

Out to find answers

Atheist's pages of questions about faith led to unexpected movie project.

When film director Michael Ray Lewis' wife, Kristina, started attending church, he challenged her with tough questions about Christianity in order to show her that her beliefs were unscientific. Eventually he compiled a three-page-long list of questions he had about God, suffering, evolution versus creation, and the Bible, and began to research the answers for himself. He's now making a



Michael Ray Lewis

documentary detailing what he discovered.

In an interview with Reasons to Believe, Michael shares that he previously identified as an atheist.

"I grew up as an unbeliever, never really thinking there was evidence for God and never even really caring to look because I would always see the Christians on the street corners with megaphones that would say, 'You're going to hell,'" Michael explains. "[That was] my perspective on Christians – what they believed was false because how can Christianity be compatible with science?"

But when Kristina, who attended Sunday School as a child, felt a pull to go back to church, he decided to go along with her – "just to be nice".

As he looked around at the congregation he understood why people attended church but he just didn't believe it could be true. Kristina pressed him on it, asking him why he didn't believe.

"I hit her with the difficult questions – really hard questions that she wasn't able to answer," Michael admits. He asked questions about evil and suffering, whether evolution was compatible with Christianity, whether the Bible could be trusted and if it was actually inspired by God, and how she knew Christianity was the one true religion.

Kristina wasn't able to answer all his questions and encouraged him to research the answers himself.

One day, Michael was watching videos on YouTube when he came across a video from a Christian astrophysicist.

"It was a video of him going over the creation days and his perspective on the creation days and ... I thought okay, this may have a little bit of merit behind it. From there on it was about a three-year journey from that point of me just studying and trying to find answers – trying more so to prove my wife wrong and in the process ended up proving her right."

Michael watched more of the Christian astrophysicist's videos and also read his and other Christian apologists' books. The deeper he dug, the more he found compelling evidence for Christianity and creationism.

Kristina introduced Michael to a theologian (an expert in the study of God). One night, armed with three pages of questions about Christianity, Michael sat down with the theologian and listened as he answered every one of them.

Fun for Kids
Pages 5,6,7

Youth Truth
Pages 9 and 10

BACK PAGE

AIMING HIGH

OSCAR TSHIEBWE

• Turn to page 2



Meseret Cohen then and now. Photo: supplied

ORPHAN FINDS NEW HOME

Ethiopian Meseret Cohen was nine when she and her three siblings became orphans.

The death of her parents – her mother from tuberculosis and her father from malaria – were unexpected, sudden and happened within months of each other. The young children, who were living in Addis Ababa at the time, were thrown into chaos.

"My parents' death turned my life and my world upside down," says Meseret, or Messie as she likes to be known.

"I suddenly lost hope, security and belief in a future. I was the eldest and so, at the age of nine, I took on the role of motherhood."

In a YouTube video entitled 'The Walk' on the Gifted by Grace site, she says that being an orphan hit her hard. "My mother played such a huge role in taking care of us, so there was this sense of hopelessness."

She also found she had some big questions for God. Messie had grown up in a practising Christian home – her father was an orthodox priest and their family attended church regularly. "But now I couldn't understand what kind of God would let these things

happen to me and my siblings," she relates.

"I began questioning the moment my mom passed away and I said I would never step into a church – I said 'God I want to see You do something'."

The children were sent to an orphanage and lived there for four years, always hoping they would be adopted. But chances were slim; the orphanage preferred to keep families together, and very few people would take on four children.

The orphanage was Catholic and the children were required to attend church every day.

"I didn't want to go to church but I didn't have a choice," Messie shares. "After a while I started to talk to God again. Then the same questions came up again, why did God let this happen to us, to all the children in the orphanage, and to me?"

"God didn't seem to be answering my questions. But with no other choice, I decided to trust Him

and prayed that He would bring a great family into my life again."

Four years later, her prayers were answered. The Cohen family, who had a long history of missionary work in Ethiopia, met Messie

and her siblings during a volunteer trip, fell in love with them and adopted all four.

Fifteen months later, in June 2009, the children and their adoptive parents landed in Perth, Australia.

Messie was 14. "To me it was a miracle," she says. "All praise to Jesus for pulling this off!"

They lived in a small town, where her adoptive parents led a church.

"One of the best things that God did was bring me to a Christian family again," she beams.

She struggled initially with assimilating into a new country – "people would stare at us because we were literally the only four African people in the town!" – but overcame those early challenges and has achieved much.

“ Don't give up when you're facing tough stuff. ”

• Turn to page 2

Out to find answers

• From page 1

"I got to the end of the page and he looks at me and he's like, 'Do you believe it?' I said, 'I think I do.'"

On the car ride home, Michael prayed to God: "I'm giving my life to You. I'm going to put my trust in You. I do believe this is true."

Michael refers to his conversion from atheism to Christianity as not "blind faith" but the result of "a lot of research and a lot of work actually investigating the truth of Christianity."

"The moment that I gave my life to Christ, I was no longer looking for the evidence to just prove that Christianity was true, but I got excited and I actually wanted to know more about God. So I studied and studied and studied and I would take apologetic courses online and anything I could do to just get as much information in

my head as I could because I wanted to know God.

"I wanted to know attributes of Him and I wanted to know everything that I could."

He also had a desire to share with people what he had discovered.

Michael is currently directing a documentary called *Universe Designed*, which will explore some of the evidences for God's existence.

He says most Christians and unbelievers do not know the arguments and evidences for the God of the Bible and the film will help summarise this and offer resources for further study and exploration.

For the film, Michael has interviewed Christian theologians, apologists and scientists, including the astrophysicist who played such an instrumental role in Michael's conversion to Christianity.

"I'm going to put my trust in You. I do believe this is true."



Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

- ACROSS**
- 1 Winged angels
 - 7 Dog's sharp bark
 - 8 Causes wheat allergies
 - 10 Cathedral alcove
 - 11 Ruble fractions
 - 13 Too awful for words
 - 16 Canal site
 - 18 Apartment
 - 20 Thyroid enlargement
 - 21 Continental money
 - 22 Staying alive
- DOWN**
- 2 What 'SOS' means
 - 3 Interest amount
 - 4 Teller's boss (4,7)
 - 5 Shortness of sight
 - 6 Criticism
 - 8 Unfairly raise a house price
 - 9 Takes habitually
 - 12 Slender
 - 14 'Grand' instruments
 - 15 Boxing prize
 - 17 Shade of blue
 - 18 Pacific island nation
 - 19 Diva's solo

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	

SOLUTIONS PAGE 11



"Acorns or chocolate cake?"

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Little book shook her faith

As a teenager, Uma Moorthy prided herself on being a staunch Brahmin Hindu. Every day she would read from the Hindu holy book and visit temples to worship idols. But while she was on a school camp, she started to question everything she and her family believed.

Sharing her story at the Gideons International Conference, Uma explains she was born and raised in an affluent family in India.

"I used to do a lot of ritualistic things and physical sacrifices to idols," she recalls. "I was so pious – I was from a very upper caste and I felt so proud. But I never had peace in my heart."

She attended a Christian convent school, where her three older sisters had gone before her.

When she was in first grade she was given a small New Testament Bible from the Gideons International.

"I was so fascinated with this small Bible because it was so tiny that it fit into my small hands and I always used to keep it in my uniform pocket," Uma recalls. "Because I like literature a lot I just simply started reading the Psalms and Proverbs."

When she was in 12th grade, she decided to attend a Scripture Union camp with her friends.

On the last day, one of the nuns shared a message from Isaiah 44 regarding idol worship that caused Uma to pause. The passage talked about the foolishness of fashioning an idol out of half a piece of wood and burning the other half in a fire.

"That night was a sleepless night... out of curiosity and just to go and fight with that sister the next day, I opened the [school] Bible, and for the first time I started reading the book of Isaiah ... I don't know what happened but the Holy Spirit just transformed me. And for the first time in my life, I got to know that the true living God hates idol worship. I cannot compress this omnipresent God and make Him into a statue or an object and worship Him and

say that you are God. I can't worship what I make from my hand."

As she read, she also realized that the God of the Bible wanted to have a personal relationship with her.

"When I was a Hindu, I used to worship 1,000 gods. It is said that in Hinduism, there are 33 crore gods, and I used to worship so many gods for each and every thing, but none of those gods wanted to have a personal relationship with me. But the God of the Bible wanted me to have a personal relationship with Him. And I could call this God Abba Father, my Dad, and I could share anything with Him, just as I am."

The next thing Uma realized was that the God of the Bible did not require the sacrifices she used to make as a Hindu.

"I need not go climb the Himalayas. I did not [need to] go to the River Ganges and dip for holiness to wash away and cleanse my sins, but this God sacrificed Himself on the cross of Calvary, while I was still a sinner. So this changed my life – I can just go to Him as I am ... So that day, I accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Savior."

But life didn't get easier from Uma from then on.

"I had to go through a lot of persecution. My family could not accept my faith ... they used to throw away my Bibles."

But on the other hand, she experienced physical healing: "The Lord



healed my tongue tie. Once I used to be stammering. But now I'm speaking in front of 2,000 people."

She became a college lecturer and married a Christian man who also used to be Hindu, and they had two children. The family then moved to America as missionaries.

"When I left India and I came to the US, I just left the small Gideon Bible in the upper room in my house in India, where my parents live. And I said, 'Lord, I cannot share my testimony with them because they are against my faith and I cannot convert them because no man can convert, but I believe that Your Word is alive.'"

Afraid that if she left a larger Bible it would be noticed and her parents would throw it away, Uma hid her small Gideon Bible on top of a shelf.

One day, she called her father in India to talk to him about something she was going through. She was surprised when he quoted verses from the Bible.

"He said, 'Jesus is with you though we are not there. Your God is there and He's a living God, and He did so many miracles in the Bible.'"

Her father had found the hidden Bible and had started reading it.

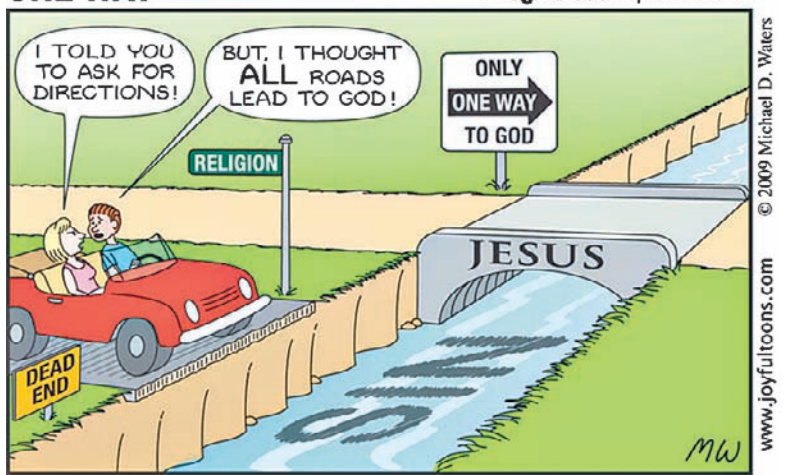
Uma's mother was not happy when she found out and told her husband that she didn't want a part of this "Bible business".

But during the Covid-19 pandemic, fear struck her mother's heart.

"I had an opportunity to share about God's love, and the courage and the encouragement that the Word gives," Uma relates. "I just shared with her Psalm 91. I just did it once, and after that, the Word of God did everything. The Word of God got into her heart and she says that Jesus is Lord and she is proclaiming this truth to all the Hindu relatives... I couldn't convert them, but the Word of God was there them. The Word of God is alive and active."

"None of those gods wanted to have a personal relationship with me."

ONE WAY



Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. – JOHN 14:6 NIV

ORPHAN FINDS NEW HOME

• From page 1

She graduated from Bible College with a Bachelor's degree in Ministry and launched an organisation called "Life After Adoption".

Inspired by mission trips, Messie has gone on to complete a Graduate Certificate in Social Change and Development.

Looking back, the 31-year-old says: "I don't really know how I did it at the time, and my faith was up and down, but I can now say God was there every minute to provide good friends, an amazing Christian school, great parents and extended family, and a great country."

"I know now that it was God who brought me to this place and through all the different things that have happened to me. He was looking after me and my siblings

through it all."

Messie remembers one church service in particular that restored her faith.

"It was one of my most memorable experiences with God, the beginning of healing from some past hurts and fears. On that night I met God personally, one-on-one. It was a moment of revelation that He truly is a God of hope, faith and love. I now had a new hope and future, so I decided to pursue Him."

"I have a heart and a passion to go back to Ethiopia and share with others who God is and what He has done for me. I am still not sure where God is taking me," Messie admits, "But I have started on this journey of following Him. I just want to say yes to Him and His work. God has a plan and a purpose for everyone. Don't give up when you're facing tough stuff."

I was a workman for the devil

BY MARK ELLIS

Shane “Little Mike” Reese grew up in Orange County, California, with mixed messages from two sides of his family. His mother’s side of the family were “solid”, but his father’s side had a felonious past.

“My dad’s side was pretty much all crime, biker lifestyle, drug deals, and questionable women,” he told God Reports.

Shane’s early life seemed promising, as he excelled in high school athletics.

“I was a super jock and I ended up with a full-ride scholarship for shot-put, discus, and powerlifting. I was going to the Nationals in Arizona and I was a shoo-in to win.”

However, a school official made a serious error with respect to Shane.

“My athletic director gave me the wrong time to show up for the meet. I was unable to throw or compete or do anything,” he recounts.

When he returned home from Arizona, there were numerous messages on his answering machine, apologizing for the terrible mistake, but the damage was done.

“My scholarships were athletic, and I failed to place in a national meet, so I got dropped from all my scholarships.”

He went to the last party of his senior year in high school feeling dejected. “I was in give-up mode, and there was some cocaine at the party.

I thought, what the heck, I have nothing else to lose. So that’s where it started. That kicked off my career as a habitual drug user.”

He found an escape from the painful emotions connected with the sudden loss of a promising athletic future, and a downward spiral ensued.

At 19, he was arrested in a Tower Records store for shoplifting and during the arrest, officers found drugs in his possession.

“I went to jail for the first time at age 19, which was a major shock to my family because I’d always been the jock, the athletic guy.”

They had really no idea what was going on behind the scenes after high school.”

From the age of 19 to 36 Shane was addicted and locked up, either in a penitentiary or county jail, for sales, multiple possessions, parole violations, weapons charges, and even an explosives charge.

“I was a workman for the devil, doing things that go along with the drug life and the people related to it: robbing, stealing, and hurting people. I was definitely working, and it wasn’t for God.”

Shane stayed high whether he was in jail or out of jail.

He says drugs were readily available when he was incarcerated.

“I was an IV drug user. So when you get to that level, there’s nothing off limits as far as what your conscience will let you do. I destroyed families,

not only my own, but other people’s,” he admits.

One of his greatest regrets is that he injected a pregnant girl with drugs. “She was just like me, an IV drug user. Everything came second to the drug and getting high.

“The devil is strong,” he adds. “He lives in the lives of people that are out there on the streets and doing drugs, because it’s an easy place for him to land.”

At 36, Shane appeared before a judge who offered him the choice of another nine years in prison, or a 90-day rehab program.

“That was an easy choice, so I went to the 90-day program, just to get parole and my family off my back and appease them for a little while. I had no real goal in mind of getting sober or getting clean or anything like that. It was just to get everybody off my back.”

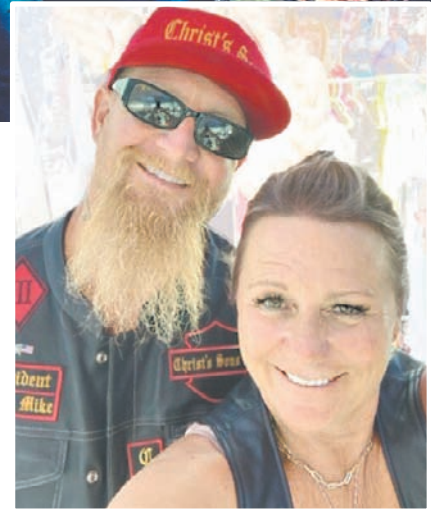
In the rehab program in Santa Ana, California, Shane began a 12-step program, albeit half-heartedly. One day he attended a meeting with 200 people, and he felt the guest speaker skewer him with these words:

“Hey, stupid, you want to be



Shane Reese (second from right) with some other members of Christ’s Sons Motorcycle Club.

INSET: Shane with his wife, Tina.



happy? Go do what the happy people do.”

I don’t know any happy people, Shane thought, and he began to ponder the man’s words in his heart.

“On Sundays, we were able to leave for a couple of hours to go see family or go to church. And I ran into a girlfriend of mine who said that this guy had beat her up and broke her finger and he goes to this church.”

“So I went to this church, not necessarily to find God, but to find this guy and give him what for. I wasn’t

thinking that God is present at this place and there’s Christian people at this place. I was going there to hurt this guy.”

As Shane sat back in his seat and began to listen, Pastor “Freeway Pete” Cropsey, a former leader of the Vagos Motorcycle Club, delivered a message that penetrated Shane’s calloused heart.

When Freeway Pete gave the invitation to follow Jesus, Shane came forward and surrendered his life to Jesus as his Lord and Savior and was born again.

“My dad was a biker and I wanted to be like my dad my whole life. And I got my wish. But one of the guys that he hung out with was this guy named Freeway Pete, who was the national Sergeant at Arms, for the Vagos 1% Outlaw Motorcycle Club. That means he was a real heavy hitter. If there’s any issues within the club, he’s the one that goes and handles it, however he needs to handle it, nationally, which is a very big deal.

“So lo and behold I go to this church, and there’s Freeway Pete — 30 years later — as a pastor of this church.

His message landed home because he looked like me, he talked like me, was covered in tattoos, a biker, and he got his life right.

“From that day, in 2013, I have been saved and serving the Lord, living this amazing Christian life.”

Shane met his wife, Tina, in rehab. She got saved at the same church, and they were baptized together, “We’re still happily married today, seven years later.”

He marvels at the way his life has been transformed. “The most measurable change for me is the peace, the serenity, the true joy of this new life in Christ.”

Shane is currently the president of Christ’s Sons Motorcycle Club. “Ninety-eight percent of us have walked the prison yards in Southern California, have been addicted, homeless, violent — we even have a former bomb maker.

“But we all did one thing different in our lives that changed our lives, and that was submit to God. That’s the only thing different we did that changed our entire lives.”

Fathered by a serial killer

When the FBI arrived at Kerri Rawson’s house and informed her that her father, Dennis Rader, was the notorious serial killer known as BTK, she felt like the room was spinning.

“I was shaking all over,” she writes in her book, *A Serial Killer’s daughter: My story of hope, love and overcoming*. “The room turned red, dark splotches came into view. I was falling into a black hole with no idea of how I was ever going to get out.”

The father Kerri had grown up with was very different to the man the police were now telling her he was.

In an interview with *Jesus Calling* podcast, Kerri describes growing up in a typical American family.

“We went on a lot of family vacations. We went fishing and camping a lot with my dad. We went to church every Sunday with my family... We just didn’t know until my father was arrested that he had been living a double life from the mid-70s on.”

She says her father was a solid, decent, good husband and father — about 95 percent of the time.

“There were times where he could be emotionally abusive, and there were two times he was physically abusive with my brother. And when you’re little and your dad’s being a brute, you just learn to adapt around him or follow what your mom is doing. In hindsight, you look back and you realize you were just seeing the very tip of a very deep, insane iceberg.”

Dennis committed his first murders in 1974 when he killed a family of four. He took six more lives between then and 1991. During that time Dennis taunted the police and media and claimed responsibility for the murders, calling himself “BTK” for bind, torture and kill. He also claimed to be motivated to kill by a supernatural element he called “factor X”.

One of Dennis’ victims was Marine Hedge, a grandmother and widow who lived down the street from the Raders.

“Mom and I would wave hello to her on our



Kerri Rawson and her father Dennis Rader. Photo: YouTube

way to my grandparents,” Kerri writes. After the murder, Kerri remembers feeling frightened and wondering if she and her family were safe.

“At the time dad had reassured me: ‘Don’t worry, we’re safe,’” she says.

In 1996 tragedy struck Kerri’s own family when her cousin died in an accident. Although she had been raised attending the church where her father served as an usher, she walked away from her childhood faith.

“I couldn’t reconcile what happened down the street with God, who I wasn’t sure even existed,” Kerri admits. Kerri’s anger towards God was further fuelled after watching her grandfather die of cancer. At the same time she was facing the stress of university life, difficulties in friendships and struggles with depression and anxiety.

On a camping trip with her father, brother and cousin, Kerri was emotionally and physically exhausted when faced with the dangers of not having enough water, dangerous terrain and being separated from her brother for a time.

“I started praying to God, which is probably the first time in my life I had actually prayed to Him... I said I would accept His Son and asked for forgiveness. And I said I would come back.”

When she returned home from the trip, Kerri started reading her Bible and attending Bible studies with her College Campus Crusade for Christ. In college she met Darian and the couple married in

2003 after they graduated.

The following year, Kerri read that BTK had resurfaced after ceasing communication with the police and media in 1979. Now he was taunting them again, claiming responsibility for a murder from 1986. This led to a massive manhunt.

Dennis was arrested while driving home from work on February 25, 2005. He had been on the lam for 31 years. Kerri told the FBI they must have the wrong man and ran through his credentials: military service, church president, Boy Scout leader, dutiful son.

Later that night the FBI informed Kerri that DNA evidence had led them to her father and that he had confessed to the

murders.

A psychologist for Dennis’ legal team diagnosed him with narcissistic, antisocial and obsessive-compulsive personality disorders.

Kerri was swept up in a media circus and her identity was ripped from her. She was no longer Kerri Rawson — she was BTK’s Daughter.

In the months following Dennis’ arrest, Kerri clung to the hope she found in repeating Bible verses such as Psalm 18:2: “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”

Dennis pled guilty and was sentenced to 175 years in prison.

In a letter Dennis wrote to Kerri, he said he spent his time in prison studying the Bible and “working toward Christian light”. He shared remorse for his victims and that he sought God for forgiveness.

Kerri was diagnosed with PTSD and started therapy, but even after the worst of her PTSD had been dealt with, Kerri shares that her anger still festered, preventing her wounds from fully healing. But with God’s help, she has been able to forgive her father.

“My identity didn’t belong to my broken father on earth,” Kerri writes. “My identity was meant to rest in the arms of God — my heavenly Father. Who never fails and never gives up.”

Forgiving my father's killer

BY BENJAMIN LAHOOD

Figure skating brought moments of peace to Katherine Thacker. She needed a healthy outlet because her mind was obsessed with hateful thoughts directed toward the suspect who killed her father, a policeman, while he was on duty. Forgiveness was out of the question.

"I started writing very angry letters to the man who killed my dad," Katherine says on a 700 Club video. "But not only did I express my hurt, I also expressed what I wished could happen to him. And they were really, really hateful."

Her all-consuming hatred started in 1998. That's when three officers came to the front door of their home to break the bad news to the family.

"It was like being hit by a Mack truck," Katherine says. "Watching the relationships that my friends had with their dads, I definitely envied them."

Ice skating was a moment of beauty in her life. "It was always an outlet for me," she remembers.

Broken in spirit, she turned away from God, blaming Him for her dad's death.

"Why did God let my dad die?" she asked. "If God's good, why did He let the man who killed my dad do this?"

Her distancing from God continued until she became a junior in high school when she went to a week-long summer Christian camp. The motivational speaker displayed a genuine joy that Katherine realized she lacked.

Slowly but surely, she began to tear down, brick by brick, the wall she had erected to keep God out of her life.

"I assumed that if I built up this wall, God would be long gone. He'd be so far gone," she recalls. "I realized that when I took the wall down, He was still right there. He didn't leave or walk away."

Katherine became a Christian and



Photo: Kevin Manguio



Katherine Thacker shares on YouTube and (left) performs in Liberty University's 'Praisefest Christmas on Ice' show, December 15, 2017.

realized she must forgive her dad's killer.

"My anger was consuming my thoughts, consuming my heart. It was blocking out parts of my heart that God could easily fill up," she says. "So I ended up, through a lot of prayer, able to fully forgive the man who killed my dad. I hold no grudge against him. He can experience God's forgiveness too, because he's a sinful

human just like me."

Katherine stopped writing hateful letters that she never sent to the murderer. Instead, she started writing letters to the bereaved families of fallen policemen.

"I know for my family getting handwritten letters in the mail just to say, 'hey, we're thinking of you, we are thankful for his sacrifice,' those

kinds of letters meant the world to me," Katherine says.

She recruited others to get involved in the letter-writing campaign, to let people know God cares about their suffering, sees what they are going through and loves them.

The power of forgiveness brought healing to Katherine's heart and a blessing to many others.

Rodeo cowboy endured hard knocks

BY MARK ELLIS

Monty Rieck is a plumber, hunter, rodeo guy, and a cowboy. In a new autobiography he describes a "wild ride to redemption," when the one trained in calf-roping got roped by God himself.

"My dad was a third generation plumbing contractor and professional drag racer," he told God Reports. "He was a John Wayne-type; he idolized John Wayne. He was like a big six-foot-two, 230-pound man. A man of very few words, like John Wayne."

When Monty's oldest brother was born, forceps damaged his spinal cord so badly that he never matured beyond that of a two-year-old. "I think my mom sort of got mad at God, so she went away from the church. I didn't grow up with anything of God in my life."

Monty's father bought a ranch in California where Monty learned to rope steers and ride bulls, as recounted in his autobiography, *I Am Eli*.

"I grew up there from the time I was 10 until I left home, so I grew up working hard. When I turned 16, I went to work for my dad as a plumber."

"Following my dad's lead, I became a man's man. He was a good provider, but emotionally he was never there for us."

In high school, his father gave him his first beer, and his brothers provided marijuana and cocaine, which he and his brothers also began to sell. "I was working hard, playing hard, doing a lot of partying, and a lot of womanizing," Monty recounts. "As soon as I began to get close to [girls], or they started getting close to me, I would just get rid of them, or go to another one out of fear of getting hurt."

After father and son had a falling

out, Monty moved to Colorado with his wife, Pam, and their son, Cody. He went to work with another plumber, who happened to be a strong Christian. "It was my first real experience with someone that I believe was a born-again Christian. He said he talked to God and God talked to him. And I was thinking; This guy's crazy."

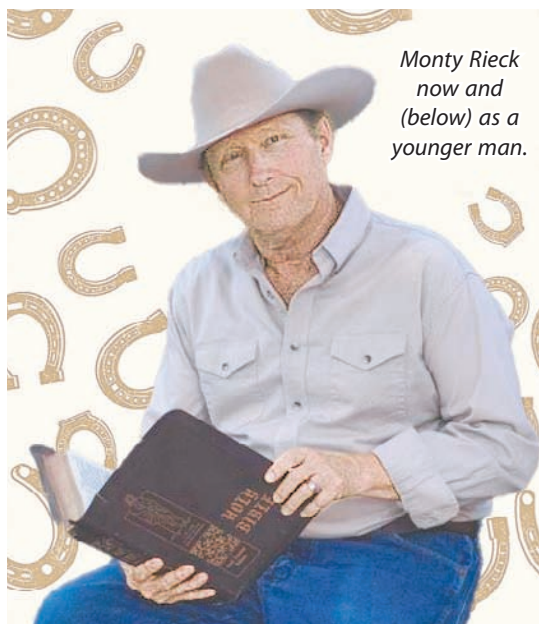
"I had nothing of God in my life, except seeing the Pope on TV, or as a family watching Billy Graham. They're so different, I had a real question in my mind — what is religion really?"

Not long after their move, Monty got a surprising phone call. "My dad called me on Thanksgiving morning for the first time ever, just to talk to me, and I was blown away. I thought he was making amends, you know, in his own way, following that argument."

Monty was stunned when he learned his father died later that day. "That was a huge shock to me. I just bought a brand-new house, and I was doing so well. I just felt so lost, my whole identity and my comfort and everything was just gone."

After his father's passing, Monty and his wife and son returned to his home town, and he got back into the plumbing business there. "The business started struggling really bad. It got to a point where ... I didn't know what to do."

"I was so broken because of my business and marriage failing. My relationship with my brother, because we went into business together, was failing. I was so tired of fighting, trying to save my business



Monty Rieck now and (below) as a younger man.

and fighting with my wife; we had a lot of really serious problems."

Through a multi-level marketing business he joined, "I ended up going to church for the first time ever, because on Sundays, they would have a nondenominational church service, and so I started going to those. That's where I started hearing the gospel and hearing Christian music and seeing Christian bands."

In response to one particular message, Monty gave his life to the Lord. "I heard [Jesus'] message of peace, that even through your sufferings, you can have joy. I was seeing all these Christian people, how their demeanor was so different, you know, they're going through trials and tribulations, but they still had a joy to them. I ended up surrendering my life to Jesus Christ at that time."

"Oh man, I was all in! I was just bawling and crying, and I just lifted up my hands and I said, 'Lord Jesus, I don't want my (old) life. You know, I give my life to you. I surrender to you fully and totally, and I don't want to be Monty. I want to be like you. I just totally gave it all up.'

"I know at that moment I was born again!"

Because of Monty's rodeo background, he has had 12 different surgeries, and used the downtime to write his book. "I lived the hard life and paid for it," he said. "[*I Am Eli*] is quite a journey with lots of bumps, bruises and brokenness that I think people will relate to."

This article first appeared on godreports.com and is used with kind permission.

Sin is not static

BY SHANE IDLEMAN

DAN Delzell, in a riveting blog from a decade ago titled, 'Google Executive's Tragic Death Sends Somber Warning,' wrote the following:

"How do you go from being a devoted father of five and a successful Silicon Valley executive, into a 51-year-old man convulsing from a fatal dose of heroin on your 50-foot yacht, with a prostitute walking over your dying body to take a final sip of wine before leaving you to die?"

He then asked, "How do tragedies like this take place?"

One step at a time

First, the enemy [of our souls (Satan)] rarely pushes us off the cliff, so to speak. We're often led down one step at a time, one compromise at a time, one wrong choice at a time.

For example, the enemy doesn't show a couple the pain and anguish and the years of regret that adultery brings; he deceives them with the temporary enjoyment of sex and a false sense of freedom from responsibility.

If the full story was known beforehand, no doubt different choices might have been made. We're often not shown the pain that sin brings, we're enticed by the temporary pleasure.

An unforgettable analogy

A story I heard demonstrates a powerful truth: "A young man, determined to find help for his troubled life, walked to a neighboring church. He told the pastor that his life was meaningless and in constant turmoil. He wanted to make better choices but couldn't."

He described the conflict: "It's as if I have two dogs constantly battling within me. One dog is evil, while the other is good. The battles are long and difficult; they drain me emotionally and mentally."

The pastor asked, "Which dog wins the battles?" Hesitantly, the young man admitted, "The evil dog." The pastor looked at him and said, "That's the one you feed the most. You need to starve that dog to death!"

What we embrace eventually embraces us

One of the reasons why people struggle with lust or anger is because they feed those emotions through their media consumption. What we embrace eventually embraces us. "The more we follow that which is good, the faster and the further we shall flee from that which is evil" (Matthew Henry).

Who controls you?

Romans 8:6 says that if our sinful nature controls our mind, there is death. But if the Holy Spirit controls our mind, there is life and peace. With God's help, you'll begin to control your thoughts instead of allowing your thoughts to control you.

For those who are skeptical about the media's influence, consider why companies spend millions of dollars on commercials. They obviously understand the concept of "suggestive selling."

Why walk willingly into the enemy's camp

In the end, the choice is yours when it comes to what you watch and listen to, but why would you willingly walk into the enemy's camp? Why would you feed wrong desires and thoughts when they do nothing but war against the soul?

If you're questioning God's existence, experiencing violent outbursts of anger, struggling with addiction or lust, or continually feeling depressed or discouraged; evaluate your diet of television, movies, the internet, music, friends, and your thoughts in general. Are they lifting you up, or pulling you down? Commit your life to God and develop a devotional life that consists of prayer, worship, and studying the Bible. This is how you win the battle within.

Shane Idleman is the founder and lead pastor of Westside Christian Fellowship in Lancaster, California. Shane's sermons, articles, books, and radio program can all be found at shaneidleman.com or wcfav.org. Follow him on Facebook at: facebook.com/confusedchurch, or on Parler https://parler.com/profile/ShaneIdleman/posts.



Deposit photos

Nature's patterns point to God

Jonathan Safarti speaks to geography expert Dr Sarah Buckland

Those who think geography is just about finding places on an atlas or memorising longitude and latitude haven't met Dr Sarah Buckland.

Sarah, a lecturer and researcher at the University of West Indies, says geography has helped her understand both human and natural environments.

Sarah strongly disagrees that science and the Bible conflict.

She explains: "As I study science, geography is just the world's complexity. All we scientists can do is discover what has already been created — or manipulate, synthesise, or channel aspects of creation in order to problem-solve and propose theories on how things work."

"As Psalm 111:2 implies, scientific study should naturally bring any honest person closer to God. Without God, there could be no scientific exploration."

Furthermore, scientific discoveries point to nature's underlying regularity, created by the Divine Lawmaker (Psalm 119:91).

Patterns

Sarah elaborates: "In my research on historical drought patterns in some of Jamaica's microclimates, I found that very distinct inter-annual signals were evident even at the micro-climate scale (rainfall fluctuations with interspersed drought occurrences). These patterns closely reflected larger-scale climate variability modes (eg. El Niño/ La Niña Southern Oscillations), along with variations caused by local conditions."

"The existence of distinct patterns that persist across different scales is a testament to our natural world's very precise order and balance. It could never have arisen by chance."

"Finding any precise pattern in nature is a loud testament to the God of order who upholds the world with His Word (1 Corinthians 14:33, Colossians 1:17)," Sarah says.

Geographical accuracy

Sarah points out other geographical discoveries that support the Bible's accuracy.

"In Job 38: 16, God asks Job: 'Have you entered the springs of the sea? Or have you walked in search of the depths?'"

"The historical date of Job's writings is about 1400 BC. At that time, human imagination could

Dr Sarah Fey Buckland
Photo: Supplied



never fathom today's oceanic exploration. Even before 1930, little was known about the ocean floor. It was not until 1973 — over 3,000 years after Job was written — that under-sea springs were directly observed."

This example is one of Sarah's favorites as it exemplifies the Bible's robustness as a basis for further scientific discovery:

“Without God there would be no scientific exploration.”

Matthew Fontaine Maury, the author of the first modern oceanography textbook, used the Bible for scientific hypotheses. After reading Psalm 8:8's 'paths of the seas', he discovered ocean and air currents, which revolutionised travel.

The Bible's geographical accuracy is so overwhelming it turned Scottish archaeologist Sir William Mitchell Ramsay (1851–1939), from an atheist and a sceptic to a believer in Christ.

Sir William had tried disproving the Bible's account of the Apostle Paul's travels in the book of Acts. But his research showed every detail was so accurate that he ended up concluding Luke (who wrote Acts) was one of the greatest ancient world historians.

Eventually he converted to Christianity, shocking the intellectual world by doing so.

Faith journey

Sarah, however, was born into a Christian home with both parents active in Christian work. "My family cultivated a prayer and Bible study environment with nightly devotions. I quickly grew in my love for God. By the age of four, I desired to be baptised [immersed in water as a symbol of dying to one's old life]."

"But it was not until age eight that my parents felt I was old enough to understand what I was doing. I vividly recall that Sunday, 2 December 2001, when I received Jesus as my Lord through faith. I experienced a peace and joy I knew to be God's presence. Since that moment, I have experienced many lessons in my spiritual journey."

Why it matters

Many people, misled into thinking that evolution is a proven fact, attempt to 'pretzelize' Scripture to fit. But Sarah warns that evolution undermines three fundamental Christian teachings: "The salvation message, the Bible's historical accuracy explaining this message, and Jesus' omniscience and sovereignty."

First, she points out that the Gospel message of "salvation from sins is only through Jesus dying on the cross and His Resurrection. But in evolutionary theory, death pre-existed original sin in creation, dictating that death could not be sin's penalty. Evolution steeply undermines the reason for Jesus' suffering and death in our place."

Second, evolution undermines the reliability of biblical history: "Evolutionary theory posits that human ancestry cannot be traced directly to only one man, contrasting with the biblical account of a literal Adam and Eve."

"This compromised belief undermines Jesus' entire genealogy ... Jesus' human ancestry traces back to Adam and the patriarchs."

Finally, evolution undermines Jesus' authority, omniscience, and thus His deity:

"In several Bible passages, Jesus specifically referenced patriarchs and events, including the murder of Adam's son Abel (Luke 11:51), Noah and the Flood and Ark (Luke 17:26–27), and how man was created at "the beginning of creation" (Mark 10:5–9).

"If the Genesis account were fictional, one would conclude that Jesus was deceiving His listeners or had limited knowledge."

Evolution and racism

Sarah points out that only the true history of the world can solve racial problems; evolution, on the other hand, exacerbates them:

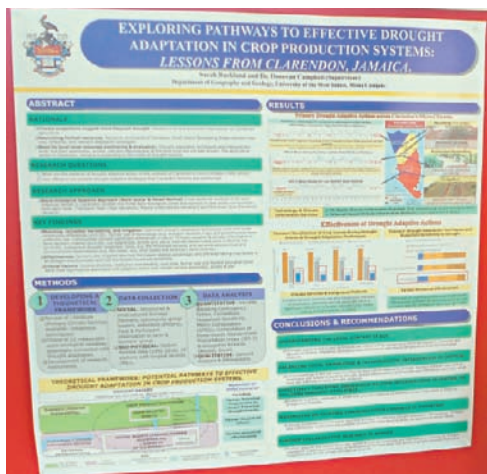
"Genesis clearly states that all human beings were created in God's image. All persons being created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights has formed the foundation for most positive anti-racial campaigns, including those by William Wilberforce and Dr Martin Luther King Jr."

"The Bible clearly teaches that God created humanity from 'one man' (Acts 17:26). While many secular movements depict Christianity as racist, the evolutionary worldview inherently has the most racist roots, both philosophically and in practice," Sarah explains.

"Biological evolution requires an evolutionary 'progression' from the first 'primitive' humans to modern man. Unfortunately, Darwin and the early Darwinians point to an African origin of the most 'primitive' humans."

"Conversely, Europeans were considered the highest-evolved race. This philosophy influenced some of the most racist movements, including Hitler's Nazism."

"Once again, the Bible's unchanging doctrines always provide the most ethical basis for all aspects of life, in contrast to ever-changing evolutionary 'science'," Sarah concludes.



Not so bird-brained after all!

PETER'S CORNER

HOW is your memory? Did you forget where you put your car keys or phone this week? Or like me, forget that your cup of tea is in the microwave?

Did you know that there is a creature that can remember where it hid 30,000 items, up to nine



months ago? There is a bird, the Clark's Nutcracker, which does exactly that. The bird is native to the Rocky Mountains area of North America, and has the beak size and shape to extract seeds from pine cones of the White Bark Pine. It can carry up to 150 seeds at a time in an expanding pouch just under its tongue.

But what happens next is amazing. The Nutcracker buries them 3 cm deep (perfect depth for germination) in soil, in bundles of about 10, in 3,000 places all over an area of about 15 kilometres in size. This process is repeated over and over thousands of times, to store the seeds that will sustain the bird through the long winters. But oh no! Problem! The ground and the seeds become covered by a blanket of snow for months during the winter!

It's no problem. The bird can still find them! In the winter, when it needs to remember the 3,000 locations, the bird's brain physically swells as it works to recall the exact locations. The brain later returns to normal "summer size."

Think about how this bird could evolve to do such mental feats. It needs truly amazing memory up front in order to stay alive. There is not much value in "evolving" a brain that can remember where only the first seed store is, while winter has four months to run! That brain will not survive, and the alleged evolution has to start all over again.

It is not evolution. God told us how it happened in the Bible. Truly all creatures — including humans — are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14) and we are grateful to be able to say to Him, thank you!

I hope these words help you, as they have me, in your journey to surely trust the Bible and the Creator. I gratefully acknowledge the below references for background information for this article.

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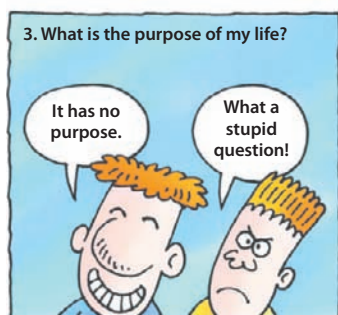
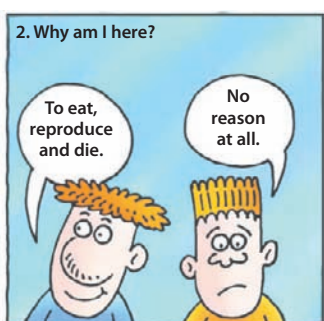
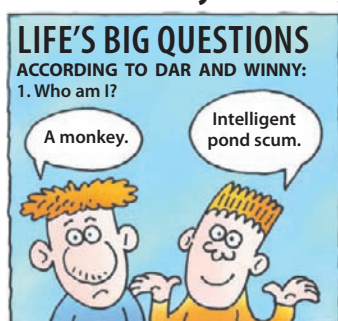
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Peter Mikula is a mining engineer in Kalgoorlie, Australia, who loves stargazing and talking with others about Jesus.

Dar and Winny

by Richard Gunther

16



FOSSIL FAIRYTALES

"Once upon a time, there was a fish. One day it died, and sank to the sea floor, where it was gradually covered by sand and dirt, and soon it became a fossil!"

Reality check!
When a fish dies, it floats. It starts to decay and it floats. Then bacteria and scavengers destroy it.

So it is nonsense to claim that dead fish sink to the sea floor. So how can a fish become a fossil? Here's the reality.

There has to be a disaster. Waves and waves of water full of sediment and sand and dirt, suddenly overwhelming the fish, and burying it very quickly, and sealing it from air, so it cannot rot.

Most fossils are the result of a global flood, which buried billions of creatures and plants, and this flood is described in Genesis.

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Youth Truth

Musician shares hope on TikTok

Stephen McWhirter started walking down a path of rebellion in his early teen years. It started with smoking and drinking but quickly progressed to cocaine, LSD and selling drugs by the time he was 15.

"By the time I was 17 I was a crystal meth addict and I was using crystal meth every day for nearly six years," Stephen admits in a video on his YouTube channel.

He grew up the son of an evangelist (someone who tells people about the Christian faith), travelling all over the US, from church camp to church camp. But the man he saw preaching on Sunday mornings was not the same man he lived with for the rest of the time.

The hypocrisy put Stephen off Christianity altogether.

"I decided if God is real, He's not good, and if this Jesus guy is real, I don't want anything to do with Him. I was so against Christianity that I remember if you even



Stephen McWhirter

mentioned the name Jesus around me I would have cursed you out."

People in Stephen's life continued to pray for him, even crying out to God that he would come to know Jesus for who He really is.

Someone loaned him a book called *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* by Lee Strobel and Stephen read it – which he

now says is a miracle in itself.

"I just remember accepting this book in like a blur... fast forward I'm living in a house full of musicians. It's 3 o'clock in the morning and I'm lying in bed.

"I've literally got drugs next to me on the side table as I'm reading this book... nobody's playing music softly in the corner, nobody's preaching or anything like that but in this moment I encountered the presence of God. It's the kindness of the Lord to meet you in a place where no one can get the credit but Him. I remembered

encountering the manifest presence of God which is just this really churchy word for a tangible encounter with God – you can't explain it but you just know that you've met with Him.

"In this moment we begin to have this internal dialogue that went something like this: He said, 'Stephen I'm real and I'm good and I have a purpose for your life. What are you

going to do about it?'

"In that moment I just cry out to God. I said, 'God I want to give You my life. I want to quit all this addiction, depression, all these things that I've known for so long. They feel like a warm blanket that I don't even know how to take off.' I said, 'God, I can't do it. I want to but I can't.' The Holy Spirit spoke into me something that changed me for the rest of my life. He said, 'Stephen you won't do it, I'll do it.'

"I took God at His Word... I fell to my knees that night in that room and I gave my life to Christ. I went from addiction to redemption, from meth addict to worship leader because God is real. It's not just some Sunday School lesson I encountered – it is the reality and the character and the nature and the power of God as a Savior."

Stephen now has a TikTok account (@stephen-mcwhirtermusic) where he shares his story and encourages people to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

In an interview with Think Eternity, Stephen says thousands of viewers made decisions to follow Jesus since he joined the social media platform in May 2022.

On his first live stream on TikTok, Stephen sang worship songs, then shared his story of how he became a Christian and what the good news of Jesus is all about.

"And in the middle of sharing that, I felt the Lord wanted me to say, 'Hey, if you want to give your life to Jesus, just type yes. And put your first name because I want to say your name because the Lord calls you by name.'"

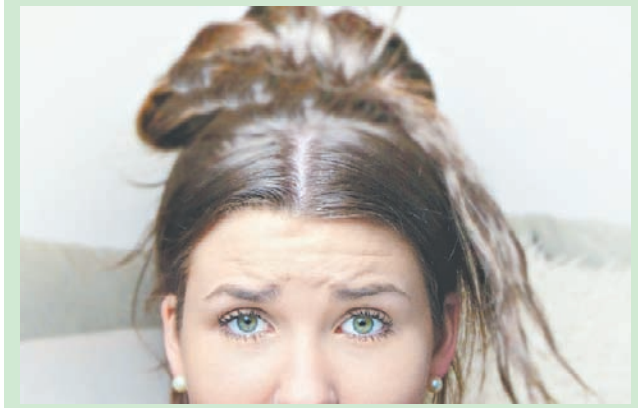
Someone typed "yes" followed by more and more people.

He then created a link on his TikTok bio page for people to go to after they give their life to Jesus so he can connect with them, pray with them and help them find a church.

During one of Stephen's first TikTok livestreams, a girl came on and said "Hail Satan. I've given my life to Satan."

"I just stopped what I was doing and said, 'Hey, you know, Megan, if someone wounded you in your life, that person most likely was not a Christian. That wasn't Jesus.' By the end of the call, she gave her life to Jesus. She repented (turned away from her sin) and ended up messaging us. She called us, and while crying, shared about her first time praying by herself."

If you would like to make the radical change Stephen did, see 'How do I become a Christian?' on page 11. •



Is doubt the end of faith?

BY HARRIET COOMBE

I HAVE struggled with doubt for as long as I can remember. I doubt my friends really like me. I doubt my abilities as a writer. I doubt my husband's eyesight when he says I look beautiful. And sometimes I even doubt God.

I've hidden my doubts, afraid of the judgement that sometimes comes when I voice them. But when I feel safe and encouraged to share even the hard questions I have, I soon realize I am not alone. Doubt is a part of being a human, no matter what you believe.

On the other hand, every human has faith. Even the most hardened atheist relies on faith for what they can't see or prove.

Maybe your doubts about God have stopped you from taking the first step in following Him. Maybe you used to follow Him but your doubts became too insurmountable and you walked away.

When it comes to belief in God, it's okay to have questions and it's okay to have doubts – and in fact, we all do at certain times. Thankfully a lack of doubt is not a pre-requisite for becoming a Christian. In the Bible, Jesus is quoted as saying, "Oh, you of little faith," on more than one occasion to his followers. One of Jesus' followers/disciples even earned the nickname, "Doubting Thomas" due to his propensity for doubt – and this was someone who spent years travelling around with Jesus! I've come to learn that doubt is just a feeling.

Sometimes feelings lie and we definitely shouldn't let them control our lives. If you only went to school or work when you felt like it, how often would you go? Would you ever do the dishes if you waited until you felt like doing them?

Faith, on the other hand, is not a feeling but an action. Therefore, you can have faith while simultaneously having doubts. So what exactly is faith? The Bible says it is, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). It is trusting even in what I don't see because God has proven Himself over and over. It is opening our eyes to the truth of Bible. It is choosing to believe because of the evidence (creation, Jesus' empty tomb, Christian's transformed lives) that tells us the Bible is true, not just blindly. While doubt is normal, if we allow it to rule and don't face the questions it raises, the Bible says we become like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed around by every new idea (James 1:6). Thankfully, the Bible also gives us the remedy for doubt. Romans 10:17 says, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Notice the word is hearing — an active, present-tense verb. That means we need to continue to read the Bible and hear the gospel preached — that Christ died for our sins on the cross and rose again so that we can spend eternity with God. The Bible reminds us of what God has done in the past and that we can therefore trust Him in the present. It says in Psalm 77:11, "I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago."

In an article about doubt on thegospelcoalition.org, it says, "Since faith is embracing Jesus, in times of doubt I don't need more faith, I need more Jesus. And when I get more Jesus — through preaching, Scripture, prayer, community — then, maybe even in spite of myself, my faith is revived. When we focus on the Him of Jesus rather than the what of faith, doubts are reduced, relativised, replaced, and even redeemed. It might just be that the path of doubt was God's way of bringing you to a deeper, richer knowledge of Jesus Himself."

Face those difficult questions, pray about them, talk with wise people about them — but don't let doubt put an end to your faith or stop you from making a commitment to Jesus today. •

HAUNTED NO MORE

When Laura Adams was a teenager, something changed in her home. Her normally kind mother began telling her she hated her and wished she hadn't been born. The rejection led Laura to seek affection elsewhere, and she found it in one-night stands with men. But far from making her feel loved and accepted, it only left her more broken, until she discovered there was a spiritual battle that had been going on around her since she was a child.

Laura tells CBN that the changes in her mother's personality occurred after she started seeing psychics, tarot card readers and channelers.

Laura was about 11 and, despite her young age, knew these new activities were wrong.

"But there really wasn't much I could say on the matter; I was just a little girl," she shares. "So I kind of watched it happen around me."

Laura's mother hosted parties which included tarot card readings for guests.

"After a while I started to accept it as the norm. I would see a psychic or a tarot card reader or somebody who would do my chart in astrology. I started taking classes on how to channel. I was reading metaphysical books."

Laura describes the rejection she faced by her mother as "very, very traumatic".

As years went on she started sleeping around, resulting in two pregnancies – both of which Laura aborted.

"Everybody had taught me that it was a clump of cells and that this wasn't worth anything, and I got an abortion," Laura explains. "I really didn't put a lot of thought into it. I didn't want to think that this was a real baby. I didn't want to take responsibility for something like this. So, it was just easy to do it and to pretend that it never happened."

As Laura grew older she started hearing voices and having nightmares.

"I would sometimes feel very dark energies upon me, like they were in the room," she recalls.

"These energies would tell me that they wanted to kill me. The feeling was so realistic

that I could not differentiate it from the truth."

She sought help from a psychiatrist, who diagnosed her with bipolar disorder.

"He told me I had manic depression. I think that there was some psychosis in there also. He told me that my situation would not get better. That it would actually get progressively worse and at some point I would be institutionalised."

Laura visited a hypnotist, who believed Laura's problems were spiritual. When he laid his hands on Laura's head, she felt something "profoundly dark" leave her.

"That's the best way I know how to explain it. I felt it come off my head, and it was liberating. I felt a little bit of sanity come back. I looked at him, and I said, 'What was that?' He said to me, 'That was a demon.'"

Laura was shocked to realize that this meant Satan actually existed, which led to more revelations.

"After a few moments of thinking about it, I realized that if Satan existed, that means that Jesus Christ existed. If that's the case, then, 'What am I doing in this man's office? I need to go to the individual that was responsible for conquering Satan.'"

"It was at that point that I left his office and chose to find a Christian path and get help."

Laura called a Christian friend, who led her to a Christian counselor. At her first appointment, the counselor prayed with her.

"It was at that point that I came before the Lord and I told Him that I was receiving Him as my Lord and Savior. I asked Him to forgive me of my sins."

It didn't happen overnight, but Laura is no longer haunted by her past.

"I'm experiencing mental clarity and emotional joy at a level I've never experienced before in my life," she attests.

"The Lord has completely blessed me. That dark hole that was in me for the 38 years that I was on this planet before coming to know the Lord, left me. The abyss went away and I was filled with a joy that I had never known before." •

Contact Challenge!

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

Youth Truth

FROM DEPRESSION TO COMPLETE JOY

BY KERI YANG

My struggle began in middle school. My friend group was predominantly white and this led to bullying by a group of black girls. Again and again, I was told that I wasn't "black enough." This left me so confused about my identity. I thought that the bullying would end after middle school, but it continued into high school. My confusion eventually led to me disliking myself, which led to a very deep, very dark depression.

This depression was tied to anxiety, which together resulted in a life of partying.

Whenever I could drink away my dislike of myself, I did.

When it was time to pick a college, I chose a party school. But, being away from home fuelled the depression, anxiety, and lack of identity, which, in turn, amped up my need for parties, boys, sex, and fake friends.

It sucked. That life was absolutely draining, but I kept doing it, thinking that maybe if I learned how to do it right, I would eventually get something out of it.

Around this time, I made friends with this super-friendly girl from my English class. She always wanted to talk to me and always asked me to get breakfast after class.

I could see that she was completely different from any other friend I had, but I didn't know what the difference was. After a while, she invited me to a Christian campus ministry called CRU. I knew about Jesus and thought He was cool enough, so I said, "Sure... why not?"

I was raised to believe that Jesus was and is God. But, along the way, something got lost in translation; I thought that as long as I believed in Jesus, I could do whatever I wanted without consequence.

I'd fit CRU into my schedule. I'd go to CRU, sing a song or two, listen to the message, and then go straight out to a party.

Again, this was where my head was

at: Jesus was cool and He didn't care what I did, so as long as I believed in him.

Then, I met a guy. We actually met in an elevator and it was all romantic and I thought it was meant to be.

But, the romance quickly crumbled into something dangerous and ugly — an emotionally, mentally, and physically abusive relationship. That was the lowest point of my life. By the time the relationship ended, I was at the bottom of a pit.

But, I knew that I could get out; see, I was still going to CRU and I did believe that Jesus loved me.

So, I called up the friendly, weird girl from my English class and asked how to get more involved with the ministry. I started taking the ministry more seriously and going to Bible study.

As my understanding grew, I realized that, though being a follower of Christ requires believing, following is about removing yourself from the throne of your life and placing Jesus there. It's about allowing your life to reflect

the daily relationship you have with Him. And most importantly, I finally understood the reality of God's grace (undeserved love): as an imperfect, fallen being, the only thing I deserved was death, yet, because of Jesus, I — and the rest of humanity — could have life.

The turning point came on October 14, 2012. It was my second year at University and I was away on the ministry's off-campus retreat.

While sitting out on the river dock, I was struck by a verse in the Bible which was 2 Corinthians 13:5: "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you — unless, of course, you fail the test?"

Following these instructions, I examined myself thoroughly.

At this point, I recognized who Jesus was.

I knew that He came to Earth as the Son of God — that He was God taking on flesh. As a human, He was tempted in every way, yet He lived a perfect, sinless life. In his death, He took on the sins of His fallen creation.

And after three days, He rose, conquering sin and death. In doing so, He defeated Satan, the enemy that

damaged the relationship between man and God.

The missing piece, the piece that I gained that day, was this: by accepting Jesus as my Savior and allowing Jesus to rule my life, I could have a relationship with God.

In that moment, I realized that I wanted nothing more than that. So, I turned away from my sins, decided to live for God, and invited the Holy Spirit to reside within me.

As I prayed this I had an overwhelming feeling of peace and love. In a single, supernatural moment, my depression and the trauma of my past relationship were given to God. God took care of it all. My identity issues were solved. In a split second, I was

found in Christ.

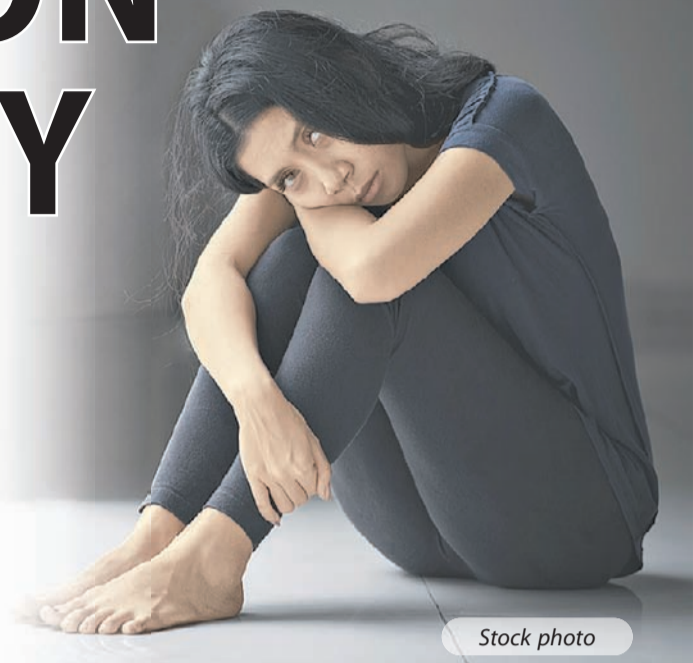
From that day, I have made an effort to develop my relationship with God. From my conversations with others to my spending, there is nothing I do without God in mind.

It's requires daily effort to turn from sin and towards God. Sometimes, I mess up; but, because of the Cross, I have grace (God's undeserved love). Grace is so amazing.

My life will never be the same. God has impacted me in ways that I never knew were possible.

My relationship with Him is my primary focus; He's my world — and He hasn't failed me yet.

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



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“I had an overwhelming feeling of peace and love.”

”

My abusive dad transformed

As a child Tanner Williams always felt on edge.

"I had to be aware of how my father was and his emotions and as a result I could never come home and just relax," he shares in a Their Testimonies video on YouTube. "I was constantly on guard about where he was and whether he was going to explode on me for something I did."

He grew up in a big family and found it hard to stand out among his five siblings.

But despite this, he still seemed to draw attention from his father — and not in the way he wanted. "Something would upset him and he would end up beating me because of it," Tanner shares.

His family attended church together, and Tanner hated the way his father would act like a loving father but the next day, "I'd be woken up by him beating me because of something I did wrong ... I hated it because I saw my dad act like a two-faced person. I despised the church because every time I went to church it seemed so fake to me."

Tanner became more aggressive himself. "I was never at rest or I never felt peace in my life and I was angry all the time."

He says he tried to numb his heartache by trying to do well in school, having a lot of friends and playing sports, but he admits it didn't work. Then something changed in Tanner's father.

"My dad actually started taking his relationship with God more seriously. He started working on himself and started going to anger management and he stopped abusing me. But I still had all of this baggage and all this resentment toward my dad so even though he started treating me really kindly I didn't really believe it or accept him or forgive him."

The following year, Tanner's parents "forced" him to volunteer at their church's summer camp, where he met Christians his own age.



Tanner Williams

"[They] really loved me and cared for me and throughout that entire summer they were just constantly showing God's love to me.

"Over time my heart started [opening] to the Lord and I started to come to realize who Jesus is and what He did for me, that Jesus' sacrifice [on the cross] has covered everything. Even though I had gone through a lot of hardship growing up I knew throughout that summer that God's love overcomes all of that."

Then, before Tanner went into 10th grade, he went to a beach house retreat with his church youth group. It was a time to get away and read the Bible and worship God together.

"The Lord transformed my heart. I forgave my

father for what he had done to me in the past and accepted Jesus for the way that He died for my sins on the cross for me."

After that Tanner's relationship with his father improved.

"I changed as an individual and became less aggressive and less upset all the time," he attests. "I'm grateful that I do have a loving father in my life now — we have a great relationship."

In college, Tanner didn't know what he wanted to major in and struggled in his classes.

By his second year he was in academic probation.

The following year, Tanner was forced to take the year off from college completely due to constant sickness. Instead of going to classes, he spent his days reading his Bible. At night when he couldn't sleep, he would read the Bible until he did.

"Instead of watching TV or being on my phone I was reading my Bible and using that as a way to get closer to the Lord ... over time my sleep schedule got better, my health got better and then I was able to finally recover from all my sickness."

By the start of his fourth year of college, he was able to attend classes again.

"I started doing really well in school. I was on the Dean's List (an award for academic excellence) ... there was a lot of suffering [but] I felt so strong by the end."

Tanner says he has learnt not to worry about his future but to rely on God.

"As a kid I was really angry and upset all the time, I never had any peace and now I'm much more chilled and relaxed and when things go awry in my life I know that I can rely on God."

"When hardships do occur I know how to get through them."

"The biggest way the Lord has transformed me is not relying on the outside world for validation but relying on Him and who He is."

"My faith didn't remove the pain but it got me through the pain. Trusting God didn't diminish or vanquish the anguish, but it enabled me to endure it." Robert Rogers

BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

We are not wired for loneliness

BY ROB FURLONG

THE 2018 Australian Loneliness Report revealed that one in four Australians said they felt “lonely at least once a week” with one doctor commenting that “chronic loneliness is on the rise in Australia.”

Five years on, nothing has changed – a recent news report I listened to again confirmed the one in four figures.

As this column is about building better relationships, for the next couple of months I want to talk about the importance and benefits of friends and friendships.

Why do we need friends?

My simple answer is, we are not wired for loneliness.

The Bible states that when God created men and women, He “made them in His image.” What that means is that like God, we are creative, moral, and personal beings. He made us with the capacity for relationships with other human beings!

You may not be a believer in God but before you dismiss the idea that we are relational beings, the report I mentioned above stated in its opening lines that, “our need to connect with others is deeply hardwired (and goes right back to when we’d hang out in groups so we could survive).”

Whether you factor God into the equation or not, it is pretty much universally recognized that to be human is to connect with and love

other people.

Put more bluntly – you are not an island – you need other people in your life.

The next thing I would say in answer to the question, why do we need friends? is loneliness is not a good thing.

King Solomon put it very succinctly when he said, “Two are better than one.”

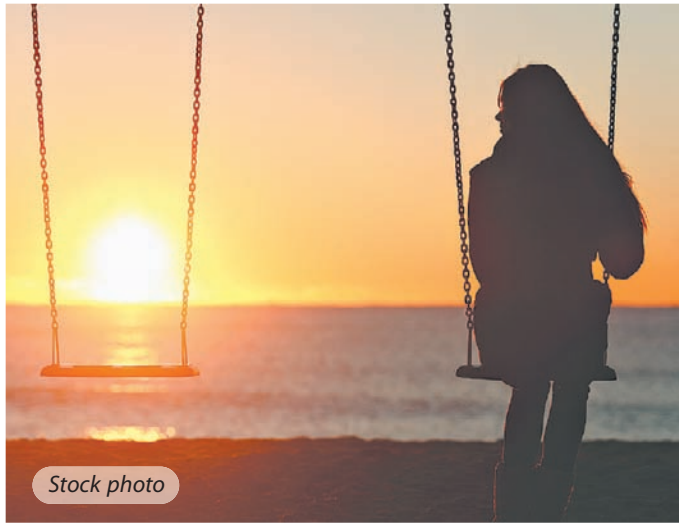
In Solomon’s day it was common to travel at night to escape the heat of a harsh, Middle Eastern sun. But travelling at night, especially alone, held some serious dangers.

Deep ditches were dotted here and there along the roads and extremely difficult to spot in the dark.

It was not uncommon for the unwary traveler to fall face down into one of them. Fall into one of those on your own and you were in serious trouble – you may not be able to get yourself out!

But as Solomon observes, travelling with a friend gave you the security of knowing there was someone there who could pull you out should you come to grief.

Robbers were another danger. Facing one alone was a serious challenge, but travel with a friend and together, “two can resist them.”



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reaching out to someone we know is lonely, or who we are concerned about.

A great initiative with this is the “RUOK Day” which encourages those of us who know people who are lonely, or we are concerned about to reach out to them and just ask, “Are you ok?”

By the time you read this, the annual “RUOK Day” will have passed, but it is never too late to reach out to someone in friendship or to check on them.

Asking someone if they are ok can feel awkward and challenging, but all it requires is that you care enough to approach the person, and a willingness to listen if they open up to you. Some tips on how to do this can be found at the RUOK website: ruok.org.au We are not wired for loneliness – it’s not a good thing – reach out to someone today.

Don’t do life alone!

Loneliness is not a good thing – in fact, it’s downright dangerous. 8.6 Australians per day die by their own hand, so let me ask you a question – who is there in your life that you can call on when you “fall face down into a ditch” in life?

If you can’t answer that question, please do everything you can to try and find a friend.

More importantly, I believe many of us can make positive steps by

Jazz and the joy of having limits

NUDGE WITH KARL FAASE

JAZZ music is not everyone’s first choice — it is a unique style of music. In many concerts, you may actually be treated to music that no one has ever heard before because within many jazz pieces, there is the opportunity for free expression.

It is very important to realize that this is within limits.

If all the musicians playing at that moment did exactly what they wanted, you would not have music, it would just be a conglomeration of sounds.

The ability of jazz musicians to

play extemporaneously is in fact within strict limits.

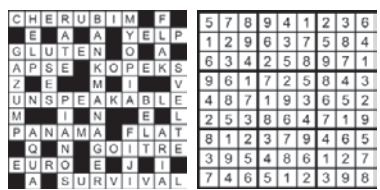
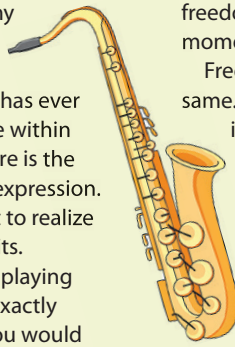
The freedom to play and experiment with the music is freedom within the bounds of the moment, the band and the music.

Freedom in this life is just the same. We have the freedom to live in a relationship with God, but

God does not say that our freedom has no boundaries.

Life with no boundaries is like music with no boundaries. It’s a disaster.

Discover the freedom God has for you. A life lived to its maximum potential, but within the boundaries of God’s Word to us.



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HOW DO I BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

Anyone can gain the eternal life offered through Jesus Christ

We read in God’s word: “God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16)

OUR PROBLEM: **Separation from God**
“Everyone has sinned. Nobody is good enough because God’s standards are perfect” (Romans 3:23)

ADMIT

GOD’S REMEDY / SOLUTION: **Jesus died on the cross**
“God demonstrates His own love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8)

BELIEVE

OUR RESPONSE: **Trust Jesus by receiving Him**
“To all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12)

COMMIT

Here is an example of how you can pray.

Dear Father in Heaven. I come to you now because I want to be saved. Please, forgive me of my sins. I believe that you sent your Son Jesus Christ to die for me and that you have raised him from the dead. I now ask Jesus Christ to come into my life as my Savior and Lord. Take control of my life. Please make me the person You created me to be. In Jesus Christ’s name. Amen

The Lord Jesus says: “I tell you the truth. Everyone who believes in me has eternal life.” (John 6:47). He gives life of a wonderful quality that continues forever.

What now?

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

AS A NEXT STEP:

I have prayed the prayer [ABOVE]

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

* Please check and write clearly *

Name _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Email address _____

Challenge. 2634 Drake Road / Cell: 513-804-8818
Lebanon Ohio 45036 / E-mail: usaoffice@challengenews.org

All overseas inquiries are referred onto someone in their own country

Want to explore more?

Here are some free, helpful, online Christian resources:

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

Lessons from a sick bed

BY JODY BENNETT

HERE are some more insights that came to me while enduring an extended period of illness.

4. Living in the present while sick is very important if we are to appreciate the time. I’m a catastrophist by nature, always living in the future “what ifs?” Especially on bad days, it took all my self-control to bring my focus back to the present. Today. I can do today. Today, work can cope without me. Today my family is fine. Today I can cope with this pain. The Lord taught His disciples to ask for daily bread. As His child, I live hand-to-mouth — right now I have grace sufficient for this circumstance. What I don’t have is grace to cope with every worry of the future and all the might bes that one can think of.

The Psalmist, David, described this as quieting his soul within him like a weaned child (Psalm 131:2). I have to be as trusting as a little kid before God. As a poster in my restroom says: Lord, I don’t understand, I don’t need to; I know You’ve a plan, You will see through; It is in Your hands, I believe You.

5. Illness is not only trying but humbling: the waiting and helplessness and realization that we are not indispensable reminds us that we are puny and our lives are fleeting. The world goes on without us. Sickness (like disaster) reminds us that everything we plan could be instantly changed by forces outside our control. We arrogantly think we are masters of our own destiny but even the common cold can destroy our lofty plans. The Bible writer James admonishes us to prefix our plans with “If the Lord wills” or “Lord willing” because we really have no idea what tomorrow holds (James 4:15).

6. Another hard lesson is that pain is very lonely. No one else can feel our pain or understand our feelings of sickness. It is hard to explain or quantify. In hospital one is asked to rate pain on a scale of 1-10 or describe it as stabbing or crampy or sharp. But one person’s level 6 pain may be very different from another’s. Wouldn’t it be fantastic if there was a machine that could give the doctor the exact pain you were feeling? However, our pain is ours alone. The only one who feels it with us is God Himself. I found great comfort in knowing He understands my suffering precisely and completely.

*O Lord, You have searched me and known me.
You know my sitting down and my rising up;
You understand my thought afar off.
You comprehend my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.* (Psalm 139:1-3)

7. But while pain is in one sense isolating, in another way it made me a comrade of all the people I know who have had cancer or suffered with ongoing sickness. I now realize how many people deal with pain on a near-constant basis, especially as we age. How many old people are cantankerous just because they are dealing with chronic pain? My suffering gave me new respect for the elderly and chronically ill, each day they bear a great weight that very few acknowledge, let alone appreciate. I hope that insight will make me kinder in my dealings with others.

To be continued...

For the full article online see www.challenge.news/jody

Oscar Tshiebwe #34 of the Kentucky Wildcats lays the ball in against Nae'Qwan Tomlin #35 of the Kansas State Wildcats during the first half in the second round of the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament at The Fieldhouse at Greensboro Coliseum on March 19, 2023 in Greensboro, North Carolina. (Photo by Jared C. Tilton/Getty Images)



INSPIRED BY HIS DAD

When Oscar Tshiebwe moved to the USA from The Democratic Republic of the Congo to play basketball, his high school coach ridiculed him.

"You are the worst player we ever had," he told him.

But Oscar had faith he would succeed. His coach laughed when he told him he would one day play for Kentucky. But he did from 2021, and last year he was the consensus National College Player of the year.

In two seasons he pulled down a jaw-dropping 1317 rebounds.

Oscar grew up in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, where he started out playing soccer. But due to his tall height, he was encouraged to play basketball. He attended a basketball camp led by Congolese National Basketball Association (NBA) player Bismack Biyombo and a new course was set for his life.



Oscar Tshiebwe after accepting the Jersey Mike's Naismith Men's College Player of the Year trophy on April 03, 2022 in New Orleans, Louisiana. (Photo by Jonathan Bachman/Getty Images)

However, when he was 13 years old, tragedy struck Oscar's family when his father died after being poisoned. His killer was never brought to justice.

Oscar told CBN what he remembered about the day his father died: "Thirty minutes before he passed he said, 'Grab a chair.' I grab a chair and I sit right there and he started talking to me. He said, 'Don't ever forget about God no matter where you go. Don't lose God because when you lose God, you lose your life. Always listen to what I'm telling you. You gotta take care of your family.'"

Oscar had been raised in a Christian home but his father's death caused him to be angry at God. He cried out to God in anger, "Why did this have to happen?" But the more Oscar spent time with God, the more he realized he needed Him.

"I said, 'No, maybe I need to give my heart to God. Maybe I need to pay attention,' because my daddy always told me, 'No matter what happens in your life, don't let that thing affect your relationship with God, because God has great plans for your life and your dream.'"

Oscar put his faith and trust in Jesus. He worked hard at basketball and at 15, he moved to the United States.

"I had no family, I could not speak any English," Oscar told CBN. "We could not communicate with anybody. Most of the people think like I was going to fail; I was going to go back home. People making fun of me, I don't even know what they say. My coach never wanted to play me in high school my first two years, he told me, 'You are the worst player we ever had. Like good luck with that.'

I told him, 'I will play for Kentucky one day.' They laughed. They made a joke. But I went back in the scriptures, read, but the scripture told us anything is possible to those who work hard and believe in God. [Editor's note: The Bible in fact says "with God all things are possible".] I say, 'Why the Bible says, anything is possible, but everybody here told me it's impossible for me to get there?' I say, 'I will stick with the Word of God. I don't care what people say. I'm going to stick with the Word of God. If I'm going to fail, I'm going to fail with the Word of God.'"

Oscar initially played college basketball for the West Virginia Mountaineers and in his second game he was named the Newcomer of the Week. At the end of the season he had averaged 11.2 points and 9.3 rebounds per game as a freshman while shooting 55% from the field and was named to the Second Team All-Big 12 and the All-Newcomer Team.

As a sophomore, he averaged 8.5 points and 7.8 rebounds through 10 games.

In 2021 Oscar transferred to the Kentucky Wildcats – his goal achieved. At 6'9" and 260 pounds (118 kilograms), Oscar is an imposing presence on the court. In his first game he tallied 17 points and 20 rebounds in a 79–71 loss to Duke. At the end of the season he was named the Sporting News National Player of the Year and the unanimous Southeastern Conference Player of the Year.

Then Oscar had a new goal – to play for the NBA.

"I told [God], 'I want to be an NBA player. I want to get there. I want to help other people and help my family. But I cannot get there

by myself.'"

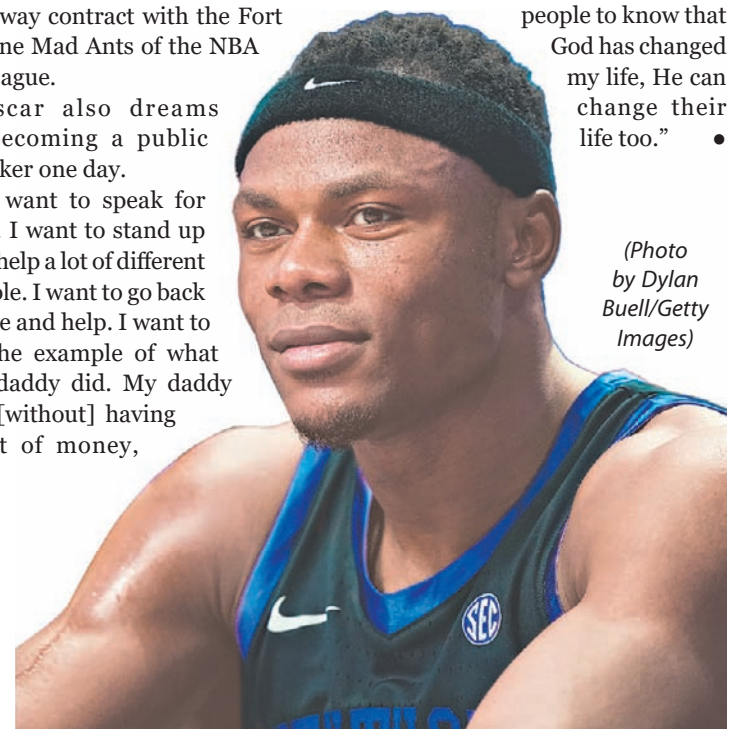
Even this goal has already been achieved, when earlier this year the 23-year-old centre was signed by the NBA's Indiana Pacers, on a two-way contract with the Fort Wayne Mad Ants of the NBA G League.

Oscar also dreams of becoming a public speaker one day.

"I want to speak for God. I want to stand up and help a lot of different people. I want to go back home and help. I want to be the example of what my daddy did. My daddy did [without] having a lot of money,

but if I have money, I think I can do better. I'm going to help somebody else. I'm going to try to change the world ... I want people to know that

God is everything. I want people to know that God has changed my life, He can change their life too." •



(Photo by Dylan Buell/Getty Images)

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