



PRISONER

INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN NEWSPAPER

"And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free".

John 8:32

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Presenting the "Prisoner" Website

On behalf of our entire editorial team, I extend heartfelt congratulations on the Birth of Christ and the advent of the new year, 2024! As we step into this new year, my fervent wish is for a tranquil sky above our heads, robust health, resounding success, overall well-being, and, above all, an unwavering presence of faith, hope, and love in every facet of our lives. May it be God's will that peace, joy, and love find their way into every home in this coming year. May the grace of God envelop us all!

In this Christmas edition of our publication, we are officially introducing our official website, "Prisoner", accessible to anyone interested at this link: prisoner.news.

This platform not only archives all "Prisoner" issues from 2012 onwards but also hosts a wealth of valuable information. Featuring multiple sections and categories covering diverse topics such as the latest Christian news worldwide, testimonials from former inmates, letters, sermons, global prison tours, poetry, music, and other vital information.

The "Prisoner" website was meticulously crafted to provide seamless access to the most current information, eliminating the need to await the print edition, particularly beneficial for those with internet accessibility. Moreover, certain voluminous information and video content find a fitting platform online, though our printed publication will persist and continue its distribution across numerous penitentiary institutions worldwide.

We earnestly implore all engaged in prison ministry and all caring Christians concerned about these matters to continue their support, both in prayers and financially, not only for our publication but also for the "Prisoner" website.

Entering its twelfth year since the inception of the inaugural issue, "Prisoner" has been sustained, printed, and disseminated solely through donations, devoid of affluent sponsors. Yet, by God's grace, this endeavor, initially through our publication and now via our website,

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About the project

"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall"
1 Cor. 10:12

Man proposes, God disposes

In the present day, the word "prison" has become an everyday word for many citizens. However, the attitude towards those who are there does not change. Society looks with contempt at those people who are serving a sentence, or coming out of jail to freedom. In most cases, prisoners, current and former, remain outcasts in society. To put it mildly, the society does not want to "dirty itself" by getting to know current and former prisoners. Prejudice and contempt of society to these people makes them even more cruel and tough than they already are. The so-called righteous hate the wicked, the latter, in turn, answer in kind. To this day, that fire of hatred continues to burn between people.

Today, I once again want to remind you of the words of the Bible, which say: **"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."**

Unfortunately, many people now, as before, do not think about the fact that everything in this life could radically change. If today you do not know what prison is like, there is not guarantee that you will not find out tomorrow...

No person will willingly go to jail. However, not always can a person anticipate and protect themselves from the risk of certain circumstances. Statistics show that in prisons are not only hardened criminals, including murderers and maniacs, but also many people who are serving sentences for crimes committed under extremely extenuating circumstances. And quite a significant percentage of people spend their lives in jail on falsified cases. It's safe to say that at one time these people, as well as many now, ironically to that dictum: **"Man proposes, God disposes"**. But it's true, because a person does not always know where he can stumble and fall. And because it sounds trite, society neglects such warnings. Incarcerated people should not be treated by society as some kind of scum. Even towards the most have love. For the Lord teaches: not only to love our enemies but to forgive, bless, and pray for them (Lk. 6:27-28). And if God Himself forgives all sinners, then how do we look in the eyes of God, when we look with scorn toward those who served or are serving their sentence in prison?

Why have people formed a stereotype that anyone who has been in prison or in jail, is just a goner? Why such hostility to these people? And what has every one of us done to make our society cleaner? Why is there such a high percentage of crime everywhere?

To answer this and other questions, I want to disclose in parallel with the above, and problem on a global scale really, to which, unfortunately, many people are indifferent. But all that is happening in human society, is more like what goes on in a shelter for the mentally ill, who have lost not only their common sense, but also their human identity. No technical progress is able to compensate for the degradation that affects all of present day human society. Distracted humanity stands on the edge of a bottomless abyss.

Worldwide there is an unsubstantiated struggle against drugs, banditry and other criminal activity, which is called crime. But with all this effort, not only is crime is not to eradicate; no one can even reduce it. Perhaps today we live in a period of the most sophisticated evil, which manifests itself in the form of global crime, which is like a plague that affects all human society.

Crime becomes like an infectious disease, one-sidedly infecting society without any hope of healing. Today, hundreds of thousands of people pass through prisons and zones. Soon, probably, there will not be a single family left that will not be touched by the misfortune of imprisonment. Even if not directly, but indirectly, this tragedy affects many families. And the main tragedy is that this misfortune affects not only adults. This is a problem for the entire younger generation, that is, very young children. What are they watching now, reading and what are they learning from us adults?! Perhaps my words will seem a little harsh, but it is impossible to say otherwise: society has already ruined its culture and its language to the ground. Nowadays, people's spoken language is completely switching to slang. Nowadays, the entire show business has exposed itself and openly promotes human sin to the accompaniment of music. Variety and film artists take great pleasure in copying the criminal world from the stage, and also willingly star in those films where it is necessary to show the "tough" guys - thieves, murderers, prostitutes and other rubbish of this sinful world, thereby, willingly or unwillingly, building their own characters to the rank of romantic heroes. Of course, here we can say that such creativity purposefully exposes sin in all its glory. But then the

Translate

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endures and yields positive outcomes. We ardently hope for the perpetual progression of the "Prisoner" project. Our collective actions shape the emergence of individuals from places of confinement and those who are around us. People are not born as criminals, they are shaped by multifaceted factors, often exacerbated by societal indifference to this issue.

Through the "Prisoner" project, spanning several years, countless individuals across diverse countries have

diverged from criminal paths. Many former offenders now serve as missionaries in prison ministry and as church pastors. Society, too, gradually sheds archaic stereotypes regarding current and former inmates, recognizing their intrinsic value.

I once articulated the purpose and goal of the "Prisoner" project in an earlier issue, and thankfully, it has held true. Over time, a bridge of trust, support, and comprehension has evolved between freedom and

confinement. Even within prison walls, many have attained spiritual liberation. The words spoken by Jesus Christ, **"Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"** (John 8:32), have a real effect.

May the radiant festivities of Holy Christmas uplift and fill with joy those walking alongside Jesus Christ today! To those yet to experience this spiritual liberation and elation, my wish is for a swift embrace of it.

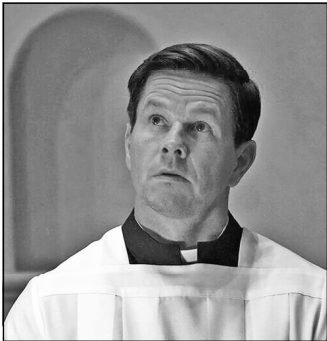
I. GORIK.

CHRISTIAN NEWS

I cannot deny my faith, said the famous actor Mark Wahlberg

A two-time Oscar nominee shared how his faith has influenced him personally and professionally. The actor, a devout Christian, openly talked about overcoming his early life challenges by accepting faith in Jesus. In an interview, Wahlberg said that he attributes all his achievements to his dedication to God.

It's just the most important aspect of my life, said Wahlberg. It's the



most important thing. It's afforded me all the things that I've been able to accomplish in my life — my faith, my discipline.

The actor stated, *It's not popular in my industry, but, you know, I cannot deny my faith... It's important for me to share that with people.*

Wahlberg produced and starred in the 2022 film *Father Stu*, playing a boxer who finds his path to redemption and becomes a Catholic priest. According to Wahlberg, the film's story symbolizes his own redemption through faith.

Wahlberg overcame his troubled youth, which included several run-ins with the law, on his way to becoming an A-list actor. He explained that in the story of the film *Father Stu*, he saw not only his past but also his present.

And my looking for my purpose, he added. God has continued to bless me and put me in this situation, not to continue to grow and work on Mark Wahlberg, the person, but to do His work and give me... the skills and the tools to go out there and articulate the message that he wants me to.

Based on Fox News materials, sobor.com.ua

WITHOUT A CHANCE FOR HOPE

The Vinnytsia Penal Institution (No. 1) is the largest in terms of the number of life-sentenced individuals in Ukraine. Currently, Ukraine has sentenced 1597 people to life imprisonment, with 350 serving their sentences in the Vinnytsia Penal Institution (No. 1). Life imprisonment in Ukraine has been in existence since 2000. Throughout the entire period of this punishment's existence, only two individuals were pardoned during the presidency of Petro Poroshenko (although these two pardons did not meet the criteria on which this humane act could be applied).



To speak truthfully, there is simply no institution of pardon for this category of convicts in Ukraine. Every year, hundreds of pardon petitions for life-sentenced individuals are sent to the President of Ukraine from correctional institutions, but not a single petition is even considered. The commission for pardon does not take into account this category of convicts. All life-sentenced individuals, without exception, receive identical responses from the Office of the President of Ukraine (as if copied), in which pardons are denied on the grounds that the convict committed a particularly serious crime more than twenty, twenty-five, or thirty years ago. Additionally, the pardon commission completely ignores the fact that, in some cases, public organizations, churches, international missions, and even ombudsmen, repeatedly advocate for the convict. Everyone is denied, citing only one criterion: that the convict committed a particularly serious crime decades ago. And here arises a perfectly legitimate question: then why is the norm of pardon prescribed in the law for life-sentenced individuals if everyone is denied, citing the

argument that the person committed a particularly serious crime?!

When this norm, such as pardon for life-sentenced individuals, was prescribed in the law, did anyone not know that all those sentenced to life imprisonment committed serious crimes?! Most likely, everyone knew it perfectly well. And if so, can such a criterion as "committed a particularly serious crime" be used at all in a European country when considering a pardon petition from a life-sentenced individual? Perhaps the main criterion for considering such petitions from life-sentenced individuals should be the person's life over these decades, their lifestyle, goals, achievements, education, behavior, the opinion of the administration of the institution where the convict is held, their social connections, and the public opinion (of churches, organizations, missions, private individuals), rather than the fact that the person committed a particularly serious crime sometime in the past, as all those sentenced to life imprisonment have committed particularly serious crimes.

If we indeed live in a rational state, then all criteria for evaluating pardon petitions from life-sentenced individuals should correspond to common sense. Otherwise, the norm prescribed in the law regarding the pardon of life-sentenced individuals is completely absurd if, when considering pardon petitions, one refuses a person, using only the argument of "committed a particularly serious crime". After all, a particularly serious crime will not change its nature even after a hundred years, but a person can change, and there are real confirmations and facts for that.

Thank God that in the Vinnytsia Penal Institution (No. 1), regular religious services have been held for life-sentenced individuals since 2005, representing various Christian denominations. Currently, nine different denominations have the opportunity for religious services in the institution. Every year, new people come to faith in God with repentance. The rite of baptism is performed directly



in the institution, during which the baptized promise God to live with a clear conscience and serve Him. Faith in God genuinely changes people. Having spent decades in the prison system under the most severe regime, people find themselves in religion and, along with this, completely reassess their previous sinful life. Many study in educational institutions, including universities, express a desire to work not only within the institution but also beyond the prison walls. They have their projects, which, in some cases, are implemented in freedom through relatives and friends. There is a specific percentage of life-sentenced individuals who, through their deeds, behavior, and determination, have proven that they can be valuable members of society in freedom. However, not giving these people a chance for pardon, the norms of which are prescribed in Ukrainian law, is also extremely cruel, especially when compared to murder. In fact, in a state where the death penalty is abolished, life imprisonment without a chance for pardon can in a lot of ways be considered a delayed death.

If we genuinely want to become full-fledged members of the European Union and live among civilized states, the institution of pardon for life-sentenced individuals in Ukraine must be not only formal but also effective! It is impossible to waste state funds on something that simply does not exist. Unfortunately, today, the institution of pardon for life-sentenced individuals is just a waste of state resources and exists in name only.

I have quoted in my articles more than once a very wise statement, which I want to call on all those whose decisions determine the further fate of people today: **"Do not fear your enemies. The worst they can do is kill you. Do not fear friends. At worst, they may betray you. Fear those who do not care; they neither kill nor betray, but betrayal and murder exist because of their silent consent"** (Bruno Jasiński. *The Conspiracy of the indifference*).

I. GORIK.

YOUR LETTERS

Everything happening to me is a trial

Grace and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ to all brothers, sisters, ministers, and all the staff of the "Prisoner" newspaper!

I, Andriy Stepanenko, am writing to you. I received your letter, for which I thank the Lord Jesus Christ and you. After all, this is a manifestation of God's love, which is now almost nonexistent in the world. God's love is a gift, unlike the love in a world of sin, debauchery, and hypocrisy.

I am now over sixty years old, having gone through the war in Afghanistan. I fought for more than three years until I was wounded. A lot of inexplicable things happened to me then, and I still don't understand them. My heart stopped for more than four minutes, and then suddenly started beating on its own. The doctors had already recorded my

death, but God decided otherwise, and I remained alive. In 1991, I came to the Lord, and since then, my life has turned around. Even being within these walls now, I accept it as God's providence. And if you remember what is said in the Book of Job, everything happening to me before and now is a trial of my faith. To put it simply, it's a fiery temptation, which I endure. Undoubtedly, in the tragedy that landed me in prison, there is my guilt. It lies in the fact that I came to that place and found myself in that situation. But I have accepted all the circumstances and surrendered myself into God's hands. After all, He sees and knows everything, just as He knows all the desires of the heart. In Him, I have my faith and hope because He alone is my judge. The Lord is my protection and shield; by His Holy Spirit, He inspires and supports me.

I will look forward to the next issue of your newspaper.

With faith, hope, and love in Jesus Christ, brother

Andriy STEPANENKO,
Ukraine.

Dear newspaper, you are a light for those wandering in darkness

Hello, esteemed editorial board of the "Prisoner"!

I received another issue of your publication, which is a light for those who wander in darkness. Thank you very much for your work in the field of God and the indescribable good for the sake of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I would like to send a big greeting through your publication from me to my friends, brothers, and sisters in Christ: Vitaliy Lotaryov, Sergey Bogatyrev, Denis Isaev, Irina Brugger, Mikhail Pravis, Nelly Ivanovna Zinchik, V. V. Kud-

ryukov, Konstantin Nikulin.

I want to tell you a little about myself. I am from Ukraine, born and raised in the Zhytomyr region. I am of the Orthodox faith, but I believe there is no division, for there is one God and one faith in Him. At the age of twenty-four, I received a life sentence. When I was detained and placed in pre-trial detention, I had terrible dreams: I was running away from the devil, demons, but suddenly God appeared and disappeared just as quickly. By morning, my hands and knees were beaten to blood. These dreams haunted me until I was transferred to Zhytomyr pre-trial detention center. The sentence "Life imprisonment" was not a surprise for me because I was arrested for a double murder (although I did not commit them).

There, in the pre-trial detention center, I met the believer Vitaliy Lotaryov, thanks to whom my journey of strengthening faith began. Later, my paths crossed with Sergey Bogatyrev, who was another example of a pillar of faith. I am weak, but at the same time, I am endowed with great

strength in the knowledge that I am walking through life with God. I cannot say that in freedom, I lived neck-deep in sin, but life cannot be considered normal if it does not touch God. I did not use drugs, did not heavily consume alcohol, and worked from the age of sixteen. But where there is money, there is sin. I succumbed to this sin: friends, clubs, girls... After my father's death, another sin took hold of me — theft. My soul was stolen by the devil, and now I am paying for it, repenting.

Therefore, realizing my sins, I ask everyone in the words of the Holy Scriptures: *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

Mikhail BELOTSKY,
Ukraine.

Even though most people are acquainted with the general history of Christmas, there are many details about the birth of Jesus that you might have not known.

HOW MANY WISE MEN WERE THERE?

Many pictures depict only three wise men on camels following a star. No one knows exactly how many wise men there were. There is reason to believe that there could have been several dozen wise men, accompanied by servants and a large number of guards. The group was so large that it scared King Herod. Such a long journey could never be completed without being accompanied by assistants.

It is also naive to assume that the number of gifts corresponded to the number of wise men. Most likely, the group of eastern guests was more numerous. After all, a long journey required both good security and a solid caravan.

Do not forget: in order to assemble a caravan, it took quite a lot of time (to find servants, camels, stock up on food to Jerusalem and back, find tents, etc.). In this case, such a long journey to Jerusalem could take months — up to a year or more (taking into account the obligatory stops for rest and overnight stays).

IS THE MANGER REALLY A BEAUTIFUL WOODEN STRUCTURE?

Many nativity scenes feature the baby Jesus lying on a



beautiful wooden bed stand. In fact, a manger is a feeding trough for animals. In biblical times, there were usually no wooden mangers; the main household items were made of stone, especially feeders, since they also contained water for the animals.

This was definitely not an ideal place to lay a newborn baby. This is all that was available to Mary and Joseph at the time of Jesus' birth.

WHERE WAS THE SAVIOR BORN?

Jesus was most likely born in a stable at home, although the Bible never mentions where Jesus was born. All that is mentioned is the manger in which the baby Jesus was laid. But the Bible says that Mary and Joseph came from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where there was no room for them in the inn.

And she brought forth her

firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:7).

The Greek word *inn* (*kataluma*) does not mean inn in our modern sense. This word has several meanings. One of them is a large furnished upper room (the top floor of the house). Since many people came to the city for the census, the upper floors of the houses were filled.

Animals were always kept downstairs to keep the house warm. Mary and Joseph were probably downstairs in the stable, where there was also a manger for the animals. At that time, two-story houses were common in Bethlehem.

It was customary for the Jews to have a small number of livestock in their houses, which often lived on the ground floor. Food supplies,

feed for livestock and tools were also stored there.

Family bedrooms were always located on the second floor, called the upper dwelling (upper room/inn).

WISEMEN WEREN'T THERE

The assertion that the wise men who visited the baby Jesus came to the manger at the same time as the shepherds, as most illustrations supposedly indicate, is a fallacy. These illustrations are incorrect! In fact, when the wise men/magi came to where Jesus was, they entered a house.

And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother... (Matt. 2:11).

Many scholars believe that the wise men arrived when Jesus was between one and two years old.

The Magi were definitely not present at the birth of Jesus.

In the second chapter of Matthew, Herod orders the death of all boys under two years of age. Why would he do this? Because it took the Magi up to two years to arrive in Judea from Persia and tell Herod about the birth of the Messiah. By the time the wise men found Jesus, he had already reached the age of a baby. And the ancient Greek word Matthew uses does not correspond to a baby, but to a child. Most likely, his age was between a newborn of about a year and a child under two years old.

WHEN WAS JESUS BORN?

Although Christmas has been celebrated on December 25th for almost 1,700 years, Jesus was not actually born in December.

At the moment, all researchers, historians, archaeologists and theologians are sure that the birth of Jesus could not have happened on December 25 or January 7, as it is celebrated in various church traditions. Even the church hierarchs themselves recognize the dates for celebrating Christmas as conventional and such that have become an integral part of modern Christian culture.

In 336 AD, Emperor Constantine established Christmas on the day of the winter solstice, that is, December 25.

Many Christians, understanding the conventionality of the date of the Nativity of Christ, still use this day to remember the birth of Christ the Savior.

bible-facts.org

On the eve of the approaching Christmas of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we increasingly want to sing, talk and write about the most significant, most precious gift that has ever been given to humanity — new life and a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The understanding that the only real and lasting value is personally and intimately knowing the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ fills me more and more with the passage of time and every day.

For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

How often do you find that even in the Church of God there are many treasures, although only one is truly priceless!

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith... (Phil. 3:8–9).

I would like to encourage you, dear friends, to answer the question for yourself on the approaching holidays: What exactly am I celebrating? Who is at the center of these holidays for me?

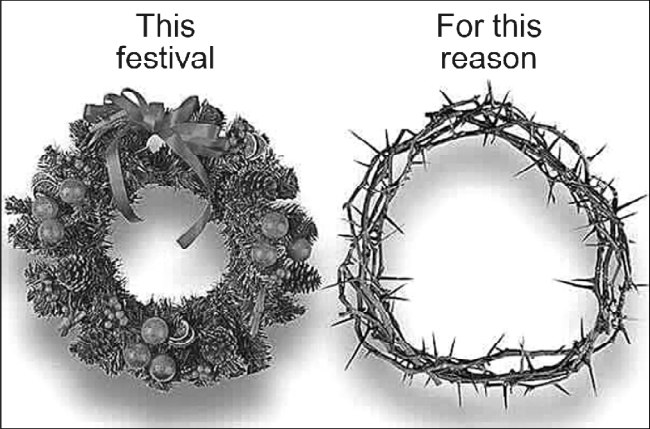
I wanted to publicly answer this question. (Who knows, maybe my thoughts and my answer will be useful to some of you.) For me, the center of these holidays is not a Christmas tree, not a beautifully decorated house, and not the quantitative and qualitative composition of the menu. This, of course, does not mean that there should be dirt in the house and no need to eat, but with this secondary thing you can forget about the main thing! And most importantly, in all these festive worries, do not forget about the One for whose sake all the celebrations are for — Jesus Christ!

Jesus was born into this world to die a painful death on the cross, and without His birth there would have been no resurrection. He descended to earth, leaving the glory of Heaven, in order to bring us, people, an indescribable gift — reconciliation with God through Himself. Agree that many people celebrate His birthday every year without accepting this gift and without reflecting on the meaning of this holiday. This is very unreasonable, since we were created by God and for God. Until we realize this, our life will remain empty, without any meaning. Although the Word of God tells us this: Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name

The meaning of Christmas: Who is in the center of your life?

which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5–11).

So, let's briefly remind ourselves and summarize what the main essence of Christmas is. The essence of Christmas is the Good News. But this is not news about



gifts under the tree; this is not news of a feast; and not even the news of time spent with family and friends.

Christmas is the good news of God's love for us. The Bible says that without God we are all lost and hopelessly lost. Although many people think differently, but in fact, without God we have no direction in life and we are defenseless against its circumstances. Without God, we do not recognize our purpose in this world in light of eternity. Without Him we do not know what real joy is. Without God we have no guarantee of a place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The good news of Christmas is that God sent His Son to find and save the lost. The Bible tells us: For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5). The word salvation is as multi-faceted as a jewel and can be looked at from many different angles. I will probably name the main ones.

Jesus was born to redeem us. If He had not come into this world, we would never have been able to solve all

our problems on our own. Because without Jesus, we are often controlled by the expectations of those around us. We are consumed by the desire for their approval. We struggle with different addictions. We try to change ourselves and our lives again and again, but we do not have the power that can make this change possible. Jesus came to give us this power.

Jesus was born to restore us. Deep inside each of us, from childhood, there languishes (often not fully realized) the desire to restore those parts of our life that were hopelessly lost by man as a result of the fall and separation from God. Restoring our strength, confidence, reputation, innocence and relationship with God is only possible through Jesus Christ.

Jesus was born to reconcile us to God. Isn't it true, sometimes we think (thought) that if we turn to God, He will express His dissatisfaction with us and immediately hand us over to punishment? But that's not true! God wants us back! Jesus came down to earth at Christmas to reconcile us to God and restore peace with Him through His subsequent death on the cross of Calvary!

Therefore, as we celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus these days, let us not forget the purpose of His birth! Oh, how important it is that the gaze of every Christian should always be directed to the cross of the Lord! It is possible to find true, genuine joy only by looking at the Author and Fulfiller of our faith, Jesus! Only by realizing the price paid by Love on the cross! When the crucified Christ is before your eyes, your heart is filled with gratitude, holiness and fear of God, unspeakable peace and inexpressible joy!

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls (Heb. 12:2–3).

The cross represents more than just a test, and much more than an inconvenience. The cross is pain! The cross is suffering! The cross is the greatest agony that humanity could ever imagine. How was Jesus able to endure the cross and the excruciating physical pain that He had to endure?

Jesus knew that He had to die so that we could live, and this was His real joy! Jesus knew that His body would have to endure the terrible pain of an excruciating execution so that we could be healed from mental wounds and physical pain. He considered it a real joy to serve us with His Love! Did Jesus like what He had to go through? No... The Bible tells us that He prayed to the Father, asking that this cup would pass from Him, but by deciding to be obedient (in obedience to the Father's will), He experienced peace and joy!

(Continuation on pg. 4)

The meaning of Christmas: Who is in the center of your life?

(Continued. Starts on pg. 3)

I think that many of us have at least once been in a situation where we've reached the limit of our strength. Remember what helped at that moment? I am sure that it was an awareness of the goal, an understanding of why you are going through this suffering, and... joy, because all this is not in vain and it will be useful to someone. I think that Jesus was able to endure the cross only thanks to the unearthly joy that was sent to Him. It gave Him strength when the pain could no longer be endured, and this joy is you and me, friends. He was born for us and He died for us! We are His joy, and He is our joy! That is why the soul rejoices on the eve of His Nativity! That is why, when He is at the center of all life, both our lives and the world around us change!

When we envision Jesus Christ, the center of our lives, being crucified, you will no longer grieve the Father with sin through indifference or disobedience. This means that His good and perfect will come first, not our own desires and understandings. This means that the main desire becomes to be, and not just to be called, His child, which in practice means denying yourself and taking up your cross, putting your hands to the plough, and following Him without looking back.

The birth of Jesus Christ, the perfect Sacrifice coming into this world, His death on the cross and His resurrection for the sake of justification for me and you personally will give strength to go through trials and keep your heart in His perfect peace and joy!

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, My soul shall be joyful in my God; For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness... (Is. 61:10).

If you approach the celebration of the Nativity of Christ with such understanding, the Lord God will be very happy, and His grace will not be accepted in vain! We will be able to maintain our faith and complete our path only when the Lord of lords who came into the world, who took upon Himself the form of a man, Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected on the third day, the Lamb of God, was, is and will be the only source of faith, the center of all life!

For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings (Hos. 6:6).

Blessed Christmas, dear friends!



Svitlana ONYSHCHUK,
<https://mostholy.org.ua>

"Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, 'Peace be with you'. When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, 'Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you'. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive

in their spiritual leaders than in the living, invisible God. For the majority, faith acts exclusively on visible indicators, that is, directly on what a person wants to see or hear. And this despite the fact that Scripture clearly characterizes the very essence and meaning of faith: **"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"** (Heb. 11:1).

Today, their genuine joy in faith can only be conveyed by those who have truly accepted and opened their hearts to the kind of faith about which Jesus said: *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* It was not for nothing that

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HAVEN'T SEEN AND YET BELIEVE

the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'. Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him, 'We have seen the Lord'. So he said to them, 'Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe'. And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, 'Peace to you!' Then He said to Thomas, 'Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing'. And Thomas answered and said to Him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'" (John 20:19-29).

Every time I read about Jesus' response to Thomas' exclamations, I involuntarily think and say almost the same thing to myself: "Well, how can this be? After all, all of them (the apostles) saw with their own eyes the Lord and all the miracles that He performed in their presence, but at the same time they had doubts about His real resurrection from the dead. What then can we say about today's world, where most people live in complete unbelief?"

Drawing parallels between the times of Moses, the apostles and the church today, I am increasingly convinced that man, at his core, has changed little in his faith. Both then and now people are more inclined to believe what they see in front of them than what is temporarily unseen. For example, remember the times of Moses, where people repeatedly saw signs of God's glory and greatness, but very little time passed, and people again began to murmur against God and worship various idols.

The earthly life of Jesus Christ, it would seem, should have completely changed the consciousness of people and strengthened their faith, but here everything was extremely surprising, that is, the faith of people, including the apostles themselves, was shown only when they saw miracles and signs from the Lord Himself. But after a short time, people were ready to betray and even renounce the One Whom only recently they had called the Son of God and the Lord.

Today, almost the same thing is happening among those who call themselves Christians. A significant part of parishioners of totalitarian sects, and other churches, are more willing to believe

the Lord called such people blessed. The power of faith comes from God only to such believers. Holy Scripture very clearly emphasizes the advantage of the invisible over the visible. These words involuntarily evoke trembling in your soul when you penetrate with all your heart into the deep meaning of what was said: **"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal"** (2 Cor. 4:17-18).

Faith in the invisible God allows us to achieve great rewards in eternity. The Scripture says: **"Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those who love Him"** (1 Cor. 2:9).

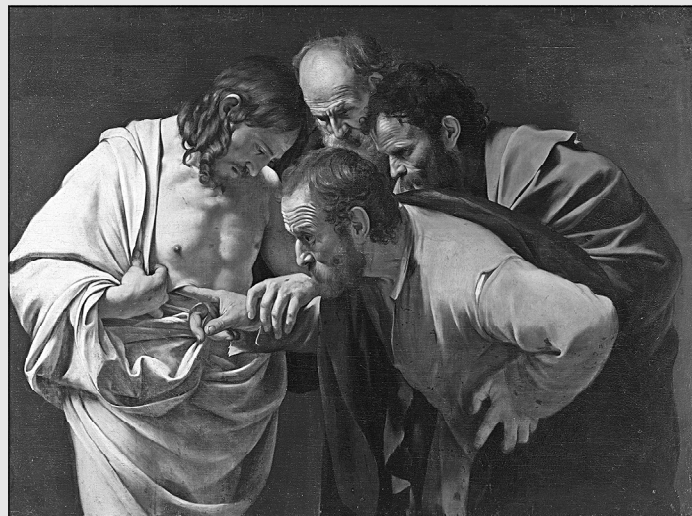
To believe and love the invisible God, to feel His real power is the height of bliss. It is to those who seek God with their whole lives that God reveals Himself in everything. As it is said, **"By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible. (...) But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him"** (Heb. 11:3, 6).

No matter how many times I re-read the Bible, my heart rejoices again and again when I come to the words of Jesus Christ: **"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"**.

I really want these words spoken by the Lord to bring joy not only to my heart, but also to the hearts of many other people. For faith in the invisible God is not blind faith. Anyone who has even the slightest doubt about this can personally verify the opposite. For God is very real, always alive and omnipresent. All that remains is to call on His name in repentance and enter the number of blessed ones that Jesus spoke about.

To those who are reading the newspaper "Prisoner" for the first time today, I want to address you with these words: do not miss your chance to find real joy and peace of mind in faith. Earthly years pass very quickly, and beyond the threshold of earthly existence an endless eternity is opened. And the only way into this eternal life is left to us in Jesus Christ, Who lovingly tells us: **"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"**.

I GORIK.



Thomas's assurance. Caravaggio

INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT SCRIBES

In the Gospels, scribes are sometimes called lawyers, that is, experts in the sacred Law of Moses. Another name for them is teachers of the law or simply teachers. It is not surprising that the common people deeply respected them: their skills were in demand not only in Jerusalem.



The first and greatest scribe was Ezra (Ezra 7:6).

During the time of the New Testament, the scribes transformed into a political party, where only highly educated people could become members — the elite of Jewish society. They often

collaborated with the Pharisees.

In the New Testament, the scribes were opponents of Jesus Christ, but there were also those who sought to follow Christ.

Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go" (Matt. 8:19).

In essence, they became representatives of a separate profession of teachers, capable of preserving the exact Law of Moses and interpreting it in relation to the conditions of the post-exilic period.

From early on, Ezra had the role of a scribe. *Ezra the priest, the scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the Lord* (Ezra 7:11).

Some of the scribes came from the tribe of Levi. Within the Levitical community, some Levites also studied and interpreted the Law and other religious texts.

They could serve as scribes, taking care of the preservation, copying and distribution of the Holy Scriptures. These Levitical scribes, being both Levites and scribes, had a special status and authority in the religious community.

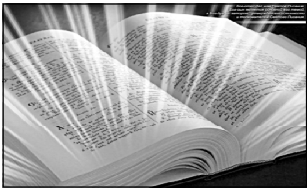
The scribes in most cases were opponents of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus appeared before Herod, they stood nearby and shouted their accusations along with others (Lk. 23:10).

Until the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 AD, the scribes, along with other members of the synhedrin, continued to oppose the early Christian church. They became the culprits of Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 6:12-14).

Scribes assisted in the compilation of genealogies, record keeping, recording of events, and participated in trials as legal consultants and advisors. They played an important role in educating and teaching people, disseminating historical and religious texts, and interpreting them.

The evangelists indicate that they, along with the elders and/or high priests, were members of the Sanhedrin (Mk. 15:1; Matt. 2:4; Acts 4:5; 6:12).



PASTOR'S WORD

THE PURPOSE OF TRIALS AND SUFFERING

WHAT IS SUFFERING

Suffering is an extremely unpleasant, burdensome, or tormenting sensations, in which the sufferer experiences physical or emotional discomfort, pain, stress, sorrow, and torment.

Suffering is the manifestation of agonizing and painful experiences on a physical or emotional level. Suffering and pain accompany every person entering this world from the first minute of their existence, and most often until the last. If at birth a child experiences only physical pain, like its mother, then as it grows, it begins to encounter various emotional pains and sufferings, which can be harder to bear than physical ones. Sometimes, the emotional experiences of guilt, conscience pangs, or the loss of loved ones can be so great that people are even willing to end these torments at the cost of their own lives.

Why do some people, undergoing sorrows and sufferings in their lives, become softer, kinder, and more compassionate towards others, while others become embittered and angry? If we look more closely and listen to both groups, we will discover a significant difference in how these two groups of people make sense of what is happening to them. People who change positively under the influence of difficulties usually do not complain about anyone or blame anyone for their trials. They understand that they are ordinary people, just like many other suffering people, whose destinies may be much harder than theirs. They are content with what they have, and comparing themselves with cripples and beggars, they rejoice that they are not as bad off as them. On the other hand, those who harbor resentment and bitterness lament that life is unfair to them. They believe that they deserve much better treatment than they receive from fate or those around them. They are ready to cry with self-pity and envy when they see people who are more fortunate in life than they are. Sometimes, it is difficult for them to refrain from venting their displeasure on someone. Innocent people usually become victims of their anger, often close family members. Offended people often become carriers of bitterness, which, having saturated them, consciously or unconsciously spreads from them to other people. If these people do not recognize their problem and do not want to change, no one can help them.

The purpose of these reflections is to help every person derive maximum benefit from the painful periods of life that will inevitably accompany them. And especially to help all those who love God and want to spend eternity with Him.

The opportunity to achieve positive results from suffering has been noticed by various people. There is even an ancient expression that partially reflects the essence of this phenomenon.

Per aspera ad astra (Latin: *through hardships to the stars*; also, the variant *ad astra per aspera* — Latin: *to the stars through hardships*) is a well-known saying, meaning *Through effort to victory, Through difficulties to triumph*. It is attributed to Lucius Seneca, an ancient Roman philosopher, poet, and statesman. Its essence is that the path to achieving high results passes through difficulties and pains.

Let's now consider the role of the sufferings of Jesus Christ throughout His earthly life.

The Bible states:

Hebrews 5:8-9 — *...though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.*

Hebrews 2:10 — *For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.*

Matthew 4:1 — *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*

Natural questions arise: *Where did Jesus Christ go after His baptism in the*

Jordan River? By whom? And for what purpose?

It turns out that, by the Father's command, the Spirit of God led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Obviously, this was necessary. After these trials, Christ emerged in much better shape than before.

Luke 4:13-14 — *Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time. Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region.*

Was it really necessary for the Son of God, essentially God through whom our Universe and everything in it was created, to undergo perfection? And at what stage of His existence did Christ have to go through this? Let's read a passage from the Bible where Christ Himself speaks about it, conversing with the accusing Jews.

John 10:36 — *Do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, "You are blaspheming", because I said, "I am the Son of God"?*

How are we to understand the words *whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world*?

In heaven, there is nothing unholy, and the Son of God is perfection itself. So what is being talked about here? These texts clearly speak about Christ, and we cannot deny that.

So, let's repeat the question: Was it necessary for Christ to undergo a process of perfection and sanctification? For the eternal Son of God, no, it was not necessary, but for the bodily part of His nature during His earthly existence, it was. This process more reflects the harmonizing of the human body with the Spirit. It's not about a process occurring in heaven but purely about the earthly phase of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh. There was a time when He grew up in the home of His earthly parents before being sent into the world, or in other words, before entering public ministry. It is written:

Luke 2:40 — *And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him.*

Luke 2:52 — *And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.*

Each of these texts speaks of a process of improvement, from lesser to greater, from a less perfect state to a more perfect one. They all refer to Jesus Christ in infancy, childhood, and youth. It is precisely this period of His earthly life that the above-mentioned verses about perfection through suffering or sanctification relate to.

The Bible states that Christ experienced everything except sin. The word *everything* includes struggles, illnesses, fatigue, praise, revilement, sorrows, injustice, sadness, anger, joy, and the like. To avoid committing any sin, which fills our Universe, it was necessary to struggle, suffer, and overcome.

Hebrews 4:15 — *For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.*

Hebrews 2:18 — *For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.*

The complete harmony of Jesus' body with the Spirit was a period of perfection and sanctification that led to complete obedience to the will of the Heavenly Father.

The word *sanctification* is sometimes associated with sin, but it's not necessarily so. It has two shades:

The first is separation from the rest and dedication to God's service.

The second is bringing life into accordance with God's standards. And it has qualitative significance.

In Jesus' life, there was both. And all of this was accompanied by struggle, sorrows, and sufferings.

God perfected His Son, Jesus Christ, through suffering.

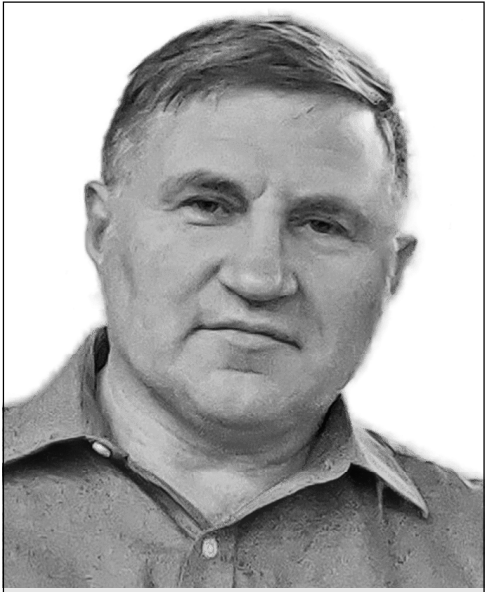
And if Christ had to go through such a path, then all the more for us, His followers.

1 Peter 2:21 — *For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps.*

Who among us would easily agree to fly on an untested airplane that has never taken off after assembly, even though it incorporates the very best inventions of modernity?

Tests show whether the mechanism or unit meets the requirements imposed on it. Can it perform the assigned functions for a long time and reliably? Can it be relied upon? The results of tests also indicate the units or areas where refinement or improvement is needed.

Similar periods of testing have to be gone through by all children of God, both directly after entering into a covenant with God and throughout life. The path to



Pastor Aleksandr BORISENKO

perfection goes through trials and sufferings.

Testing is a painful process that determines the values of the subject and reveals weak points in our spiritual structure.

Tests come in various forms:

- in time and expectations,
- life burdens,
- shattered hopes,
- the death of loved ones,
- losses, damages, accidents,
- mistakes of those we looked up to,
- betrayal by loved ones,
- humiliations,
- illnesses,
- a spirit of rejection and despondency.

The Purpose of Trials:

- 1) remind us that we are children of God,
- 2) reveal what is in our hearts,
- 3) show the magnitude of our faith,
- 4) test our sacrificial spirit,
- 5) test our loyalty,
- 6) point out our weaknesses that need correction.

Trials are designed to change, improve a person, and lead to voluntary submission to the will of God.

WHAT HAPPENS TO A PERSON DURING TRIALS

When we turn to God, our spirit is reborn, but our soul component remains the same for some time. The same desires to control ourselves, the same reliance on ourselves or others, and worldly ambitions persist. All of this needs to be changed, and this process successfully occurs during trials and sufferings. In the refining fire, the following takes place:

- old stereotypes crumble;
- the true extent of our corruption is genuinely revealed;
- all soul-related and worldly aspects are separated (pride, self-reliance, independence from God, the pursuit of significance);
- knowledge of God comes because trials reveal that He is not as we previously imagined;
- life priorities change;
- the meaning of suffering and the entire human life is newly understood;
- the attitude towards other people changes.

We are wired to always seek a way out of difficult situations. When trials come, we mobilize all our abilities and resources to resolve the situation and find a way out. This often happens until our capabilities are completely exhausted. God patiently waits until we lose all hope in ourselves, our resources, or other people. It is often only then, in the midst of trials, that a person turns to God. David spoke about the benefits of these experiences:

Psalms 118:67 — *Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.*

Psalms 118:71 — *It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.*

In periods of ongoing God's blessings, it may seem that all the successes in transforming our character are the result of our merits. To allow us to spiritually grow further and prevent pride from ruining us, God may show us that all this is given to us by Him. For this purpose, He may deprive us of the sense of His close presence, spiritual joy, and peace... Usually, in these periods, we see all the signs of our old, uncleansed nature: lack of love for others, irritability, impatience, sensitivity, blaming others, and so on. This leads us to sobriety. Although this period of abandonment is painful, it successfully helps us see who we are without God and get rid of our vices. After our realization, we begin to notice in ourselves what we did not see before: pride, arrogance, self-confidence, independence from God, and everything else that separates us from Him. This leads us to repentance before God, and we cling to Him tremblingly and faithfully. Ultimately, painful periods of abandonment by God turn into a tremendous blessing for us. They contribute to correction, purification, and spiritual growth.

Isaiah 54:7-8 — *"For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies, I will gather you. With a little wrath, I hid My face from you for a moment; but with everlasting kindness, I will have mercy on you", says the Lord, your Redeemer.*

Numbers 14:34 — *...that you may know what it is that to be left by Me.*

WHAT ELSE DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT TRIALS

1. Suffering as a Means of Spiritual Improvement

A. Suffering contributes to correction, purification, and spiritual growth.

Hebrews 12:6-10 — *For whom the Lord loves, He chastens and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness.*

1 Peter 4:1-2 — *Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.*

Lamentations 3:27 — *It is good for a man to bear The yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone and keep silent, Because God has laid it on him; Let him put his mouth in the dust — There may yet be hope. Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes him, And be full of reproach.*

1 Peter 5:10 — *But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.*

Philippians 3:10 — *...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death...*

(Continued on pg. 10)

TESTIMONIES OF BORN-AGAIN CHRISTIANS

From a life of crime to street evangelism

Nigel Williams was put into care as a child and has been in 18 different prisons. But meeting Christ set him free from his addictions and self-harm, and now he loves to share the good news with everyone he meets.

I grew up in a little town near Mansfield with my mum, who had schizophrenia, and my grandma. I wasn't looked after properly and would play out on the streets from the age of five. I was hard to control and didn't go to school. I would steal cigarettes and money from my mum.

One evening, I woke up in the middle of the night and I could see smoke coming from underneath the door. I woke my mum and grandma up. Mum called the fire service and grandma tried to put the fire out but was beaten back by the flames. I was hiding under my bed and the floor was getting hotter and hotter. Eventually, a fireman pulled me out.

After the fire, which was caused by one of mum's cigarettes, social services took me into care. I was taken to see my mum every couple of weeks, but sometimes she wouldn't turn up.

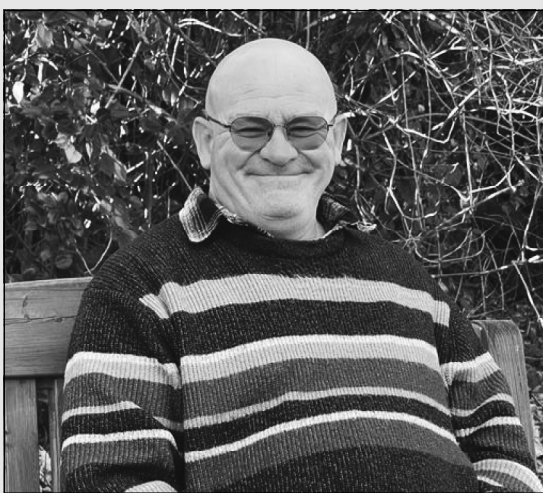
As a teenager, I stole fags and sold them at school. Then I broke into a pub and stole

booze. After that, I began to burgle houses. The first time I went to prison, I was beaten for weeks by two other inmates until, finally, a prison officer saw the state of my back and I was taken to the hospital wing. Later, I hit two officers with a jug and was threatened with a ten-year sentence.

I was transferred from prison to a secure hospital because I had a breakdown. My mum died, which left me depressed. Voices

had tormented me for years — they made me smash things or stick a knife into myself. I've got 62 scars on my body from self-harming. When in prison, I was put in solitary confinement for months because I used to self-harm or get into fights. I was in and out of 18 different prisons, two secure hospitals, dozens of mental health hospitals and four bail hostels.

While I was in prison in Hull, Christians visited every Tuesday. I worked in the kitchen and brought them sandwiches or cups of tea. It was good to talk to them, even though I didn't believe. I wanted to, but I needed



evidence; I wanted proof that Jesus Christ was real.

One of my questions was: *How can there be a God when my life is a complete mess?* People in prison had beat me with pillowcases full of boots, jars and stones. They'd laugh at me and ridicule me. I thought: If there is a God, he's not really helping me and I don't want to follow him. When these Christians came in, I tried to say that their God wasn't real and picked faults all the time. But the only fool there was me, and I'm so glad God had mercy on me.

One day, I had an experience in the prison chapel when these Christians prayed for me. I went down in the Spirit and,

suddenly, the prison bars didn't seem to have any hold on me any more. I was filled with joy, peace and love as someone led me to Christ.

Even though I was in a secure hospital I felt so free. I ran out of the chapel and said: *Jesus is alive!* One of the doctors said: *Put him on more medication, nurse,* but I was experiencing the Holy Spirit for the first time.

Once I became a Christian, I felt guilty for my crimes. It hit me like a bombshell. For years I suffered from the shame and guilt of what I did to people's homes and all the drugs I sold to people. The enemy was trying to keep me trapped. I thought: You might as well end your life now. Everyone hates you. You're a piece of scum. You have no right to be a Christian. It took me several years to overcome that lying voice.

I used to swear all the time but, when I got saved, that went straight away. Other addictions took longer. One day my friend Martin came to my flat, and saw loads of empty larger cans stacked in the corner. He said: *Nige, do*

you want to give up this addiction? I said: *Of course I do! But I'm trapped. I even need a drink when I wake up at four in the morning.*

All Martin said was: *Lord Jesus, just set Nigel free from the addiction of alcohol.* Then he went to my fridge, took the cans I had and went home. I thought: You cheeky thing! I'm going to go to the shop if this feeling of needing a drink doesn't go away, and I'm going to buy some more. But I said to God: *I'll just give it another hour and see how I feel.* An hour went by, and I didn't need a drink. The next morning when I woke up, I didn't have the shakes or any cravings. I'd been addicted since the age of eleven. It had ruined my life. I couldn't believe a simple prayer had set me free.

Now I go out on the streets each week to share my faith. Even with mental illness, I still evangelise because I know God is real. I love to pray for people. Some Christians are afraid to go, and there's so much that I fear too. I still have schizophrenia, but God gives me the ability to stand and preach in a packed market in Sheffield and see people come to Christ.



By Sam HAILES,
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ARE THERE SIDE ISSUES IN SCRIPTURE?

And if so, should we be focusing on something more important?

We often receive messages that claim that creation is a side issue, and we should be doing something more important like feeding the hungry. Or that we should not be divisive over something that isn't a salvation issue. But I think before we answer this assertion, we have to ask, are there side issues in Scripture at all?

Part of the implication when something is called a side issue is that it really isn't that important. But that seems too trivial a term to attach to something God inspired in Scripture. If God inspired a limited number of documents (the 66 we carry around in our Bibles), wouldn't it seem odd for Him to fill up most of that precious space with unnecessary, extraneous information that is more or less optional for the believer?

That being said, we would agree that some doctrines are more important than others. Paul spoke of doctrines of *first importance* (1 Corinthians 15:3), and Christ spoke of the first and second greatest laws (Matthew 22:37–39), so there is scriptural precedent for saying that some things in Scripture are more important than others. But the point of the hierarchy was to point out how important and glorious the most important things were, not an excuse to throw out or trivialize whatever is deemed the least important. In fact, Jesus warned of severe judgment for those who threw out even the least of the commandments (Matthew 5:19).

So theoretically, one could make a hierarchy of doctrines, with the ones necessary for salvation at the top, then other important ones that are not salvation issues, then at the bottom the least important. But even the one at the bottom of the list is still important and inspired and preserved in Scripture. There is a saying, *How many times does God need to say something to make it true?* (Of course, the answer is none,

since something can be true without it being enshrined in Scripture.) We could add, *How many times does God have to say something to make it important?*

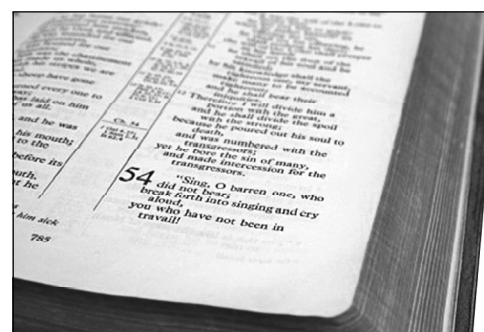
IS CREATION A SIDE ISSUE?

So in the hierarchy proposed above, where would the historicity of Genesis creation fall? It isn't at the top with the *doctrines of first importance*, but it is still high up on the hierarchy, because it is essential to understand the Gospel. Genesis 1–3 sets the stage for everything that follows in Scripture. And the authors of Scripture link Genesis creation to an entire theology of who God is and how He interacts with His creation. And in the New Testament, the authors even raise the stakes by making creation intensely christological — in other words, if you want to understand who Jesus is, what He came to do and why, and how it makes a difference in our lives, and even what we have to look forward to in salvation, Paul, Peter, and everyone else points us back to the Genesis creation account.

The global Flood is a picture of what Christ's second coming will look like — a sudden, universal judgment with no hope of escape. Christ's sacrifice applies to us in the same way that Adam's sin condemned everyone descended from him. When John received a vision of the New Jerusalem, it was filled with Edenic imagery, suggesting that what we look forward to is, in a way, a restoration of what was lost when Adam sinned. But if Adam lived in a world full of death and suffering, is that what we look forward to in the new heavens and earth? Surely the Edenic imagery only makes sense if we accept a straightforward interpretation of Genesis.

So creation isn't an *essential* issue for salvation, but it is a *foundational*

issue, because if you misunderstand creation, it's hard to *get it right* when it comes to what the Gospel means and why we need that hope.



REINTERPRETATION OR REJECTION?

Some people misinterpret creation through ignorance; they haven't studied the issue, they don't know completely what the Bible teaches. But there are others who know what the Bible teaches, and they believe something else. This sort of willful rejection, exemplified by *BioLogos* and similar organizations, is far more serious.

But many people who accept theistic evolution or various forms of *old-earth* creation would claim they are not rejecting the Bible's teaching on creation, but simply challenging the literal interpretation of the days of creation. However, there is much more at stake than merely the length of creation days. For example, any long-age interpretation has the problem of death (and violence and disease) before sin — making millions of years of death and suffering of animals and even sometimes *soulless pre-humans* part of what God described as *very good* at the end of Creation Week.

Also, these reinterpretations almost inevitably include a local, not global Flood in Noah's day. But Jesus and Peter used the Flood to illustrate what the Second Coming would be like —

universal and sudden, at a time that no one could predict.

Many evangelical scholars and apologists have understood the need to stand by the historical Adam as the literal ancestor of all human beings, even as they've vacillated on the age of the earth and the global Flood. But if Adam came into the world less than 10,000 years ago after billions of years of other species existing and going extinct, in what sense did God create mankind male and female *from the beginning of creation* as Jesus claims (Mark 10:6)?

The point is, sometimes there are different interpretations of Scripture. But to be a valid interpretation of Scripture, it has to fit with all of what Scripture says on a certain topic. And long-age or local flood interpretations invariably ignore much of what the rest of Scripture has to say about their significance in the rest of Scripture.

NOTHING GOD SAYS IS A SIDE ISSUE

We believe that God is incomprehensible to us unless He reveals Himself to us. We're so far below Him that unless He stoops to our level, we have no hope of understanding even the most trivial things about God. His self-revelation in Scripture, and in Jesus, meant that God had to stoop down to *our level* in a sense for us to understand what He wanted us to know about Him. We can't see Jesus today (though we look forward to His coming again), but we do have His Word preserved in Scripture.

If we understand how utterly precious Scripture is, we should want to understand and believe all of it, because we love the God who inspired it, and that should become a joyful lifelong pursuit.

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TESTIMONIES OF BORN-AGAIN CHRISTIANS

I have encountered the risen Christ!

And He will destroy on this mountain the surface of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken. And it will be said in that day: "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation" (Isaiah 25:7-9).

The covering over the nations is the sinful life that separates a person from God. Such a covering was also over my life. Many people in the world are under a similar covering, experiencing a separation between themselves and God. Some seek the Lord in religion, others in science, but all these pursuits cannot fill the emptiness in the human heart. This emptiness can be felt by a child, a young person, those middle aged — people of all ages, regardless of gender, financial status, or social position.

I first felt the emptiness in my heart around the age of twenty when I was discharged from compulsory military service. One day, after drinking alcohol, one of my comrades suggested committing theft (although it wouldn't bring much profit). It was after this that I encountered significant problems with the police, criminal structures, and the victims who had recently been released from incarceration. It was then that I realized the cynicism of so-called friendship: the police drag you to local precincts, the victims catch you on the street, and your supposed best friends sell you out to both sides, trying to buy their way out using you. That's when I concluded that I had no friends from that moment on.

My family also faced challenges. My father drank heavily for many years, and from the age of twelve, my mother, who tried her best to provide for me and my younger brother, raised me. I had to do all the household chores when my mother was at work or away. My father increasingly spent the money my mother left us for food on alcohol. I personally did not like to consume alcoholic beverages because I constantly witnessed my drunken father creating conflict situations: raising his hand against my mother and getting into altercations with me and my brother. I was afraid that my family life would be the same, and my wife would suffer as my mother did.

Around seventh grade, classmates started smoking, and

some of them began consuming alcoholic beverages. I did not engage in these activities. Friends even offered me money to take one puff of a cigarette, but I did not smoke, and I took pride in not hanging out in corners and not indulging in smoking.

My mother always asked me not to associate with careless guys, but I didn't listen. After my friends robbed an apartment and a cooperative during the Christmas holidays, stealing about twenty bottles of liquor in the cooperative, I drank for the first time. I don't want to say that the guys were the worst and I was the best. Some were quite careless, some slightly better, but overall, we leaned towards evil. At that time, I moved to Zboiska (a district in Lviv), where there was a tense criminal situation. Many Roma people lived there, eagerly buying stolen goods or exchanging them for narcotics (weed, ecstasy, poppy). Within a month of living in the area, a ninth-caliber revolver was pointed at my face. That was my first encounter with the local community. Later, I got to know this local community better and began stealing car radios, followed by the use of weed and poppy.

Thus, life at nineteen took a downturn, even though I had a job and was a promising employee. On the other hand, theft, wild entertainment, and drugs cornered me. Unexpectedly, with a just-stolen car radio, I was taken to the police station. Thanks to my mother's influence, I was soon released, but my acquaintances didn't believe that one could get out of the police station so quickly, and suspicions arose. After that, we could no longer share the location where weed was sold.

Once, when I was heading home under the influence of drugs, the same guys who had pointed a gun at my forehead told me that they would talk to me tomorrow evening. I knew well how such conversations usually ended. It would be good if I didn't end up disabled.

On that evening, I walked along Gorodotska Street towards home, but my legs didn't want to move. I tried to delay the time, avoiding meeting anyone, as I didn't want to go home knowing that the guys were always hanging out near my house, especially near my entrance. During those difficult times, I began to talk to God

(sometimes I did that), begging Him to keep me safe. But what can I say? I brought it upon myself, and the Lord is holy, while I am sinful. I understood that promising to God to change my life is not something a person can promise; He knows everything.

By that time, I had already forgotten about an event that



happened when I was fifteen. I made homemade explosives, and everything seemed thought out, but when I ignited it, for some reason, it didn't explode. My younger brother begged me not to do it. Several times, from a distance of about five meters, I lit the fuse, with my brother standing next to me. When nothing happened, I approached, sat over the explosive, lit a match, and thrust the match head directly into the hole. There was a strong explosion. My brother, although he stepped back, had his face slightly burned. Another guy, standing sideways three meters away, had his face severely burned, and while we waited for the ambulance, he ran around the house to let the wind cool his face. And I sat at a distance of twenty centimeters from the explosion. The first thing I did was open my eyes, but I couldn't see anything except darkness. The thought echoed in my head: *That's it, blind forever.* I realized that I had done something terrible and irreversible. But in a second, I started screaming loudly (I don't know if I screamed with my mouth or with my whole soul): *Lord, give me my eyes, let my face be whatever.* I've seen burnt guys before, who were disfigured for life. My face burned, it was unbearable; the skin on my hands cracked to the flesh, clothes and hair were on fire. I closed my eyes again and shouted: *Lord, Lord!* When I opened them again, I could see easily. I closed them again, opened after some time, and could see. Thanks be to Jesus, who is close to all who call on His name. Molten iron from the explosion flew into the air and fell on the body, leaving deep burns. When I ran home, I looked in the mirror and saw

that my entire face was burned. Particles that had hit my face sizzled; nothing remained of my devilish face, all the skin had burned. Three months in the hospital, and thanks to God, everything returned to normal!

And now, I'm walking home and don't remember these events that happened two years ago, praying: *Help me get home alive. I can't promise You that I'll quit smoking, using drugs or alcohol, or committing sins in general, but if You help me, I will quit.* After this prayer, no one bothered me anymore. Although I was very anxious as I walked home, I never met those guys again.

Life continued; all my dreams of a better life were scattered like leaves in the autumn wind.

Returning to these events, I want to say that after I came back from the army and got a job, I started drinking alcohol, although there was strong resistance within me, but I couldn't overcome that desire. I noticed that while I used to drink once a month, I could now afford to do it twice a week. It infuriated me. I didn't want to become an alcoholic and couldn't afford it. There was one desire: not to become like my father, whom alcohol ensnared. As an alternative to alcohol, I chose light drugs.

One day, I went to the store to buy a snack, a pack of Artek cigarettes. I was a bit tipsy and bought a chocolate for the salespeople. Occasionally visiting this store, I noticed a girl working in the confectionery department, and I got to know her. Her name was Anya. She invited me to a gathering. Since I wasn't a religious person, I agreed and started attending church. Gradually, I began reading the New Testament.

One day, I learned that there was a strange rule in this church: if you don't accept baptism, you won't be able to get married in the church. Although the water was knee-deep for me, I was ready to go to the end of the earth for my sweetheart. I told my mom about this order. She said, *Well, if it's necessary, then it's necessary.* My mom didn't know what plans the Lord had, and I didn't understand anything either.

Preparation for baptism went smoothly; everything was fine, except for one thing: I was determined to deceive everyone. A few days remained until the baptism, and I drank more, everything was getting worse.

So the last week passed. Thursday came. On Saturday, I had to undergo water baptism, but as I was a sinner, I probably became even worse (although reading the Gospel began to influence me).

Once I was at home, and when I began to contemplate this situation, I clearly realized that I was deceiving not only Anya, but the church and even the pastor. Understanding came to me: most importantly I was deceiving the Lord Himself! And then, at home, I knelt down and began to pray — talk to the Lord. The first thing I said: I will not marry this girl in this way; I cannot quit smoking and drinking, and I cannot lead the kind of life that the people I saw in the church lead. I said, *Lord, why do You need me like this?* And with these thoughts, I went to sleep. The next morning, while doing household chores (around noon), I suddenly realized that I hadn't smoked a single cigarette yet, which was impossible for me because I needed to smoke before eating in the morning. For five years, I had been trying to quit smoking on my own, but nothing worked. And on that day, a miracle happened: I didn't want to and didn't even think about it. Then I understood that the Lord had delivered me from smoking, and I felt complete freedom from all the chains that bound me. Thanks be to the Lord, for His mercy endures forever!

In the year 2000, I received holy water baptism in faith because I encountered the risen Jesus in my life! Many years have passed since my marriage. The Lord has blessed us with four beautiful children and many life testimonies of His power in our family life.

Now I understand that a person's life is in the hands of the Lord, and whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. *With the merciful, You will show Yourself merciful; with a blameless man, You will show Yourself blameless; with the pure, You will show Yourself pure; and with the devious, You will show Yourself shrewd. You will save the humble people, but Your eyes are on the haughty to bring them down. You light my lamp, O Lord; my God enlightens my darkness. With You, I can run against a troop, and with my God, I can leap over a wall (Psalm 18:26-30).*

If it had not been for my deceit, then our family would have broken apart like a ship without a lighthouse in the dark night. Today, even in difficult moments of our life together, the Lord is a beacon for us.



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BONFIRE

A cruel storm that raged in the open ocean sank the ship. The indifferent elements spared no one except one man. He woke up at dawn, thrown ashore by a wave, the sole survivor.

The man walked along the shore in hopes of finding people and soon returned to the spot where his journey began. It was an island — a small island, lost in the boundless ocean. There were

no people here. The man remained alone.

Like Robinson Crusoe, he built himself a hut from branches and debris washed ashore. Every day, he prayed to God for rescue.

But days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and the man still remained alone. One day, after spending the entire day searching for food, the man



returned to his humble abode and saw ashes in its place. Everything he owned had turned into smoldering coals.

Lord! the man cried out in despair. *Have I not faced enough trials? Why do You punish me, taking away even the little I had?*

Sobbing with grief and even more with helplessness, he fell to the ground, not knowing how

to go on living. He lay on the ground, not lifting his eyes, feeling the daytime heat giving way to evening coolness. And he still lay on the ground and could not get up because he had no strength left. Suddenly, he heard sounds — so familiar on the ship but forgotten on the shore. At first softly, then louder and louder. He lifted his head and saw a ship, all sails set, heading for his island. Even before fully believing that this ship was real, the man understood that he had never

seen anything more beautiful than this ship.

How did you manage to find me? the man asked the sailors.

We saw the signal bonfire you lit on the shore! they replied.

How difficult it is to accept one's fate with humility. Unable to comprehend the Creator's plan, we often grumble. But only in sorrow and grief is spiritual strength found.

<http://www.smisl-zhizni.ru/pritch>

TESTIMONIES OF BORN-AGAIN CHRISTIANS

I Thank the Lord for my Salvation

I was born in Ukraine and lived there until I was twenty-three. Then my husband and I decided to move to the North, to the Nizhnevartovsk region. It was in 1978. There were developments, geology, everything was being explored. I really wanted to go there, so we went.

And so we arrived there. Everything was good. We settled, worked. I had a desire to get an education, and I did. I graduated from a technical school and an institute.

At that time, there were no roads, including railways. All deliveries were either by water during the summer navigation or by helicopters and planes. I worked as the chief dispatcher in a large geological exploration association and was involved in air transportation. It was very interesting. And everything in my life was good: family, children. But I did not have peace. Somehow, something always seemed to be missing. It felt like everything was not right, and I wanted something else.

I often came to Moscow and Kyiv because special flights were operated from Kyiv. We transported shift workers from there. And when I came to these big cities, I went to churches, lit candles, gave alms, but I left with a feeling that something was not right, that something was missing. And I did not know how to come to God. The word of the Bible always touched my heart. However, I didn't have time to take the Bible and start reading it.

Years passed, the eighties began, cooperatives appeared. And I started thinking that it was time to leave Siberia for Moscow because it became very uninteresting there.

So, in 1990, I went to Moscow. I was invited by a team of Jewish shareholders who gave me the opportunity to open a business in the Urals, in Nizhny Tagil, for processing Ural gems. Everything was going well. Everything worked out. But there was no peace and joy in my heart. When believers approached me and wanted to tell me something, I just did not accept it.

The business wave took me to Central Asia. I really liked it there, especially Tashkent. And I started doing cotton business there. It is a very serious business. Where there is cotton, there is the mafia. But I succeeded.

And you know, despite the fact that the Bible was at home (it was given to me as a gift), I didn't have time to take it in my hands. But the Lord knew my heart and knew that I would come to Him. And then a situation was created for me in business: problems started — people appeared who needed a lot of money. But I could no longer pay them, and they decided to scare me a little.

And one day as I leave the house and go to the gym guys approach me, show their IDs, and say, *Look, there's a car over there. Let's go talk.* And I look at who is sitting in this car and say, *No, I won't talk to them.* They say, *Well, then let's go to the office.* And we went to the office.

So we arrived at the office. They try to intimidate me but I tell them, *Guys, I don't owe anything to anyone. The contract is not fulfilled, but there is still time to fulfill it. The contract is not fulfilled in one day. The year is not over yet.*

sum, then another came in and claimed the same. Everything was considered. Of course, I couldn't prove that I owed nothing to anyone. The contract was not fulfilled. So, this also goes as embezzlement. In general, they fabricated a case against me.

Once I was talking to the investigator, and he said to me, *Listen, you shouldn't be here at all. You're here by accident. Understand me: I have to handle the case.* And I tell him, *I have no complaints against you. I want to tell you something: people brought me here, but God*

prayer. I thought: The house of prayer, it's with the Baptists. So, I must go there. And my prayer began: *Lord, if you get me out of here, I will go to the Baptist house of prayer and repent.*

In prison, people often talk about amnesty: regular amnesty, golden amnesty... Everyone lives with the dream. People wrote cassation complaints, and I helped them write, but I didn't write anything for myself. I was waiting for the golden amnesty.

At that time, in Tashkent, they imprisoned many foreign citizens. They imprisoned them, firstly, to extort money from

Tashkent, they started checks precisely from the zones. They decided that prisoners should not have spiritual literature.

So, a commission comes to us for inspection. And we are coming back from work, and I see that the management is holding my Bible. And my Bible always lay on my bed pillow. And I say to them, *How could you have the right to take my Bible at all?* And the commission asks the head of the regime: *How is she characterized?* They answer, *Well, she is a positive person.* And I tell them, *How could you take my Bible? Can you imagine: if you offered me a huge sum of dollars right now and said, "Dollars or the Bible?" — I would tell you, "The Bible". I don't need anything except this Word of God.* And they look at me in bewilderment, and the head of the regime tells me, *Calm down. Your Bible won't disappear anywhere. We'll put it in your personal belongings. You'll leave soon, and your Bible will go with you. Calm down.*

They did put my Bible in my bag. And then they announced an amnesty and sent me home. I thought: *That's it, no Moscow, no other cities. I'm going to the North, and I must find a church there. I know that there is a house of prayer in Ukraine, in Novohrad-Volynsky (now Zvyahel. — Ed.), in the Zhytomyr region, and I need to go there.* And I told my son: *I need to go to Ukraine.* He says to me: *Of course, you'll go, I'll support you.*

So, I come to Ukraine, come to the house of prayer, and ask: *When are the services here?* I see a woman dressed nicely. She says, *Today.* And the services were held on Saturday and Sunday. I say *I'll buy a scarf and come tomorrow.* But the woman says to me, *What scarf? Come in!* And so I entered.

And when I listened to the Word of God once, I said, *That's it, I repent.* The next day, I repented. It was September 19, 1999. At that time Veniamin Vasilievich was responsible for our church there. He became my spiritual mentor, to whom I could tell everything and who baptized me in 2001. After that, I never regretted coming to God. Yes, of course, I later went to work for an oil company, but I no longer needed business and I was not interested in the position of a high-ranking manager. I said: *Whoever invites me to work, there I will go.* They invited me, and I worked as the head of shift camps at an oil field. I was a witness for Christ there. I also had a Christian library there. I thank the Lord for salvation to this day. And I don't need anything in this life. The main thing is that I am saved.

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The contract can be extended for the next year. I wonder what you want to tell me? And they also don't know what to tell me. There is no reason to open a criminal case against me.

Well, they decided to scare me by sending me to a special detention center. The situation there was, of course, terrible.

After some time, my acquaintance goes to the prosecutor and tells him, *They wrongfully convicted a person there. They should be released.* And the prosecutor says, *Fifty thousand dollars, and that's it, no more questions.* But of course, no one paid fifty thousand dollars for me, and they issued a sanction for my arrest, after which they closed me in the infamous Tashkent prison.

And when I was imprisoned, I had a strong desire to read the Bible. The prison officer, while filling out the questionnaire, asked me, *What would you like?* I said, *I would like the Bible.* She said, *Okay, I'll bring you the Bible from home.* And you know, in Tashkent, where the last printing of Bibles was in 1988–1989, an officer brings me the Bible, and I start reading it there.

A criminal case was initiated against me. One comrade came, claiming that I owed him a large

will take me out of here. For some reason, I believe in this. And there I started praying. I began to ask the Lord to have mercy on me.

Then I was convicted. I was sentenced under the embezzlement charge, which practically does not qualify for amnesty. The amount in the contract was attributed to me as embezzlement. In the end, I received fourteen years of strict regime. I did not inform anyone about it. I set it in my heart: if my son finds me, then he finds me. But if not, then I won't tell anyone where I am.

My son searched. He also worked as a manager in the North. But no one gave him an answer. Because the case was ordered, they could not say where I was. And when my son called friends, they told him that I had left the country due to business problems.

In general, they convicted me and sent me to the zone. The women's zone, by the way, is right in Tashkent. I was sent there. And there, in the library, there was a Bible and spiritual literature. I was not interested in anything else, only reading the Word of God. And there I read that the Lord said: *My house shall be called a house of*

them, and secondly, to remove them from their field of activity. And many leaders from different countries, including Ukraine, began to appeal to Karimov: release or transfer the prisoners to their countries. And Karimov, to avoid dealing with this matter, declares an amnesty. The amnesty states that all articles fall under it, and it is for foreign citizens and women convicted for the first time. Such an amnesty has never happened before. It was the only one. But in Uzbekistan, they made violations of the regime for all their women convicted for the first time. And with two violations, you don't qualify for a humane act.

In our zone, there was a brigade of underage girls. And I took the Bible and went to read the Bible to these girls. I was allowed to do that. I told everyone that I was a believer, and they treated me well. But I had never been to a meeting. And it was there, reading the Bible, that I experienced a spiritual rebirth.

In 1999, they announced an amnesty in Tashkent, but they did not yet know which articles would fall under it and which would not. They announced it, but there was no decryption yet. And then terrorist acts began. When something exploded in

Is the Earth well arranged?

Having worked all day, the gardener lay down in the garden under a walnut tree. He lies on his back, looking up. The walnut tree is large, covered with walnuts.

Well... he said to himself, *the Lord did not arrange the Earth well: on such a large tree, such small fruits,*



and on the beds, huge pumpkins lie. It should be so that on a big tree, big fruits grow, and on small stems — small ones.

At this moment, a walnut fell from the tree and hit him right on the forehead. The poor man grabbed his lump on his forehead and shouted:

How well the Lord arranged that pumpkins do not grow on trees. If I had a pumpkin hit me I wouldn't be dealing with just a lump.

The Monkey and the Melon Seeds



Once upon a time, there was a monkey who loved watermelon seeds very much. One day, she saw a melon on the vine with a small hole. The monkey rejoiced, stuck her paw into the hole, grabbed a handful of watermelon seeds, but couldn't pull out her fist — the hole was narrow.

The monkey squealed and cursed at the melon for a long time but refused to open her fist

and give up the seeds. A hunter came and caught the monkey. He had made the hole in the melon to catch the greediest monkey.

And the hunter said to the monkey:

It would have been better for you to stay hungry than to lose your life for watermelon seeds. This is how the enemy catches us when we refuse to see the danger hidden in pleasure.

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TOPIC FOR REFLECTION

THE FORMULA FOR HAPPINESS

I. DEFINITION OF TERMS
1. What People Call and Consider Happiness:
☉ state of mind when you have achieved what you dreamed of;
☉ when you are understood and respected;
☉ mutual understanding, peace and quiet in the home (family);
☉ a state of mind based on inner contentment.

2. Happiness as defined by dictionaries
Dictionary of Social Sciences
Happiness is a human condition that corresponds to:
— the greatest inner satisfaction with the conditions of one's existence;
— fullness and meaningfulness of life;
— the fulfillment of his human purpose.
B. Dictionary of Synonyms and Similar Expressions
Happiness is well-being, grace, blessing, bliss, victory, luck, success, chance, joy.

II. BIBLICAL TERMINOLOGY
1. The Old Testament
The Old Testament word for happiness is **ashar** or **ashere**. Very often this word is translated in the Old Testament as **blessed**: **Genesis 30:13** — *Then Leah said, "How happy I am! The women will call me happy". So she named him Asher.*
In this passage the word **asher** occurs three times: **happy, happy, and Asher**. The name **Asher** is a transliteration of the Hebrew name **Asher**, meaning **happy**.

2. The New Testament
The New Testament Greek word for **happiness** is **makarios**: **Luke 1:47-48** — *...and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed (which means to be happy).* In other words, this passage should be translated as follows: *For henceforth all generations will consider me happy.*
Acts 26:2 — *King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews.*
Although the meaning of the word **makarios** is **happy**, it is most often translated in the New Testament as **blessed**.
The Greek word **blessed** (**eugoeo**) is a compound word [**eu** (good) and **logos** (word)], the literal meaning of which is a good word or **blessing**: **Matthew 26:26** — *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body";* **Mark 11:9-10** — *Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*

III. HAPPINESS ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT
1. In the Old Testament, a happy person is one whom the Lord has blessed with the fullness of life and the following earthly blessings:
A. Well-being, prosperity, respect in society: **Job 11**.
B. Children: **Psalm 127:3-5** — *Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, The fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; They shall not be ashamed, But shall speak with their enemies in the gate.*
C. The basic condition for a blessed and happy life, according to the Old Testament Scriptures, is a God-fearing walk with God:

Psalm 128:1-4 — *Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, Who walks in His ways. When you eat the labor of your hands, You shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine In the very heart of your house, Your children like olive plants All around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed Who fears the Lord.*
Psalm 112:1-3 — *Praise the Lord! Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, Who delights greatly in His commandments. His descendants will be mighty on earth; The generation of the upright will be blessed. Wealth and riches will be in his house, And his righteousness endures forever.*

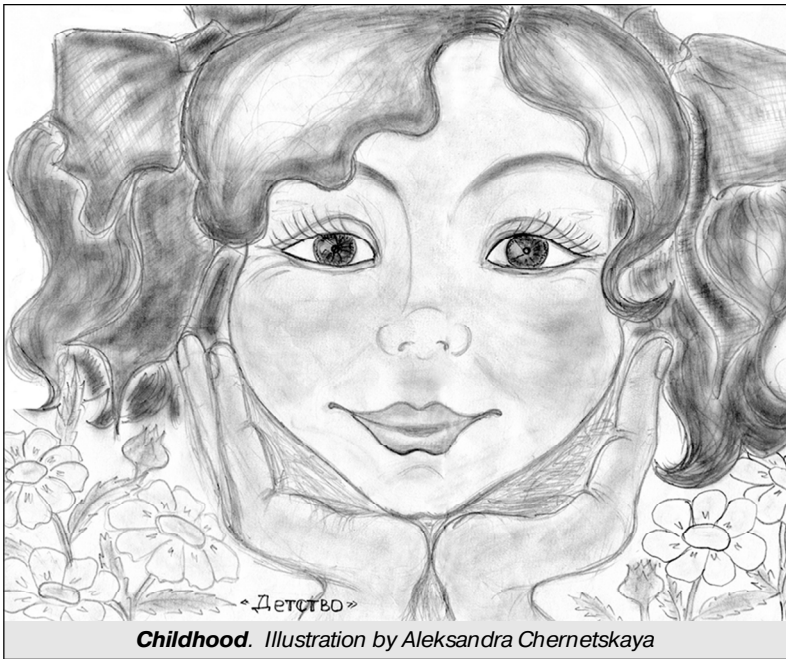
2. In the Old Testament, a happy person is one who cares for his neighbor (such a person is under the protection of God).
Psalm 41:2-3 — *The Lord will preserve him and keep him alive, And he will be blessed on the earth; You will not deliver him to the will of his enemies. The Lord will strengthen him on his bed of illness; You will sustain him on his sickbed.*

3. In the Old Testament, the one who keeps judgment and does righteousness is considered happy.
Psalm 106:3 — *Blessed are those who keep justice, And he who does righteousness at all times!*
Isaiah 56:1-2 — *Thus says the Lord: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, For My salvation is about to come, And My righteousness to be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, And the son of man who lays hold on it; Who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, And keeps his hand from doing any evil".*

4. In the Old Testament, the one who trusts in God is considered happy.
Proverbs 16:20 — *He who heeds the word wisely will find good, And whoever trusts in the Lord, happy is he.*
Psalm 33:12 — *Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, The people He has chosen as His own inheritance.*
Psalm 40:4 — *Blessed is that man who makes the Lord his trust, And does not respect the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies.*
Psalm 2:12 — *Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish in the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.*
Psalm 34:8 — *Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; Blessed is the man who trusts in Him!*

5. In the Old Testament, the one who is forgiven of sins is considered happy.
Psalm 32:1-2 — *Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit.*
6. In the Old Testament, a happy person is one who lives according to God's laws.
A godly person who is obedient to God's law is considered to be especially blessed (i.e., happy).
Psalm 1:1-2 — *Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; But his delight is in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day and night.*
Psalm 119:1-3 — *Blessed are the undefiled in the way, Who walk in the law of the Lord! Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, Who seek Him with the whole heart!*

They also do no iniquity; They walk in His ways.
Proverbs 29:18 — *Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; But happy is he who keeps the law.*
7. In the Old Testament, the one who accepts God's admonitions, instructions, and punishments is considered happy.
Psalm 93:12-13 — *Blessed is the man whom You instruct, O Lord, And teach out of Your law, That You may give him rest from the days of adversity, Until the pit is dug for the wicked.*
Job 5:17-18 — *Behold, happy is the man whom God corrects;*



Therefore do not despise the chastening of the Almighty. For He bruises, but He binds up; He wounds, but His hands make whole.
Blessed is he whom God punishes, for by such punishment man is led to the path of salvation.
Thus, the formula for happiness in the Old Testament consists in the well-being and well-being granted by God to those who live according to God's laws and hope and rely on the Lord in all things.

IV. HAPPINESS ACCORDING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT
In the New Testament, happiness (blessedness) is inextricably linked with the Kingdom of God, the path to which is opened by faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of His commandments.

1. In the New Testament, the people Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount are called happy. They are the poor in spirit, the weeping, the meek, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the exiled for righteousness.
Matthew 5:3-11 — *Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.*

2. In the New Testament, a happy person is one who has been forgiven of their sins.
Romans 4:6-8 — *...just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin".*
3. A happy person in the New Testament is one who hears God's Word and keeps it.
Luke 11:28 — *But He said, "More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"*

John 13:17 — *If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.*
Revelation 1:3 — *Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.*
James 1:25 — *But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.*

Revelation 22:7 — *Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.*
Revelation 22:14 — *Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city.*
4. In the New Testament, a happy person is one who believes in the Lord, although he has never seen Him with his own eyes.

John 20:29 — *Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed".*
Matthew 11:6 — *And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.*
5. In the New Testament, a happy person is one whose eyes see and whose ears hear spiritual truths.
Matthew 13:16 — *But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear.*
Revelation 14:13 — *Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on". "Yes", says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them".*
Revelation 20:6a — *Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power...*

6. In the New Testament, a happy person is a generous person who helps those in need.
Acts 20:35 — *I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive".*
7. In the New Testament, a happy person is one who does not succumb to temptations, but endures them with honor, keeping himself blameless in this sinful world.
James 1:12 — *Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.*

Revelation 16:15 — *Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame*
8. In the New Testament, a happy person is one who suffers for Christ and for God's truth.
1 Peter 3:14 — *But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.*
1 Peter 4:14 — *If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.*

So, as we see in the New Testament, happiness is not so much about well-being as it is about our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. According to the Holy Scriptures, it is our duty to seek intimacy with the Lord, and He will take care of what we need for life.
Matthew 6:31-33 — *Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.*

V. WHAT, THEN, IS THE BIBLE'S FORMULA FOR HAPPINESS?
We have seen that the Old Testament's concept of happiness does not contradict the New Testament's teaching on happiness.
1. The Biblical Interpretation of Happiness as Defined by the Dictionary
According to the dictionary's definition, *happiness is the state of a person that corresponds to:* (a) *the greatest inner satisfaction with the conditions of one's existence;* (b) *the fullness and meaningfulness of life;* (c) *the fulfillment of its human purpose.*
Let us examine this definition in the light of Bible truth.
A. Happiness is the state of a person that corresponds to the greatest inner satisfaction with the conditions of his existence.

A person afflicted with sin is a being who strives but is unable to achieve the full satisfaction of his needs (material, physical, spiritual, and the like). When Rockefeller became a millionaire, he was asked what he wanted most after he managed to make his first million. He answered: *I want to make my second million.* This is the sinful nature of man: if he has two pairs of shoes, he wants to have three; if he makes \$1,000 a month, he wants to make \$2,000. If he has a car, he wants to have a house, and so on... And the more a person's well-being and well-being increases, the more his needs increase.

(Continued on pg. 11)

PASTOR'S WORD

THE PURPOSE OF TRIALS AND SUFFERING

(End. Beginning on pg. 5)

B. Learning to Have Compassion for Others Through Suffering

2 Corinthians 1:4 — ...who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Hebrews 10:32-34 — But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.

C. Suffering Promotes Humility, Patience, and Obedience to the Lord

Deuteronomy 8:2-3 — And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So, He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.

Deuteronomy 8:16 — ...that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end...

Romans 5:3-4 — And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Hebrews 5:8 — ...though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

2. Accomplishing Salvation Through Suffering

Daniel 11:35 — And some of those of understanding shall fall, to refine them, purify them, and make them white, until the time of the end; because it is still for the appointed time.

2 Corinthians 1:6 — Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation.

Genesis 50:20 — But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.

3. Suffering as God's Judgment on Man
This kind of suffering is inflicted on those who, knowing the truth, sin voluntarily so that they will not be condemned with the world. In this case, God's judgments are salvific because they equalize God's established principles of justice.

2 Samuel 12:10-14 — Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the Lord: Behold, I will raise up adversity against you from your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun. So David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord". And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die".

1 Peter 4:17 — For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?

1 Corinthians 5:5 — ...deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

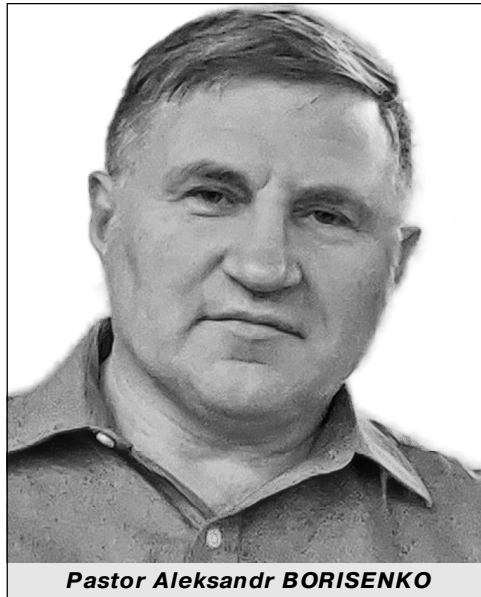
1 Corinthians 11:32 — But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.

Hebrews 10:26-27 — For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer

remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

4. Trials as a Test of Obedience to God
Deuteronomy 8:2-3 — And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord...

Deuteronomy 8:16 — ...who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might



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humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end.

Isaiah 48:10 — Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.

5. Remind us that we are God's children whom He loves

Hebrews 12:6-8 — "For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives". If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.

6. Suffering as Our Glory

1 Peter 4:12-14 — Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.

1 Peter 5:1 — The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed...

Romans 8:17-18 — ...and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18 — For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

1 Thessalonians 1:6-8 — And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward

God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

7. Suffering for the Glory of God

Job 1:8 — Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?"

Job 2:3 — Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil? And still he holds fast to his integrity, although you incited Me against him, to destroy him without cause".

John 9:3 — Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him".

John 11:4 — When Jesus heard that, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it".

2 Thessalonians 1:6-10 — ...since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.

8. Suffering as a Testimony to Others
Job's faithfulness and heroism in enduring trials serve as an example to millions of people.

1 Peter 2:12 — ...having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Mark 13:9 — But watch out for yourselves, for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. You will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them.

REASONS WHY LIFE'S TRIALS CAN BE PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT**1. Unpreparedness for tests**

No matter how much a person may suppose that difficulties may be on his way, they still come unexpectedly. It is human nature to expect, if not the best, then at least not the worst in life.

Job 29:18-20 — Then I said, "I shall die in my nest, And multiply my days as the sand. My root is spread out to the waters, And the dew lies all night on my branch. My glory is fresh within me, And my bow is renewed in my hand".

Job 30:26 — But when I looked for good, evil came to me; And when I waited for light, then came darkness.

2. Tests absorb the subject's attention
Trials and the sufferings they bring absorb the attention of the subject so that apart from them, the person no longer sees or notices anything. Even the sorrows and difficulties of others seem incomparable to his experiences. Objective common sense is replaced by selfish-subjective thinking.

3. Waiting for the end of a period of temptation or trial is frustrating

Change will not come until the Christian learns to live not in anticipation of change, but in the present day, no matter how bad it may seem.

Joseph expected the cupbearer to speak to Pharaoh about him and lead him out of prison, but God would not allow this to happen until all hope in man died in Joseph's heart.

Gen. 40:14-15 — But remember me when it is well with you, and please show kindness to me; make mention of me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house. For indeed I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews; and also I have done nothing here that they should put me into the dungeon.

Job 30:26 — But when I looked for good, evil came to me; And when I waited for light, then came darkness.

4. A deep, intimate relationship with God is replaced by questions to God: Why?

The lack of responses exacerbates the situation of the person in the trials. The person being tested may blame those who were the cause of his trials and even God Himself.

Job 21:6-7 — Even when I remember I am terrified, And trembling takes hold of my flesh. Why do the wicked live and become old, Yes, become mighty in power?

Jeremiah 12:1 — Righteous are You, O Lord, when I plead with You; Yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?

TIPS FOR CHRISTIANS WHO ARE ON TRIAL

1. Start giving thanks for the circumstances you are experiencing.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 — in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

2. Pay attention to those who are having a harder time than you and try to compare your circumstances with theirs.

3. Read and remember God's promises in the Scriptures, as well as those that God has given you personally.

Romans 8:28 — And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

James 1:12 — Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

4. Humble yourself and your thoughts. God doesn't have to tell you why He is leading you this way.

Philippians 2:7-9 — ...but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name...

Psalms 130:1-2 — Lord, my heart is not haughty, Nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with great matters, Nor with things too profound for me. Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul, Like a weaned child with his mother; Like a weaned child is my soul within me.

Deuteronomy 29:29 — The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

5. Do not try to get out of trials on your own and do not rely on people so that you do not end up in an even worse situation. Be patient, and God Himself will bring you out, and justice will surely prevail.

Job 36:21 — Take heed, do not turn to iniquity, For you have chosen this rather than affliction.

6. Do not make global decisions that can affect your entire life, but wait until God's knowledge becomes clear to you again and clarity from God comes.

7. Focus your attention on Christ, not on circumstances.

Psalms 16:8 — I have set the Lord always before me; Because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved.

8. Try to change your mindset, not your circumstances.

9. Put your trust in God, not in men.

Jeremiah 17:5 — Thus says the Lord: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man And makes flesh his strength, Whose heart departs from the Lord".

10. Stop reacting negatively to the help and advice of those who try to help you, no matter how clumsy, painful, or irrelevant their advice may seem to you.

One last thing, remember: For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal (**2 Corinthians 4:17-18**).

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Therefore, it is truly a great happiness to be satisfied with the conditions of one's existence. And such satisfaction can be achieved only by those whose meaning of life is not to increase their material well-being, but to take care of their souls. Only a person who has peace in his soul is able to be satisfied in any circumstances of life.

An example of a person who is satisfied with the conditions of his existence is the apostle Paul, who wrote the following about himself in **Philippians 4:11–13**: *Not that*

like any other feeling, joy ends or passes at some point. In the Bible, in addition to the usual joy familiar to each of us, there is a perfect joy: **1 John 1:4** — *And these things we write to you that [a]your joy may be full.*

Perfect joy is a joy that is everlasting, eternal, complete, lacking or flawed in anything. A synonym for perfect joy is *happiness*. In other words, the verse can be read as follows: *And this we write to you so that you may be (absolutely) happy.*

There are several similar verses in the New Testament that speak

TOPIC FOR REFLECTION

THE FORMULA FOR HAPPINESS

I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

B. Happiness is the state of a person that corresponds to the fullness and meaningfulness of life.

A person who is a prisoner of sin (being a slave to sin) is unable to feel the fullness and meaning of his life, just as a prisoner in prison cannot enjoy life in its fullness. Only a free person can live a full life, full of meaning and fulfillment. Only Jesus Christ can give man freedom from sin: **John 8:34–36** — *Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."*

Jesus said of Himself in **John 10:10**: *I have come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly.* The Lord came into this world to give us abundant life — freedom from sin, salvation, and eternal life. The gift of eternal life — abundant life — can be freely received through faith in Jesus Christ, the true God and Savior of mankind. This is evidenced by the Bible, the Word of God: **John 20:31** — *but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.*

C. Happiness is a human condition that corresponds to the fulfillment of one's human purpose.

Man's purpose on earth is to seek God and live in harmony and intimate communion with his Creator: **Acts 17:26–28** — *And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being...*

If a person has found God, is reconciled to Him through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, and now lives in harmony with his Creator, knowing Him and keeping His commandments, then he fulfills his human destiny and is therefore truly happy.

2. Happiness as Perfect Joy

Joy is one of the feelings that a person is capable of feeling. Joy can be caused by different events and experiences of a person, and

of perfect joy. All of them belong to the pen of the Apostle John. Let us consider under what conditions those who read what is written in God's Word can be happy.

A. John 15:11 — *These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.*

Question: *What did Jesus say that can make us happy?*

The answer is found in the first ten verses of the Gospel of John, in which the Lord Jesus speaks of how a believer can be a true disciple of Christ who bears much fruit: (1) by having an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ (abiding in Him and giving Him a place in his life); (2) keeping God's commandments. Only in this way can man abide in the love of God. And abiding in His love is happiness.

B. John 16:24 — *Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.* What is the happiness Jesus is talking about in this verse? **The answer** is found in verses 25–27: *These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; but the time is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but I will tell you plainly about the Father. In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God.*

Believers in Jesus Christ as God have the right and authority to pray and ask God for everything they need in the name of Jesus Christ. Happiness lies in a close relationship with God, so that He hears us and answers our prayers.

C. 1 John 1:4 — *And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.*

Question: *What did the apostles write that can make us happy?*

Answer: The immediate context is about the gospel. In other words, the apostle is sharing with the reader the Good News, which is the open door to real lasting happiness.

Everything in the world is transitory: joys and sorrows, prosperity, prosperity, success, and victories... But the happiness that the Creator offers to each of us is an eternal, unchanging, eternal happiness. It is eternal life with God, which begins from the moment a person comes to the Lord with repentance and a request for forgiveness of sins: **John 17:3** — *And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*



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FREQUENTLY
ASKED
QUESTIONS

How young can you be
and ask Jesus to be
your Savior?

There is definitely no age requirement for salvation. Jesus Himself declared, *But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven"* (**Matthew 19:14**). As soon as children are old enough to understand that they have sinned (**Romans 3:23**), that Jesus died to pay the penalty for their sins (**Romans 5:8; 6:23**), and that they must place their faith in Jesus for salvation (**John 3:16**), then they are old enough to be saved.

A child does not have to understand all the complex issues that are part of the doctrine of salvation. The Bible often encourages us to have faith like a child (**Matthew 18:4; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17**). It is important that parents make sure that their children understand the basic issues (as described above), but the promise of **Acts 16:31** is equally true with regard to an adult or a child: *Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.*

Little children, whether born of believers or unbelievers, may be chosen of God, redeemed by the blood of Christ, and have the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, and so enter into heaven. At what point in their lives they come to a realization of these things will vary from child to child. Some young children have especially tender hearts and, upon hearing that Jesus died for them, are immediately aware of their sinful natures and are compelled to respond. Others of more sanguine personalities may not come to this awareness until they are much older. Only the Lord knows the thoughts of the heart and we trust Him *to seek and save that which is lost* (**Luke 19:10**) according to His perfect will and timing.

Is Jesus the only way
to Heaven?

Yes, Jesus is the only way to heaven. Such an exclusive statement may grate on the postmodern ear, but it is true nonetheless. The Bible teaches that there is no other way to salvation than through Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself says in **John 14:6**, *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* He is not a way, as in one of many; He is *the way*, as in the one and only. No one, regardless of reputation, achievement, special knowledge, or personal holiness, can come to God the Father except through Jesus.

Jesus is the only way to heaven for several reasons. Jesus was *chosen by God* to be the Savior (**1 Peter 2:4**). Jesus is the only One to have come down from heaven and returned there (**John 3:13**). He is the only person to have lived a perfect human life (**Hebrews 4:15**). He is the only sacrifice for sin (**1 John 2:2; Hebrews 10:26**). He alone fulfilled the Law and the Prophets (**Matthew 5:17**). He is the only man to have conquered death forever (**Hebrews 2:14–15**). He is the only Mediator between God and man (**1 Timothy 2:5**). He is the only man whom God has *exalted... to the highest place* (**Philippians 2:9**).

Jesus spoke of Himself as the only way to heaven in several places besides **John 14:6**. He presented Himself as the object of faith in **Matthew 7:21–27**. He said His words are life (**John 6:63**). He promised that those who believe in Him will have eternal life (**John 3:14–15**). He is *the gate of the sheep* (**John 10:7**); *the bread of life* (**John 6:35**); and *the resurrection* (**John 11:25**). No one else can rightly claim those titles.

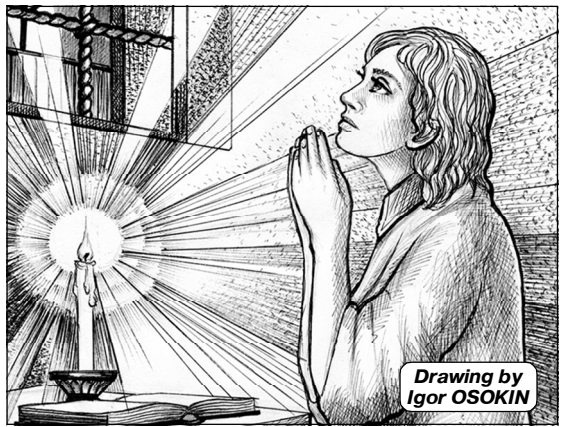
The apostles' preaching focused on the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Peter, speaking to the Sanhedrin, clearly proclaimed Jesus as the only way to heaven: *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved* (**Acts 4:12**). Paul, speaking to the synagogue in Antioch, singled out Jesus as the Savior: *I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin. Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses* (**Acts 13:38–39**). John, writing to the church at large, specifies the name of Christ as the basis of our forgiveness: *I write to you, little children, Because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake* (**1 John 2:12**). No one but Jesus can forgive sin.

Eternal life in heaven is made possible only

ABOUT SALVATION

through Christ. Jesus prayed, *And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent* (**John 17:3**). To receive God's free gift of salvation, we must look to Jesus and Jesus alone. We must trust in Jesus' death on the cross as our payment for sin and in His resurrection. *Even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference...* (**Romans 3:22**).

At one point in Jesus' ministry, many of the crowd were turning their backs on Him and leaving in hopes of finding another savior. Jesus asked the Twelve, *Do you want to go away as well?* (**John 6:67, ESV**). Peter's reply is exactly right: *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God* (**John 6:68–69**). May we all share Peter's faith that eternal life resides only in Jesus Christ.



Drawing by
Igor OSOKIN

How can I have assurance
of my salvation?

Many followers of Jesus Christ look for the assurance of salvation in the wrong places. We tend to seek assurance of salvation in the things God is doing in our lives, in our spiritual growth, in the good works and obedience to God's Word that is evident in our Christian walk. While these things can be evidence of salvation, they are not what we should base the assurance of our salvation. Rather, we should find the assurance of our salvation in the objective truth of God's Word. We should have confident trust that we are saved based on the promises God has declared, not because of our subjective experiences.

How can you have assurance of salvation? Consider **1 John 5:11–13**: *And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God. Who is it that has the Son? It is those who have believed in Him* (**John 1:12**). If you have Jesus, you have life. Not temporary life, but eternal.

God wants us to have assurance of our salvation. We should not live our Christian lives wondering and worrying each day whether or not we are truly saved. That is why the Bible makes the plan of salvation so clear. Believe in Jesus Christ (**John 3:16; Acts 16:31**). *...That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved* (**Romans 10:9**). Have you repented of your sins? Do you believe that Jesus died to pay the penalty for your sins and rose again from the dead (**Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:21**)? Do you trust Him alone for salvation? If your answer to these questions is yes, you are saved! Assurance means freedom from doubt. By taking God's Word to heart, you can have no doubt about the reality of your eternal salvation.

Jesus Himself assures those who believe in Him: *And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand* (**John 10:28–29**). Eternal life is just that — eternal. There is no one, not even yourself, who can take Christ's God-given gift of salvation away from you.

We hide God's Word in our hearts so that we do not sin against Him (**Psalms 119:11**), and this includes the sin of doubt. Take joy in what God's Word is saying to you: instead of doubting, we can live with confidence! We can have the assurance from Christ's own Word that our salvation will never be in question. Our assurance of salvation is based on the perfect and complete salvation God has provided for us through Jesus Christ.

<http://www.gotquestions.org>

Questions arise repeatedly about the external image of God. Does He have an *outward appearance*? How can we even imagine Him? After all, you will agree that our psyche is arranged in such a way that we think in images, which means that we need to somehow imagine what we are talking about. That is why questions about His specific form are puzzling.

For example, first of all, we know very well that *God is a Spirit (John 4:24)*, who *has no flesh or bones (Luke 24:39)*. That is, the nature of God is immeasurably and inconceivably higher than any physical form and is not characterized or limited by any physical parameters.

But on the other hand, as we know, there are quite a lot of references in the Holy Scriptures to the *divine* parts of the body and in general to the appearance of a human. For example,

as a kind of norm when explaining complex concepts in simple words. So let's continue talking about the language of metaphors and look at a few more examples.

Don't we, as adults and educated people, still use the words *the sun has set* and *the sun has risen*? After all, each of us knows quite definitely from the school bench that it is the Earth that revolves around the Sun and its *setting* does not exist in reality but is only perceived as such.

Or the phrase *rain whispers gentle*, with which we want to show the beauty of the rain and our positive state at the moment. And yet we continue to use such phrases in our speech. Not because we don't know how it really is, but because it's simpler, clearer, and, oddly enough, better reflects the true meaning.

Or the example of Ivan Andreevich Krylov's fables with their

“God is not human...” or How to Describe God?

it is asserted that God has eyes (2 Chron. 16:9; Zech. 2:8; Isa. 1:15), hands (Isa. 43:13; 65:2), face, mouth, lips (Micah 4:4; Jeremiah 15:19) and feet (Zech. 14:3–4). At the same time, one can even find a description of the general appearance of the Lord with quite human features: *I saw the Lord sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by, on His right hand and on His left (1 Kings 22:19), I watched till thrones were put in place, And the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow, And the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, Its wheels a burning fire... (Dan. 7:9).*

So, does the Lord have a human-like appearance, if the Holy Scriptures so often speak of him? How can such descriptions be reconciled with claims about the higher, non-physical nature of God? If it were not for such regular and eloquent references of this kind, perhaps the problem would not arise at all. But in view of the above, the question of combining external signs with the spiritual nature of the Lord needs a special explanation.

The main *secret* of solving this seemingly difficult problem is the special language used by the authors of the Holy Scriptures. However, it is not alien to us today, although this manner of expression is used somewhat less often these days. It is a language that, in describing religious supernatural concepts of a higher order, projects human images and properties onto them. This language is called anthropomorphic [(from the Greek *anthropos* (*man*) and *morphe* (*species, image, form*)).

That is, we can already understand that the anthropomorphic language of Scripture should not be taken literally, since its simple means of expression actually describe much more exalted meanings. Therefore, *the eyes, hands, and feet* of the Lord, as well as other human-like attributes, are only images given to us for our understanding. After all, it is a well-known fact that any description is a comparison of the unfamiliar with something familiar.

Religious scholars and culturologists who study such anthropomorphisms in religions and folklore note that the use of this language in antiquity was a kind of norm. Nowadays, we often try to move away from metaphorical speech and use more scientific or business language with specific concepts. However, it is quite obvious that not everything can be expressed concretely.

Let's make sure of it. First of all, let us pay attention to the fact that the anthropomorphic language is somewhat reminiscent of the children's language. In fact, when a parent explains to a child phenomenon that are not yet understandable, the method of endowing natural objects or living beings with human properties is often used. For example, it is explained how a watered flower rejoices in water. Or the sun goes down because it goes to sleep.

But in this case, is anthropomorphic language a sign of childhood underdevelopment? No way. Rather, it should be taken



Engraving by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872)

obvious anthropomorphic images of animals. Hardly anyone can doubt that the metaphorical language of fables more easily conveys serious spiritual and moral edification to readers than ponderous philosophical and scientific formulations. By the way, an example of fables is also found in the Bible (Judg. 9:7–21; 2 Kings 14:9).

Thus, anthropomorphic language is an integral part of the Holy Scripture and is used by it to describe higher meanings. It should never be taken literally, because it does not exist to express specifics. Therefore, the image of a *humanoid* God is nothing more than a metaphor. At the same time, the biblical testimonies about the spiritual, exalted higher nature of God have a direct, not a figurative meaning.

As we have seen, this language is equally characteristic of antiquity and of our days. We, modern people, are accustomed to thinking that the language of concreteness, the language of scientific terminology and concepts, is the best and most accurate language of expression. However, it is very incapable of putting into words the higher concepts, as well as human language in general. The language of metaphors, fairy tales, and fables is no worse, and in some ways better than, scientific and philosophical languages. After all, concreteness operates only with our limited rational level of knowledge, whereas metaphor allows intuitive knowledge to manifest itself, which has information of a higher level.



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