day. He wants his people to know that they're never forgotten. But it's more than that, because he goes on to say he intensely longed to see them, and he made every effort.

Presumably Paul could have just stated that he wanted to visit. Instead, he spares no adverbs or adjectives. He didn't just want to be with them, he intensely longed for it - he didn't make an effort, he made every effort.

Paul verbalises his affection. Yes, there are other agenda items requiring urgent attention. But not at the expense of letting his audience know that they are his "glory" and "joy" (1 Thess 2:20).

"People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." It's uncertain who actually coined this truism - Teddy Roosevelt? John Maxwell? But whoever the author, its aptness remains. In these days of loving from a social distance, it's a challenge to intentionally voice affection. Not just concern but affection. In all our quests for digital productivity, we need to cultivate the inefficient practices of love.

In his book *The Tech Wise Family*, Andy Crouch states: "Any sort of mediated presence is the palest shadow of what it is like to be with another person in person - that is, present in the fullness of what our bodies make possible."

This is all too true. As yet, I still don't have those embodied moments of bumping into workmates in the lunchroom, seeing colleagues laugh and cry, or observing tired shoulders as they slump into chairs.

So while technologies are only a pale substitute, I find Paul's example of loving across a distance a salutary reminder that one needs to waste space, and time, not only to ask "how are you doing?," but also to say how much we long and look forward to reuniting in person. •

Dr Mark Stephens is senior research fellow at the Centre for Public Christianity.

CPX

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Simon Smart

What is it exactly that you do?" Good question. The Centre for Public Christianity (CPX) is a media company with a mission to promote the truth, beauty and goodness of the Christian story to a secular public that has largely forgotten that grand narrative, and what it means.

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Zoom. It's not the real thing

Michael Jensen has been staring at a video camera.



After several weeks of meeting my Christian brothers and sisters on Zoom, Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:12 have taken on a new significance for me – "For now we see in a mirror, dimly." Church on Zoom is like a scene in that old movie *Midnight Express*, where the guy who's in prison tries to kiss his girlfriend through the glass that separates them. It's great to see familiar faces, but at the same time, it reminds you that you are separated. You are "together," but not really together. You cannot see the other person in all the three dimensions of who they are. You can't pick up on "vibes" and "moods." You cannot read faces well. And the Zoom experience reminds me of how dependent upon those things we are for authentic human reaction. So much of our being present with one another is to do with gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact – things that don't translate well across the airwaves. Take these non-verbal things away, and we have

to deal with the words that we say drained of any of that extra framing. This means I often finish a Zoom meeting feeling exhausted and depleted – when usually I find being with people energising. Now don't get me wrong. Meeting via the medium of software is certainly better than not meeting at all. And meeting with people who are a long way away or separated because of age is a joy! I've participated in events that have involved people across the world. I've started a theology reading group with people from around Australia. But I am reminded every Sunday that this way of "meeting" is not truly meeting. It just isn't the real thing. We are separated by the screen, and that is a disappointing experience. It produces an ache – a longing for the real thing. So what are we going to do with this ache? It is possible that the longer the lockdown goes on, the more my taste for meeting together with the body of Christ can be dulled. Since I can't meet with the church, I start to just accept it as "the

new normal." I could just deal with this longing by shrugging my shoulders and moving on. What's the point in crying about what you can't have? After all, there's a certain inconvenience about meeting together with others that has been taken away – the need to be completely dressed up (you can wear whatever trousers you like!), or the need to prepare food, or the need to travel. You can start to like your own company and the freedom that comes with solitude. Annoying people are certainly less annoying at a distance. Absence may not, after all, make the heart grow fonder. There's a certain philosophy of life which says that "desire produces suffering, so therefore don't desire." But I don't think that is a Christian philosophy at all. There are some desires that do indeed result in suffering – "the lusts of the flesh and the pride of life" as we read in 1 John 2:16. But this is not because they are desires as such. Rather, they are desires for illegitimate or corrupt things. The desire of Christians to be together, on the

other hand, is one of the best desires there is. It is a desire awakened by the Holy Spirit. It's more than simply our natural human social instinct, which is extremely powerful. We are indeed herd animals! But this is deeper than that again. The Holy Spirit draws us together to meet around Jesus Christ and to encounter him together in his word. The spiritual reality is that we are united with Christ and so united with one another, and so we deeply long to express this union by meeting together. So many of the commands of the New Testament to Christians are "one another" commands – commands that we cannot accomplish completely in separation from one another. And most central of all these commandments, right at the essence of what it is to be church, is the command to "love one another, as I have loved you." The love that God has for us in Jesus Christ is given to us that we might love one another with the divine love itself. That isn't a by-product of who we are in Christ. It is who we are in him. To paraphrase John's first letter, if we claim to know God but don't have love for one another, then it's a sham – we don't know God at all. Or, to put it positively: if love is among us, then that is a love that comes from God, because he first loved us. As Christians, then, we are like separated lovers. Perhaps you've been apart from a significant other for some time and know what I mean. You keep the relationship alive by using whatever means possible to keep in touch – the phone call, the letters, the texts and emails. You don't simply forget about the other person. You awaken your longing for one another rather than suppress it. You imagine your reunion – you plan for that day, and joyfully anticipate it. And there's nothing quite like the joy of walking through the passenger terminal and seeing the face of your loved one once more. And I think that's what we should be doing right

now – not suppressing our desire to meet together with our church family in the presence of the Spirit but fanning it into flame. We need to awaken that hunger. We are on an enforced fast from Christian fellowship. Remember how good it was? Imagine how good it will be! Imagine the faces, the buzz in the room, the catching up, the eating together, the singing, the prayers. Let's not let the sharp edge of our desire grow dull. Instead, let's now be praying and planning for the great day of reunion. Let's make it a day of joy and celebration. We've already placed an order with the best scone maker in our church, just for starters! What will your church be doing on that day? Or maybe the separation has taught you what actually was good about your church community. Perhaps you were frustrated by the clunkiness of the services or the amateurishness of the music. But what you now miss tells you what church really is – the gathering of God's family by the power of the Spirit in the name of Jesus, our Lord. If, in the past, you've taken for granted the community built by Jesus of which you are a part, could you now value it more deeply and serve it more gladly? Australian Christians have got into the habit of talking about "regular" attendance as about once a month. Now that we know what we have in our Christian families, could we ever be so blasé again? But our hunger for meeting with one another again will not be completely satisfied by meeting again. Because this ache that we feel is not actually just an ache for St Harriet's at 10.30 am Sundays, or for our community at Awesomeness Christian Church. For just as our meeting via Zoom is an incomplete experience of church, so even when we can meet together physically and in person there will be an incompleteness. There'll be those who have

died who are not there. There'll be those who cannot be with us because of distance or because they are in a nursing home. There'll still be division and sin in our midst, sadly, no matter how hard we try for reconciliation. There'll be those who separate themselves from us. Because even when we meet together as we usually do, we are experiencing a foretaste of our heavenly gathering in Christ. The meetings that we attend each week are our homes for now, and we should feel homesick for them. But if the Spirit is at work, our homesickness should be for our heavenly home. Meeting together – gathering around the throne of God and singing his praises, hearing him speak in his word, and bringing our concerns to him in prayer – is meant to awaken in us this longing. We share the Lord's Supper "until he returns" – with an eye to the future when we will be completely and always gathered and united in Jesus, made holy and perfected by his blood. We hear the declaration that Jesus is Lord – and we understand as we hear it that it is a present but not yet complete picture of the world. We pray "marana tha" – "come Lord, come," even as we know that he is present here with us by his Spirit. For even if now we "see in a mirror, dimly," we will one day see him "face to face." I can't wait. ●



Michael Jensen is the rector of St Mark's Anglican Church in Darling Point, Sydney, and the author of several books.

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Family Peacemaking

We live in a world characterised by conflict. From sibling rivalry to civil war, we see the effects of animosity in every part of life. But the Bible calls each one of us to be peacemakers – in our closest and most personal relationships, but also in our communities and in our world. *Melissa Lipsett* hopes each one of us will be filled with Holy Spirit power, courage and comfort - to enable us to be agents of peace in a world that badly needs it.

Devotion 1

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:19-20)

We know that God is a “God of peace” (Romans 16:20, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 13:20), that heaven is a world of peace (Luke 19:38), that God is peace loving and peace making (2 Corinthians 5:19, Colossians 1:20) and that he calls us to be the same – to have the same character that he does, to love what he does, to pursue what he pursues, and to be willing to sacrifice for it in the way that he did.

The fact that the lack of peace is so pervasive in our world today is nothing new. We can trace it back to the book of Genesis. Humans have been at war with God ever since Adam and Eve sinned. And, beginning with the conflict between Cain and Abel, which eventually led to one brother killing the other, we’ve been in battle with one another.

Unsurprisingly then, when Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers” he totally shocked those around him. Jesus went so far as to say that peacemakers will be called the “children of God.”

Question: Do you recognise the lineage and consequences of a lack of peace in the world? In your world?

Prayer: Lord, sadly, it seems that there is nothing new under the sun ... except for the newness that is available for me as I trust in you. May your Holy Spirit’s presence and peace fall powerfully on your world, and may those of us who follow you, be so filled with your Spirit that we will be empowered to be peacemakers wherever we find ourselves. Amen.

Devotion 2

“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26)

Peace is often defined as the absence of conflict but it’s not actually a great description of biblical peace because real peace is not just the absence of hostility, or the ignoring of reality. The biblical concept is much deeper than an absence of trouble, or a holiday to get away from it.

In the Old Testament blessing from today’s reading, the word for peace is “shalom.” It refers to a state of wholeness and harmony intended to resonate in all relationships. When used as a greeting, it was a wish for outward freedom from disturbance as well as an inward sense of well-being.

Jesus doesn’t exhort us to be mere peace-keepers but peacemakers who truly practise and bring shalom. The difference is stark. Peacemakers actively overcome evil with good. They remove hostility and effect resolution between enemies.

Question: Which of your relationships are not characterised by the wholeness and harmony of shalom? What can you do about it?

Prayer: Dearest Lord, I bring before you the parts of my life that are characterised by a lack of real shalom. Make me long for wholeness and harmony in all my relationships and empower me to act on this longing, I pray. Amen.

Devotion 3

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23)

When the people closest to you describe you, is “gentle” a word they use? When things don’t go our way, is our power and passion under control? Here’s the reality – if your family is anything like mine your partner will frustrate you, your kids will sadden you, and there will be times when you are right and everyone else will be wrong (or at least you think that!). So, what will you do? How will you react?

Max Lucado says this: “I choose gentleness ... nothing is won by force. If I raise my voice may it only be in praise. If I clench my fist, may it only be in prayer. If I make a demand, may it be only of myself.”

Question: Are there things in your life that you try to demand or win by force? Who does this benefit? Who does it damage?

Prayer (in the words of Max Lucado): Lord, I choose gentleness ... nothing is won by force. If I raise my voice may it only be in praise. If I clench my fist, may it only be in prayer. If I make a demand, may it be only of myself.

Devotion 4

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. (Colossians 3:15)

Peace-faking is different to peace-making. Peace fakers are people predisposed to having peace at any cost. They prefer peace over truth and see peace as the absence of any kind of conflict. They’ll go to great lengths to avoid confrontation and in doing so, they’ll settle for a counterfeit peace based on avoiding reality.

Although many offenses can and should be overlooked, some things are so harmful that they should be confronted. There are times when we should rightly speak to another person about their contribution to a conflict ... not

because we are wholly right and they are wholly wrong ... but because of a genuine desire for restoration and reconciliation ... after we’ve taken the log out of our own eye ... it’s amazing how much clarity we have about everyone else’s sins and offences but struggle to acknowledge and confess our own ...

Question: Do you have a “log” in your own eye? Can you (and are you prepared to) articulate what this is?

Prayer: Lord, give me courage to truthfully identify those areas of my life that I am currently blind to. And only after examining myself, I pray that you would give me wisdom and clarity about those things that you call me to confront in others.

Devotion 5

“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretence. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.” (James 3:17-18)

In a classic Peanuts cartoon Lucy says, “I hate everything. I hate everybody. I hate the whole wide world.” Charlie Brown responds, “But I thought you had inner peace.” Lucy replies “I do but I also have outer obnoxiousness.”

If we’ve made peace with God, we don’t have to settle for outer obnoxiousness. The peace of God can give us peace that we share and choose to make, with others. In fact, I believe it’s our responsibility and privilege to do so.

Rick Warren says: “The reality is that there will never be peace in the world until there’s peace within nations. And there will never be peace in nations until there is peace in communities. There won’t be peace in communities until there is peace in families. And there won’t be peace in our families until there’s peace in our individual lives.”

And although it may seem simplistic, I think he may be right!

Question: Do you think you and I have any responsibility for “world peace”? Do you believe that it starts with peace in our own lives? Do you believe that we can make a difference?

Prayer: Lord, as you have made peace with me, I pray that I will be able to share that peace in my own sphere of influence. And I pray that I can and will make a difference. Amen.

To read the entire Family Peacemaking series, go to bible.com.au/plans/family-peacemaking

Rev. Melissa Lipsett is Chief Operating Officer of Bible Society Australia.

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OPINION

In 'iso' I have become connected

Tim Costello zooms global Christian leaders.

Over the long weeks we have been in isolation for COVID-19, I have made some podcasts through my work with Micah Australia. Titled *Hope in Crisis*, the podcast series is available through the Eternity Podcast Network (eternitynews.com.au/podcast-network).

The miracle of Zoom has given me the opportunity and privilege to get into the living rooms of a range of global Christian leaders for these podcasts and talk with them about the impact of this pandemic on their lives, their communities and ministries.

I have discovered – to cite the obvious – that this is the first time in world history we have shared the same global consciousness of suffering. Never before has the Apostle Paul's words (spoken in a different context) been so true of our globe: "when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer." Yes, with the Psalmist we recognise that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" and fearfully biologically connected. Infection anywhere is a risk to others everywhere.

I have interviewed pastors in Milan who, in the deathly lockdown, dedicated themselves to a ministry of listening to the grief of people and leading them in lament. I talked with a Christian leader in India trying to make sense of Prime Minister Narendra Modi calling in the Hindu gurus for national advice on the cause of the virus. And I spoke with a courageous corruption-busting Christian journalist in Nairobi, praising his government, for once, over its fast action to implement lockdown and protect the poor. It is a reversal of bad governance and a reversal for the rich in Africa, who usually ignore and ostracise the poor. Now the poor in Africa are choosing to isolate themselves from the rich, saying, "you guys who fly internationally and live the high life have brought this virus into our country. We will avoid you."

I have also spoken with Christian leaders in Washington DC, deploring the lack of consistent messaging from President Trump, with some states openly fighting the federal government on opening up the economy. This is unlike the relative unity

and cooperation of our national cabinet that has done so well in suppressing the virus. Leadership that does not polarise and scapegoat but unifies is lifesaving leadership.

The global experience of suffering has led Micah Australia to launch a new campaign for Christians called #ENDCOVIDFORALL. We know we are blessed to be a blessing. As I write, in Australia we have so far had close to 100 deaths and 7000 infections. So we have needed less than the 2000 ventilators we had at the outset, rather than the now 7000 ICU beds and ventilators we have on hand. But 20 African nations face a grim reality – like South Sudan, a Christian nation, which has only four ventilators. Some African nations have none.

Christian faith needs to underscore a global consciousness with extra compassion for those in nations with weak health systems. The risk is that we bank our blessings and turn inwards when our brothers and sisters are still at risk. I am thrilled the government has included pastors in the JobKeeper arrangements, but the church does not exist just for self-maintenance.

Emil Brunner said: "As a fire exists for burning so the church exists for mission." The challenge is to end COVID-19 for all and Australian Christians and churches must cast their vision beyond our shores. •



Tim Costello is the executive director of Micah Australia and a senior fellow of the Centre for Public Christianity.

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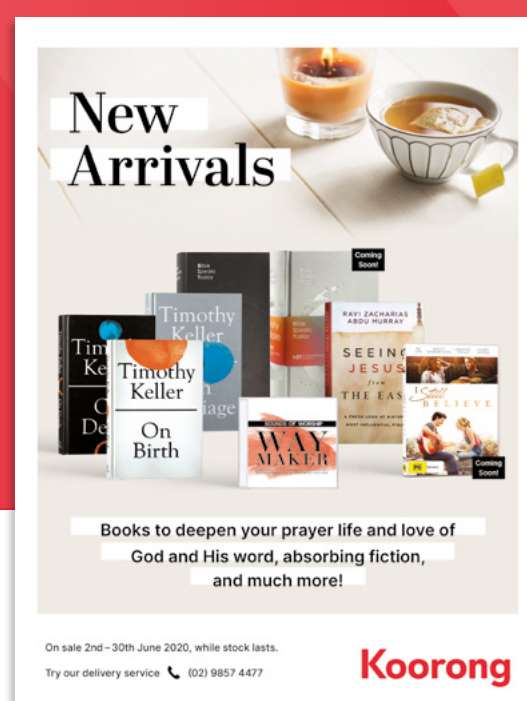
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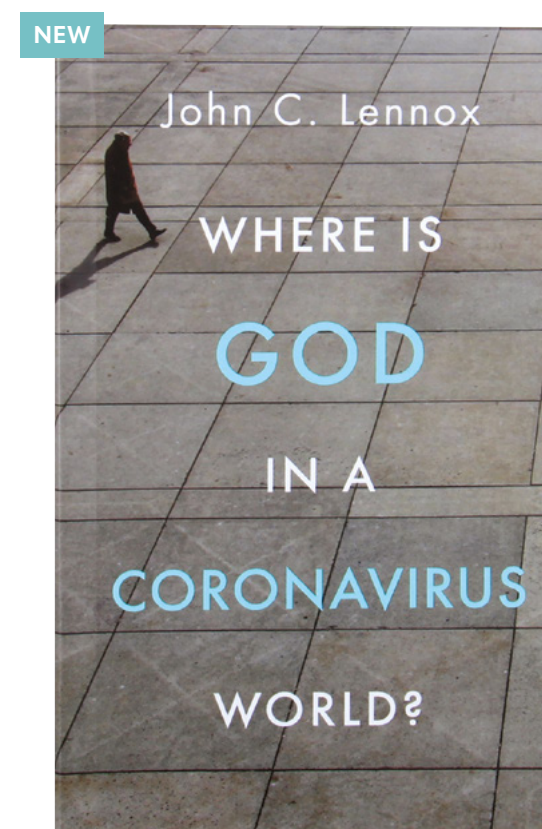
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Where Is God In A Coronavirus World?

John Lennox

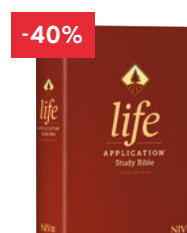
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“This book consists of my reflections on what we are experiencing right now. I started writing it a week ago, and things have changed quickly since then and no doubt will do again... I would invite you, the reader, to view the book like this: we are sitting in a coffee shop (if only we could!) and you have asked me the question on the book cover. I put down my coffee cup and attempt to give you an honest answer. What follows is what I would try to say in order to convey some comfort, support and hope.”

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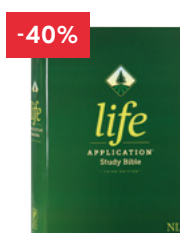
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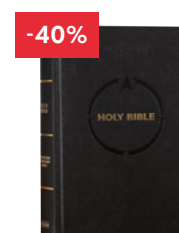
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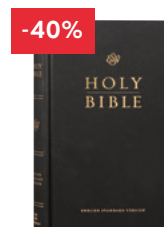
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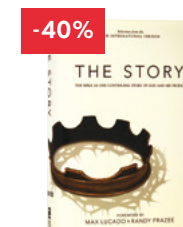
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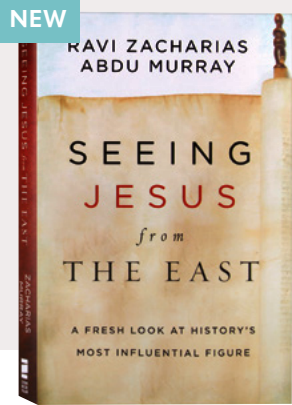
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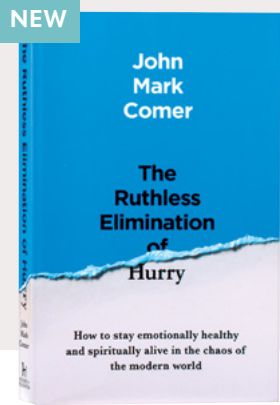
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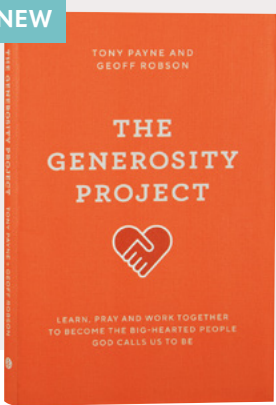
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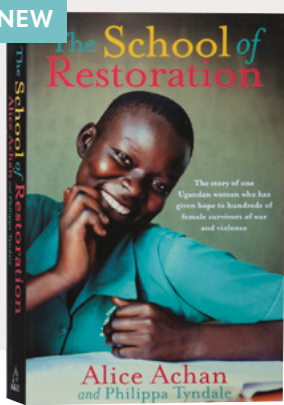
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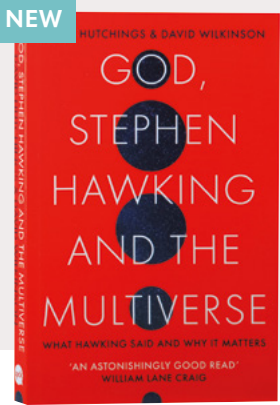
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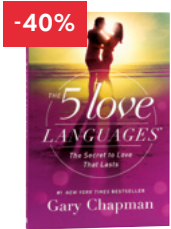


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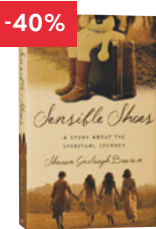
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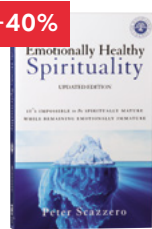
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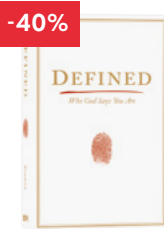
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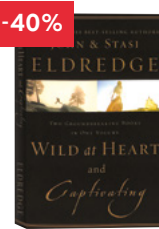
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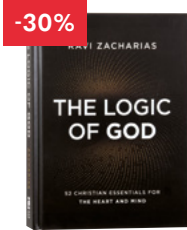
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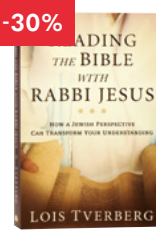
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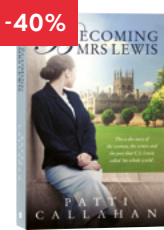
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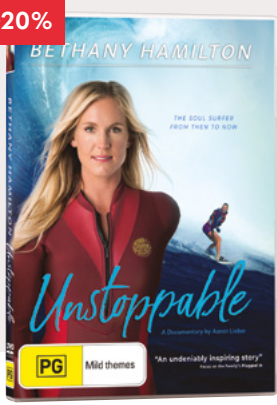
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Timothy Keller and John Inazu
560593 Paperback CW SI

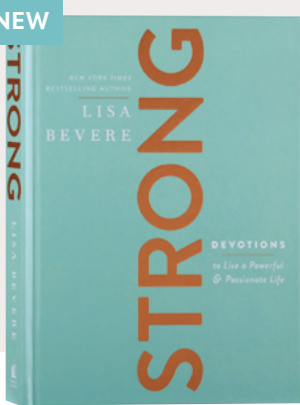
How can we interact with those around us in a way that shows respect to those whose beliefs are radically different while remaining faithful to the gospel? Tim Keller and legal scholar John Inazu bring together a thrilling range of artists, thinkers, and leaders to provide a guide to faithful living in a pluralistic, fractured world.



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Bethany Hamilton: Unstoppable Documentary
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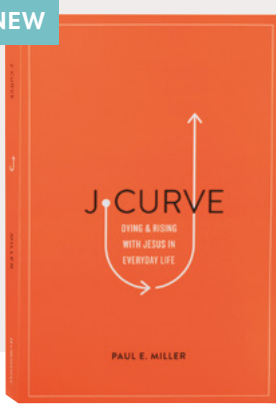
Though just 13 when she lost her left arm to a tiger shark, Bethany Hamilton was back on the surfing circuit in less than a year. This new documentary raises the Soul Surfer's exemplary story of faith and resilience to new, beautiful heights. Join Bethany as she chases a toddler



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Strong: Devotions To Live A Powerful And Passionate Life
Lisa Bevere
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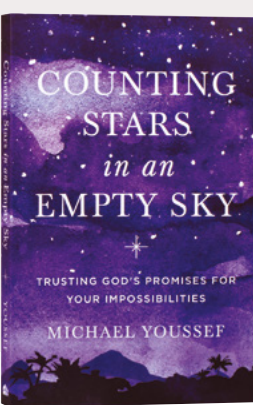
How can you live as a confident woman of faith? In these 90 beautiful devotions, Lisa Bevere leads women to find their strength, not from trying harder or doing more, but through a deep and devoted relationship with God, from knowing and following Him.



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J-Curve: Dying & Rising With Jesus In Everyday Life
Paul E Miller
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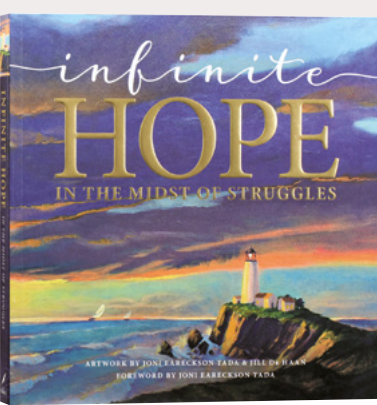
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Infinite Hope... In The Midst Of Struggles
Joni Eareckson Tada
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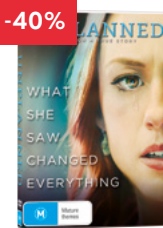
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Saved By Grace
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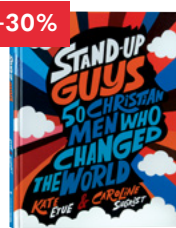
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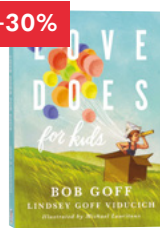
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