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**ESTHER**

The Master plan: Karen Jobes ..... 4  
Absent but everywhere: Peter Bloomfield ..... 9  
Perfect planning: Tracy Gordon ..... 11

**BIBLE STUDY**

Ruth and Philemon: Bruce Christian ..... 13

**NEWS**

Across Australia ..... 17  
Around the World ..... 18  
On the Agenda ..... 19

**REFLECTION**

A promising faith: T.M. Moore ..... 21

**MARRIAGE**

Mastering submission: Kevin Miller ..... 22

**CULTURE WATCH**

Chicago: Phil Campbell ..... 24

**LETTERS** ..... 25

**PRAYER** ..... 26

**BOOKS**

Window on the World ..... 27  
Esther ..... 27  
Sunset Victory ..... 27  
Islam in our Backyard ..... 27

**BACK PAGE**

Presbyterians reunite: John Wilson ..... 28

*editorial*

**R**arely a week goes by when I don't meet Christians who are struggling with sickness and serious disappointments. Whether their sufferings are related to personal setbacks such as a broken marriage or job loss, or whether they face religious persecution and discrimination, they all want to know what part God has to play in their misfortunes.

For those who find themselves at the eye of the storm, there are many questions that beg an answer: does God truly love us when he allows painful circumstances to intrude upon us? Is it possible to trust him – that he is loving and sovereign – particularly when we can't understand what's going on? Can God do anything about our circumstances, or are we the victims of a cruel fate?

One of the important contributions of the book of Esther is that it provides an answer to these questions, not in the sense that it outlines a succinct statement of dogmatic theology that explains all our circumstances, but rather because it gives us a poignant reminder that nothing ever happens by chance. There is no such thing as coincidence in God's world. Esther is written in such a way that the reader is persuaded by inference that God's love, power and wisdom are so absolute that we can trust him in whatever circumstances we face.

The doctrine of God's providence has once again become a major issue for Christians. The question has arisen: does God's providence according to Scripture extend to everything He has created, including the free choices of human beings? Or is His providence limited, perhaps by God Himself, so that He does not infallibly know how the universe is going to unfold?

The answer to these questions is enormously important. To think wrongly about God not only deprives Him of our worship but leads us into error in many different ways. If God does not know the future and cannot control it, can we be confident that God is going to achieve all His purposes for the world? The message of the Book of Esther is that God's love and power are so absolute that we can trust Him in whatever circumstances He calls us to face, particularly when they involve us in pain.

Peter Hastie 

# The Master plan

*Esther provides a feast of encouragement and hope.*



**K**aren Jobs is associate professor of New Testament studies at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. Westmont is a leading private Christian liberal arts college. She holds a Ph.D. in biblical hermeneutics from Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia).

Her major publications include the *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Peter*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming), *Invitation to the Septuagint*, with Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), and the well-received *NIV Application Commentary: Esther* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). She is also a member of the Committee on Bible Translation producing *Today's New International Version*.

She has been a well-respected lecturer at Regent College, Beeson Divinity School and in Inter Varsity Forums. Karen worships in Santa Barbara at Montecito Covenant Church with her husband Dr Forrest Jobs.

Peter Hastie recently spoke to her at Westmont College.



**Karen Jobs  
talks to  
Peter Hastie**

**Martin Luther didn't like the book of Esther. He said of it and 2 Maccabees: "I was so hostile to them that I wish they did not exist at all. They Judaise too greatly." Does the Book of Esther deserve a place in our Bibles?**

Yes, it does. It's true that the Book of Esther has posed a problem for interpreters throughout its history because of its sensuality, brutality, and for the simple reason that it never talks about God. Nor does it mention the covenant, the temple or anything else that has to do with the religion of Israel.

Probably Luther has expressed the strongest feelings about the book so far. But earlier interpreters had difficulties as well. As far as we can tell, there were no commentaries written on the book of Esther for the first seven centuries of the Church. And John Calvin, as far as we

know, never preached on Esther or wrote a commentary on it. So it seems that people did have a problem with what to make of Esther.

On the other hand, some Jewish rabbis have held the book in the highest esteem. For instance, Moses Maimonides, who was a 12th century Jewish scholar, said that he would rank Esther equally with the Pentateuch. He also said, "When the Messiah comes, the other books in the Hebrew Bible may pass away, but the Torah and Esther will abide forever."

**Why did Maimonides think that Esther was so special?**

I think he believed that the book of Esther foreshadowed the ultimate destiny of the Jewish people. For him it was a reminder that all of God's promises of blessing to Abraham and Israel would be fulfilled. Nothing can ever thwart those purposes. God will triumph over the forces of evil.

That's why I believe that despite the problems that the book raises, when we approach it from the perspective of the

reformed doctrine of Scripture, we simply can't dismiss it from the canon. It demands our reverent attention. Even though God Himself is not mentioned in the story, the fact that the book has been included in the canon means that we can read it as if God is telling us the story.

After all, Paul says in Romans that everything written in the past was written to teach us so that we might have hope and encouragement (Romans 15:4). I think we can read Esther in that light. When you pick it up you know that God has given you bread and not a stone. The book itself should awaken our curiosity and stimulate us to ask: "Why is God telling us this story; what's in it for His people?"

**The Book of Esther is one of the most carefully crafted stories in the Bible. It's a story about the conflict of good and evil involving a beautiful and courageous heroine, lurid scenes of drinking, an archetypal villain, intrigue, suspense and terrible injustice. What's the point of it all?**

The Esther story is certainly a literary delight. It's told with delicious irony, a lot of satire and even the odd touch of humour. Since it's in the Bible and uses these devices, we should expect its theology to be pregnant with irony, satire and humour too. In fact, I think the writer is trying to make a theological point by using these devices.

Sometimes we evangelicals worry that if we pay attention to the literary characteristics of biblical narratives we are somehow demeaning a book's historical value. But here, in Esther, I think we have an example where we don't need to do that. If we want to understand the theological point of what God has done in history, we have to carefully examine the book's literary qualities.

The literary structure of the story is largely shaped by the motif of feasting/banqueting. The book begins with a feast which celebrates human pride but at the end of the story there is another feast which commemorates the joy of God's people when they are rescued from their enemies. The feasts are like book-ends which hold the story together.

This motif of feasting is particularly apt because the story of Esther talks about the origins of the Jewish festival of Purim (9:22). It's still celebrated today. However, the feast of Purim itself is not the theme of the book. It's what it stands for. Purim commemorates the fact that God turned the sorrow of his people into

joy. There's this amazing reversal that takes place, and that's what Purim commemorates. And this reversal is connected to the ultimate destiny of God's people.

The story of the book is about God's enemies who tried to annihilate the Jews, but against all odds, their plans back-fired. The exact opposite took place. Instead of being destroyed, the Jews were delivered; their destiny was reversed. So Mordecai, the Jew, becomes by the end of the story, second only to Xerxes in the kingdom. And the destroyer, Haman, who has all of the resources of genocide at his disposal, not only loses that power, but is himself destroyed. If we are going to understand the book properly, we need to see this structure of reversal operating throughout all the different levels of the story. It's quite ingenious, actually.

***When you pick Esther up you know that God has given you bread and not a stone.***

**Can you explain how the reversal works?**

Well, the reversal is driven by this conflict between Haman the Agagite and Mordecai the Jew. The fact that Haman is referred to as an Agagite is the clue that links this story to the wider covenantal history of Israel. You will remember in I Samuel 15 that Agag was the king of the Amalekites. And the Amalekites were the sworn enemies of Israel who tried to destroy God's people as they came out of Egypt in the Exodus. And because of that God says, "I will war against every generation of the Amalekites until their name is blotted out" (Ex. 17:16).

As we read the book of Esther, we need to remember that the terms Agagite and Amalekite are more or less synonymous. When you see Agagite read Amalekite. The story is another episode in this ancient war between Israel and the Amalekites. And in this particular case, it certainly appears that Haman the Agagite is going to be the victor because the Jewish people were a small minority. They were defenceless; they didn't even have an army. Nor did they have a king, or prophets, or priests, or sacrifices, or even a temple. They had nothing. They had lost their national identity and were living in this vast, pagan empire. Moreover, they were there because of their sin. They appeared to be without hope.

And this is why the literary device of reversal works so effectively. As Haman is stripped of his power and Mordecai grows in favour and influence with the Persian court, God is seen to be fulfilling His promise that he will war against the Amalekites for all generations. And this means that even though they are in Persia rather than Jerusalem, and even though they are in exile because of their sin, God's promise to Abraham and the covenant he made with the Israelites at Sinai are still relevant at this time in their history.

**So what's the writer's point in recording this story for the Jews?**

The point is that the book was written to show them that although they had been scattered among the nations, they were still under God's covenantal care. That's very significant. God had not abandoned them. He was still being faithful to His former promises even though Israel had been faithless towards Him.

But I think we can go further by saying, "Well, what's the writer's point for us today?" As Christians, we are not living back then. Nevertheless, there are important lessons relating to the providence of God that we need to learn. I think the book of Esther is probably the most striking biblical example of God's providence in history. That's why, quite frankly, I'm surprised at the number of people who write about the providence of God but who never mention Esther.

But if we understand God's providence as the exercise of God's sovereign control, without miraculous intervention, over all creatures, people, actions, and circumstances through the normal course of events, then what we see in the book of Esther is that God fulfils His covenant promise made at Sinai in the ordinary events of Esther and Mordecai's lives. Now if that's true, then we can see why the writer has not mentioned the name of God directly. He wants the book to be a statement of God's ability to fulfil his promise through providence. It's a very appropriate and powerful literary device that God is not conspicuously present in the book of Esther.

**So it's quite right to say that God is working out his plan of salvation in the common affairs of life as well as in his miraculous interventions?**

Precisely. In fact, the book reminds us that God fulfils his saving purposes often in situations of defeat and hopelessness. From the standpoint of the Persians, Yahweh was of no account. He was just

the god of this little strip of land in a far-flung edge of their empire. However, God was able to work sovereignly through all the situations within the Persian empire where everybody was essentially blind to him. Even Esther and Mordecai seem very ambiguous in their relationship to God.

Nevertheless, in spite of all that, God still fulfills His covenant promise. Personally, I find that a particularly encouraging message. Paul says something similar in Romans 8:28 where he points out that God is working for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

**Does the pattern of reversal that we see in Esther actually foreshadow the way in which God would save his people through Jesus Christ?**

Yes, it does. It shows how God can bring a crushing victory out of circumstances that have every appearance of being a terrible defeat. The amazing thing about God is that He has this extraordinary capacity to deliver His people in the face of certain death. The Jews under the decree of Haman were facing certain death. And they were probably not so sure that they didn't deserve it, given the fact that they had violated the covenant and been cast out of the land. Along with the loss of their temple, this created a theological and national crisis for them.

So to have God deliver them in this extraordinary manner through ordinary events in such a dark period of history was very encouraging. It showed them that God had the power to fulfil His promises and to move history wherever He wants it to go. Of course, that's very relevant in pointing to the work of Christ. I'm sure that's why Maimonides said that when Messiah comes, the story of Esther will abide because it's a symbol of the final joy and deliverance that God has given us through the Messiah.

I think it's also an encouragement to know that God is moving all things to fulfillment in Christ, even in our own times. It gives me hope to know that God is not absent from our world, even in its darkest moments, and that He is subsuming all things under His powerful plan.

**What part do the various characters serve in the book of Esther?**

Let me say at the outset that I don't think we should ever allegorise the characters. Some modern interpreters have tried to do this and say, "Well, Esther stands for this and Haman stands for that and so forth." But this just creates another story

out of the original story.

Again, I don't even think that they are necessarily meant to personify some abstraction. For instance, even though some of their names in Old Persian have a resemblance to certain principles, ideals or moral qualities, I don't think we can draw much of a conclusion from it. For instance, Vashti sounds, I'm told, very much like the phrase "beautiful woman" in Old Persian; and Haman sounds pretty much like the Hebrew word for "anger" or "wrath".

However, although it's possible that the names could clue us in as to the nature of their roles, that doesn't mean they weren't historical people and it doesn't give us the licence to allegorise the book. It's meant to be treated as real history. And the characters represent real people regardless of what literary devices the author may have used.

*Esther is probably the most striking biblical example of God's providence in history.*



One indication that the story is based on real historical figures is the name Mordecai, which has been found in archaeological evidence so we know that it was a true name used in that time. In fact, Purim was called "Mordecai's Day" during the Maccabean period.

**Some people say it's just a story without any historical foundation. What do you say?**

I think it definitely has a historical basis. The setting of the story is motivated primarily by the historical incident that's behind it. When I talk about Esther as a story, I certainly don't mean to imply that it's fictional. I think the author has every intention of being historically accurate. However, at the same time there are certain elements of that historical situation that are magnified, embroidered and artistically embellished. But this doesn't mean that history is sacrificed in the process.

Personally, I think that one of the main theological lessons that can be inferred from the setting of the story is that God is always sovereign even where His name is

not recognised, much less honoured. Earlier I mentioned that the Persians would have understood Yahweh to be a very powerless God because they defeated his people and took them into exile. One of the main points of this story is that it isn't happening back in Jerusalem. It's happening in exile; it's happening in a pagan setting in the power centre of a pagan empire. God's in control in places where we might least expect him to be.

Another important point that the writer makes is that worldly wealth and power mean nothing to God. Here we have one of the wealthiest, most powerful people in the then world, Haman, who commands the resources of a vast empire. He is a man who has every reason to feel secure and on top of things, but all of this is turned on its head in an instant. This is meant to serve as a reminder to the reader that there's no power or plan that can frustrate God's promises. It doesn't matter what the situation is that God's people find themselves in, God can reverse it and crush His enemies if He chooses.

**Can we see God at work intervening for His people in the modern scene as clearly as we can in this book?**

I think God's principles of providence operate in our generation too. But the difference is that in the Bible God points definitively at certain events and interprets or explains their connection with others. This is a lot harder to do in modern history because God doesn't speak in that way anymore. We can't point at a particular event today and say: "Oh yes, God is doing this." We don't have the same authority or certainty that God bestowed upon the prophets or apostles.

So I'm a little wary about pointing my finger at current events and saying, "Oh yes, this is God fulfilling this promise or this prophecy, or God doing that." I don't think we can have the same insight or perception of the current events that we have when we look back at biblical events in the canon of Scripture.

**What conclusions, if any, should we draw from the fact that out of 167 verses the Jews are mentioned constantly but God's Name isn't mentioned once?**

That's an interesting question. Not only does the author of Esther not mention God's name, but he also avoids mentioning anything associated with Israel's religion. There's no mention of the temple, or the prophets, or the covenant, or anything like that. However, if a major

theme of the story is God's providential oversight of human affairs, then this explicit absence of reference to God is not only deliberate but also very appropriate.

I must add, however, that we can only understand Esther to be about God's providence by reading the book in its canonical context. What I mean by that is there are other biblical books that teach us that God is the unseen power behind world history. For instance, in Ezra 1:1 it says that the Lord moved the heart of the pagan king, Cyrus, to issue his decree that allowed the Jews to return to their own land. The text is very explicit. It says that God moved Cyrus's heart. The book of Exodus tells us that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Other books of the Bible say similar things about the way in which God exercises His providence.

It's interesting that in the ancient Greek translations of the Hebrew text of Esther, there's lots of mention of Esther and Mordecai praying to God. They explicitly mention the covenant and ask God to be faithful to it. So the Diaspora Jews understood it in that way even though the original author, I think, very deliberately left out any mention of God. He doesn't tell us why he did, but I think we can safely say that at the moment he wrote the book the Jewish people were wondering: "Where is God? Are we still His people or have we forfeited that forever?" We have to really respect the silence about God in the book and give it its due weight as we read theology from it.

### **The Book of Esther has been described as a crisis manual for the people of God. What sort of questions is it designed to answer?**

In its original historical setting, it was designed to answer the questions of the Jewish people: "Are we still the people of God? Is the covenant still in effect? Can God still fulfil His covenant promises because of our faithlessness? Have we frustrated God's plan?"

But the book addresses a range of other issues that involve the intriguing interplay between God's sovereignty and human actions, human responsibility and human behaviour and the deception and destructive nature of human pride. (Haman is a prime example of that.) However, I believe that one of the most important issues is this: how identifying yourself with God's people is the real defining moment in life. From a literary perspective, Esther's characterisation is the only one that really develops throughout this book. And her character development

really hinges on that moment where she decides to go to the king on behalf of her people and identify with them even though it may involve risking her life. And that's the defining moment in her life.

So I think that the issue of having the courage to become a Christian, if you are not already one, or having the courage to act and live by one's convictions as a Christian, especially in threatening or hostile situations, is a major theme. I think it's designed to answer the question: do we have any grounds for hope and encouragement, especially when it looks like God's work in the world is being crushed. We are even seeing that in North America. I don't think anyone could call America a Christian nation any more. Places that were once centres of the gospel have abandoned the faith. Look at Turkey, the great cradle of Christianity; how many true Christians live there now? Perhaps a handful. So, I think this book gives us a lot of hope and encouragement, especially when God's work looks like it is being crushed. It teaches us that even when the work of the gospel seems to be thwarted, God is simply preparing to bring about the next stage of His plan.

### **How important is it in times of trouble to reflect on God's providence?**

The book doesn't really tell us much about how Esther and Mordecai coped with their situation. However, Mordecai does seem to have had some understanding of God's providence when he says to Esther, "If you remain silent, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place" (Esther 4:14). I'm not sure where Esther's mind was at that moment.

Maybe I can relate this more to how Esther has changed my understanding of God and my own relationship to Him. Let me put it like this: I have stopped trying to understand why things are happening the way they are. I just accept that God is in control even when I have no explicit evidence that this is so. There may be no miracles going on and no neon sign which says: "God is here." But I know that He is there and He's causing everything – both the pain and the pleasure – to

work together for my good if I love him.

Personally, I think Esther and Mordecai's situation is particularly relevant as we find ourselves in what certainly looks like a post-Christian world. Today we find that other ideas and beliefs are competing quite aggressively with the Gospel. They are vying for peoples' hearts and minds. In that sense, we are like Esther living in Susa. But even when it looks as if God's promises in Christ are going to be wiped out or overpowered by the world in which we live, I think we can cope. We just need to remember how Esther and Mordecai coped. We too must learn to believe that there is no power that can thwart God's purposes and that we don't have to be living in Jerusalem for that to happen. We don't have to be living in a Christian world for God to fulfill his purposes in Christ.

### **Are there any lessons in the book about sexual roles and femininity?**

I think the author of Esther was much less concerned about gender issues than we are today. I think that the author of Proverbs 31 is doing something very different from the author of Esther. In Proverbs he is trying to say: this is how a godly woman should walk; this is a por-

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trait, an idealised portrait of a godly woman. So the woman in Proverbs 31 is meant to be seen as a role model. I'm not so sure that we can do that with Esther. I don't think that the author of the book was trying to make a special point about woman or the nature of woman, or even a godly woman for that matter.

And I think that interpreters who want to make Esther this virtuous, biblical heroine have a little bit of a problem. She may well have been a very virtuous woman, but the fact is that the author doesn't want to tell us that. Think seriously about how she becomes queen: basically, she wins a sex contest! Not too many interpreters want to go down that road.

**In what sense can Christian women use Esther as a role-model?**

This is not an easy one. Some Jewish interpreters believed that she was a bad role-model because she allowed herself to have sexual relations with a pagan king. One medieval interpreter said she should have tried to commit suicide before having sexual relations with an uncircumcised pagan. That's how strongly he felt that Esther was in the wrong. Further, he believed that Mordecai should have given his life before he allowed Esther to be taken into the king's harem. Again, we are told that somehow Esther may have been complicit in this rather sordid arrangement.

I think when the author tells us Esther pleased the king one night more than all the other virgins, he's telling us some-

thing. Of course, there are a number of ways of understanding that. It is a rather ambiguous statement. But I still believe it's hard to use Esther as an exemplar except for that moment where she decides to identify with God's people. I believe she acts as a role model there. But in what sense can you use her as a role model in the first part of her life? That a woman should make herself as attractive and as alluring as possible to powerful men so that she can be put in a position to advance God's Kingdom? I don't think so!

*Esther gives us hope and encouragement, especially when God's work looks like it is being crushed.*



**What abiding lessons are there in Esther about never despairing over circumstances, evil people or those who seem indifferent to the work of God?**

We should never despair over any of those things. They are all certainly in the book of Esther. But as I've already said, it's a book about how God reverses situations for His Name's sake and for His people. And He can do that even in the

darkest corners of the world where His presence is not so obvious. In Susa there seemed to be no trace of God. There was no temple of Yahweh, sacrifices or priests there. There were no prophets. Yet God was still at work in those circumstances. And He uses Vashti and Haman, people who have absolutely no knowledge or understanding of the part they are playing in God's plan. They make their own plans and yet their decisions are woven into God's greater purposes for the Jews. So I think Esther is just a wonderful source of encouragement. It should breed hope and optimism, the sort of optimism of knowing that even when the worst possible things happen to us and that nothing turns out the way we think it should happen, nevertheless God is in control. So it's an optimism that allows us to get beyond our circumstances.

**Is there anything we can learn about guidance from Esther?**

I think one of the things that I have learned about guidance from Esther is that as I live for the Lord, I shouldn't try to distinguish between small things and big things. From reading this book I learn that it's very difficult sometimes to know what's significant and what's insignificant. I suspect a lot of things that we think are significant are not really the things that are going to turn out that way. Sometimes it's these insignificant things that in hindsight we see really ministered to or touched someone's life. Often God uses the most trivial of things as important parts of His plan.

Sometimes after a speaking engagement, somebody will come up to me, and mention an incidental passing thought that I threw out that really ministered to them. So I think in terms of guidance, we need to do everything for the glory of God, whether they are small things or large things. We can be assured that even if we don't see how these acts play out, nevertheless they form part of this great chain of what God is doing in the world. Our deeds are part of this great tapestry that God is weaving and we have to give up all our deeds to Him. We shouldn't be anxious about the results of what we're doing. We just need to live each day as God has called us to live with the assurance that whether our actions seem significant or not, whether things go the way we have planned or not, it's all part of God's plan and purposes. I think God is most powerfully present in our lives sometimes when He seems most conspicuously absent.

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# Absent but everywhere

*God is not named in Esther, yet He is the chief character.*

In some ways the book of Esther is a bit of a mystery for readers. Many Christians have struggled to see why God has actually included it among the other books of the Bible. Some are deeply troubled by the complete absence of the divine name from the book. What can it mean? And yet, a deeper study of Esther reveals just how much God is involved in the entire historical account.

As a reader engages the text, a number of questions inevitably arise. Perhaps the most important of these is where is God in the book of Esther?

God's name is absent and there are no "miracles" or supernatural events recorded in the story. In that sense, it is no different from a secular narrative. Further, there is no mention of prayer or the Torah. Nor indeed is there any reference to the patriarchs or prophets. There is no Zion here, no temple or priest, no Exodus or Promised Land. Indeed, the Persian Jews are almost in a mode of religious denial, playing down their nationality and their spiritual traditions so they can fit in to Persian society.

But this subtlety is part of a clever literature. The author is able to make his point more powerfully when he implies rather than states things overtly. Readers deduce that the turn of events in the story could never just *happen*. The unseen hand of the Almighty is obviously working his purposes out. He is conspicuous by his absence.

The last moments of sunset are analogous. The sun is no longer visible. It has disappeared below the horizon, but the stunning effect on orange clouds proves that the sun is still very active. God too is at work beyond our visible horizon and the visible effects are glorious.

This book shows how the king, his empire, and even his sleepless nights are instruments of God. He uses the mundane events of everyday life to fulfill His covenant purposes. Whether it is the evil malice of a scheming politician, or the pretty girls aspiring to become Queen of Persia, or the superstitions of the ancient near-eastern cultures, all are in the hands of Yahweh.

He overrules all things so that when



**Peter  
Bloomfield**

humans do what they freely choose to, they unwittingly accomplish God's designs, while He remains the author of only good but never evil.

Of course, the absence of God's name raises a further question in the mind of many readers: why was this book finally recognised by the Church?

While the book is a brilliant narrative about the struggles of the Jews, it has not always been well received. The Jews who returned to Palestine after the exile refused to accept this story of God's activity in Persia as Scripture.

Even in the Christian Church it was regarded as unimportant. Not a single commentary was written on Esther for the first seven centuries! It wasn't until the 16th

century Reformation that a serious commentary of lasting worth was produced. Even prolific scholars like Martin Luther and John Calvin left no commentaries on Esther.

But in reality this book has a five-star rating. Few books will thrill and encourage people like Esther. Once the proper lines of Christology are seen, the rich gospel associations are evident.

Further, Esther is the only biblical record of what happened to the vast majority of Abraham's seed after

Babylon. The history of the few who returned to Palestine is seen in the books of Ezra, Haggai, and Nehemiah. If the danger shown in Esther had not been overcome, the vast majority of Jews would have been exterminated. This has major implications. There would have been no Nehemiah and no rebuilt Jerusalem. What then of the Messianic line?

Many people who pick up the book of Esther for the first time find it difficult to understand the context of the story and the major spiritual issues that it raises. If they are to understand the message, they must find an answer to this question: What, or more precisely, who, is the problem?

The villain is Persia's chief minister, Haman, a traditional enemy of God and his covenant people. It is crucial that we understand his identity. Haman is an Agagite (3:1). Agag was king of the Amalekites, the descendants of Amalek. Amalek was the grandson of Esau (1 Chron. 1:34-36). So Haman is the current version of *Esau hating Jacob*, the enemy of the covenant who persecutes the children of the covenant.

As he strutted around the Empire, people were supposed to bow down to him. However, Mordecai (Esther's uncle) refused. This was not due to any defect in Mordecai. It was his godly conscience. Mordecai recognised Haman as the latest version of Israel's inveterate ancient enemy. God had repeatedly declared his permanent enmity against the Amalekites (see Ex. 17:14-16, Deut. 25:17-19, 1 Sam. 15:2-3).

Mordecai acted in strict accord with God's word. Resenting Mordecai's refusal to bow, Haman went into full "overkill" mode, decreeing the murder of every single Jew in Persia. Readers rightly detect a

***Esther is the only biblical record of what happened to the vast majority of Abraham's seed after Babylon.***

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satanic obsession here.

Haman is the human face of Satan! The serpent always rages against the woman and her seed (Gen. 3:15, Rev. 12). Like Pharaoh before him and Herod after him, Haman leads sinful humanity in its attack against God's chosen people from whom Jesus the Saviour would be born. The book of Esther has to be understood as another scene in the ongoing enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman.

These lines finally converge upon Jesus in his wilderness temptations. There is the ultimate standoff between the covenant man and his inveterate enemy. Here is the ultimate Israelite and the ultimate Amalekite. There is the ultimate refusal to bow the knee. So Esther is gospel! It is another episode in the drama of redemption. By raising up the right people at the right time, God puts enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, crushing his head. He saves his covenant people doomed in Persia.

All this is helpful theological background. But it raises a question of application: how is the reader meant to interpret the story for himself?

It is tempting to assess history from a moralistic standpoint. When we do this we lock ourselves into a typically moralistic approach: that action is wrong, he shouldn't have done that, and we shouldn't do it either, so take heed! But reading the Old Testament like that is fraught with danger. The Bible's approach to history is covenantal.

It shows us how God works in the midst of human intrigue, through all the actions and intentions of men and women, and through all their virtuous and evil thoughts, words, and deeds. Regardless of their successes, failures, frustrations, hopes and fears, God infalli-

***Esther shows how life's most mundane details can ultimately prove significant as God keeps his covenant.***



bly accomplishes His eternal purposes. He overrules all things to achieve his promises to us in Christ. Nothing can frustrate him. Yet, in all of this, God does not violate or diminish human freedom, nor does He depend on it.

So Esther is a covenant document. We must avoid the moralistic agenda that has caused many readers to entirely miss the point of this book. It is easy to ask moral questions about this book. Should these Jews have taken the soft option of remaining in Persia rather than the risky hard work of rebuilding Zion? Should Esther have agreed to marry a pagan king? Was it right for Esther and others to hide their Jewish identity?

Whatever value there is in discussing

these moral issues, it is not the purpose of the book. The author wants us to see God at work, fulfilling His promises, using ordinary men and women as instruments in all the ordinary scenes of life, both the good and the evil. Esther shows how life's most mundane details can ultimately prove significant as God keeps His covenant.

The turning-point of the book is a night when the king could not sleep. Since sleeping pills hadn't been invented, he asked for the next best thing: the official history of Persia. An attendant read it to him. That's how he discovered that Mordecai had never been rewarded for saving his life. God used this, and the other details involved, to save His people. This serves as a reminder that we should always look for the kingdom of God being advanced as we read history. Esther is classic salvation-history (redemptive history), but not moralistic history. Morals are best taught from texts explicitly designed for that end (like the Decalogue).

Now that you understand the context and some of the major themes of Esther, you might be keen to study it with other Christians in a Bible study group. But where do you go from there? This is a big issue and one that I encountered as I set out to preach a series of sermons on the book. I had to ask, does the book fall into natural preaching or teaching divisions?

My recent book *The Guide: Esther* (Evangelical Press, 2002) arose from a series of 12 sermons. While every preacher must do his own research and apply the truth to his personal situation, the following expositions were well-received and might encourage others to do something similar.

1. Conspicuous by his absence (Overview).
2. Drunken paranoia (chapter 1).
3. Tomorrow's problems solved today (chapter 2).
4. Haman the horrible (chapter 3).
5. "If I perish, I perish" (chapter 4).
6. The king and I (chapters 5-6).
7. "Hang him!" (chapter 7).
8. The oil of joy for mourning (chapter 8).
9. "No one could stand against them" (9:1-17).
10. Many happy returns (9:18-10:3).
11. Should Christians fast too?
12. Perspectives on Purim (what worship honours God?).

*Peter Bloomfield is minister of Bald Hills Presbyterian Church, Queensland.* 

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# Perfect planning

*We may be caught in the whirlwind. No need to panic.*

**W**hy is it that beauty pageants seem to bring out the worst in people? Who could forget the dreadful circumstances surrounding the death of six-year-old beauty contestant Jon-Benet Ramsay in the USA in 1997?

And what about the recent chaos in Nigeria over the hosting of the Miss Universe pageant? Religious tensions erupted. Buildings were burned, people were killed and havoc reigned until all 80 beauties boarded a plane for London.

Does God get involved in beauty pageants? Or are they simply worldly activities in which God plays no part?

It may on the surface seem a bit odd that as we open the Old Testament book of Esther, we encounter another beauty pageant of sorts. King Xerxes is flaunting his power and might. The most beautiful young virgins are brought from around the region to be prepared for a night with the king. The one who catches his eye and satisfies his desires will become queen. And it is here we meet Esther, a young Jewish girl, orphaned after her parents' death, and raised by her cousin Mordecai.

Not everyone is agreed on how to interpret Chapter 2 of the book. There are many questions we could ask. What's a nice Jewish girl doing in such an overtly sexual environment? How could she allow herself to be pampered and prepared for the sake of winning a pagan king's favour through sexual means? Is she a role model, or should she have been prepared to die rather than have sexual intercourse with a pagan autocrat? Did she choose to be party to these events or was the choice made for her?

**W**hile these are not insignificant questions, the Bible is silent on them. Instead, we are invited to see how Esther's growing faith responds to the providence of God. The personal story of Esther and the national story of God's people are beautifully intertwined. Regardless of how she felt about it or whether she cooperated, Esther was at the mercy of a ruthless pagan king, just as her people were.



**Tracy  
Gordon**

For reasons which are unclear from the book, Mordecai commands her to conceal her "nationality and family background". Esther "pleases" the king and is crowned Queen. From this position of privilege, she waits upon the Lord and is able to enter the king's presence with confidence. God uses her to save His people from destruction.

What an end to an amazing story!

We sometimes find ourselves in situations and circumstances that cause us to wonder at the ways in which God goes about His plans. While we know that the

*The personal story of Esther and the national story of God's people are beautifully intertwined.*

Bible assures us of God's constant presence in the lives of believers, when we look around, it sometimes seems as though God isn't doing as much as we would like to extricate us from the situations that entangle us. Innocent people get caught up in awful situations. We make what we believe are the best decisions at the time, and yet we are sometimes faced by outcomes that seem so devastating. A parent stops by the grocery store to buy milk, and walks into an armed robbery. A trusted spouse makes promises on a wedding day with little intention of keeping them. Employees with a mortgage and family responsibilities devote themselves to a company, only to be shown the door when the business must downsize.

Sometimes we ask ourselves, where is God? Does He get involved in secular circumstances? Is it simply a case of in the wrong place at the wrong time, or is there more to it?

The book of Esther offers some helpful insights into God's providence and how He accomplishes what He chooses. Even though the name of God does not appear one single time throughout the book, we are left in no doubt that the pro-

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tagonist is not Esther herself, but God. And we can find comfort and assurance when we find ourselves in situations we never sought out or planned for.

So, what does the book of Esther teach us about what we should do when we find ourselves in a crisis?

We can first think about God's providence in the place and timing of our birth. As the Psalmist writes, "You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb ... All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139:13ff). Our birth is no accident and our birthplace is no random act in a chaotic universe.

God has also ordained the family we are born into. Esther was from the family of Kish, so she would have been accustomed to thinking about the role of providence in her life and the lives of her family around her. Keep in mind that Esther was from the tribe of Benjamin, a descendant of King Saul. While Saul's house was destroyed, her line was one of the few that survived. In that sense God had shown great mercy to her family over generations. It is no small mercy to grow up in a home with pious parents who pray for and instruct their children in the way of godliness.

As God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and His ways are higher than our ways, we must rest in His sovereignty through all the situations we encounter in life. Sometimes God designs us for situations that we do not plan. As King Solomon writes: "In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his

**Being in a bad situation does not mean that we are out of God's will.**



steps." King David thought he would be a shepherd; Amos thought he could look forward to a comfortable life as a farmer. Neither of them counted on God having other plans.

As Charles Colson writes, God may be invisible, but He is also invincible. "When I pause long enough to look back, I realise it is the unsearchable mind, the unfathomable will, the sovereign control, the irresistible providence of God at work,

because He, though invisible, remains invincible."

We should also realise that God may select us for a special purpose. There are times in the Bible where we encounter people following God's leading and yet being persecuted. Paul and Timothy received a call to go to Macedonia, yet their obedience to that call led to their persecution.

We should keep in mind that being in a bad situation does not mean that we are out of God's will. Because of the unique position Esther found herself in she was able to save her own people's lives and enrich the life of the king.

In the mystery of God's will we sometimes come to a place where we cannot explain why things turned out as they did; yet, amazingly, we are still right in the middle of His will. It's not that you or I created a problem; it's that God is in the process of surprising His people on a regular basis, writes Charles Swindoll.

It is no accident that we find ourselves in the places and situations we do. God's purposes and plans were determined in eternity past.

As Karen Jobes writes, "this episode from Esther's life offers great encouragement and comfort when we find ourselves in situations where every choice is an odd mix of right and wrong. Only God knows the end of our story from its beginning. We are responsible to Him for living faithfully in obedience to His word in every situation as we best know how. Even if we make the 'wrong' decision, whether through innocent blunder or deliberate disobedience, our God is so gracious and omnipotent that He is able to use that weak link in a chain of events that will perfect His purposes in us and through us."

And we can take comfort that the God who is able to do all things is also able to keep us from sin, even in the most appalling of circumstances. We are reminded again and again in Scripture that God is able to keep our feet from slipping (Ps. 94:18). He sometimes extricates us through catastrophic situations. While through our earthly life we only see "but a poor reflection as in a mirror", one day we shall see in full. In all of life's ups and downs, God is working to fulfil His redemptive purposes.

Tracy Gordon is a Sydney journalist. She worships at Ashfield Presbyterian Church. 

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# The marvels of providence

*20 daily bible studies  
from Ruth and Philemon*

**G**od's providence is sometimes very hard to fathom. Things go wrong in our lives that cause us to doubt God's promised love and faithfulness, or even to doubt whether God is there for us at all. The story of Ruth helps us to hang in with God during the bad times. It also helps us to know how to live in a way that pleases him when we are tempted to rationalise sinful behaviour, or to take short-cuts in the hope of precipitating a quick blessing.

Above all, Ruth shows us the eternal significance of God's providence. In ordinary people's lives God is carrying out his plan of salvation, centred on his Son Jesus, our kinsman-redeemer. The birth, death and resurrection of Jesus 2000 years ago was not just some isolated event in an unpredictable stream of human history; it was a plan in the mind and purpose of God since the beginning of Creation; it is the only solution to man's misery.

Philemon is another little book that demonstrates the wonder of God's providence. A slave/thief on the run gets involved with a prisoner named Paul who leads him to faith in Christ and eternal life.

May this month's Bible studies help you to trust God with every little detail of your life.

**Bruce Christian**

## DAY 1

### *Sad beginnings*

#### THE PASSAGE

RUTH 1:1-5

**THE POINT** God's providence is sometimes very hard to fathom. Without knowing how the events of her life fitted into God's long-term Plan, Naomi's faith would have been sorely tested over many years. How she deals with this will be a good lesson for us.

#### THE PARTICULARS

- All things are in God's sovereign hands. We are to see the famine that led Elimelech and his young family to migrate to an alien country and culture as part of his providence, his divine will.
- Elimelech's name means 'My God is King' and Naomi's means 'Pleasant' – we might expect all to go well for them as a family!
- Elimelech's untimely death would have left Naomi in a vulnerable position, now settled in a foreign land with 2 sons who would be likely to, and did, marry foreign, non-covenant wives.
- The death of her 2 sons would have been the end for Naomi.

#### TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- How do you cope when the God in whom you trust seems to set his hand against you? Does this fit into your 'world-view'?
- Might Naomi have wondered if God was punishing her for going to Moab? Is adversity necessarily punishment from God?

## DAY 2

### *No light at the end of the tunnel*

#### THE PASSAGE

RUTH 1:6-13

**THE POINT** Orpah and Ruth were in a 'no-win' situation. Although attracted to their mother-in-law with her 'foreign' ways and beliefs, the track record of her God was hardly convincing. Everything was wrong; any relief in Bethlehem was of no real use to them.

#### THE PARTICULARS

- With the drought now broken in Judah, and with all her hopes and dreams shattered in Moab, Naomi's heart longed for 'home'.
- Ruth and Orpah were Naomi's only emotional security but everything seemed stacked against their going back with her: they could not have been very impressed with Naomi's God; and there was no hope of a brother-in-law to marry to raise up descendants for Naomi as provided for in Deuteronomy 25:5-6.
- Naomi felt the bitter pain of being despised and rejected by God. To have no prospects of grandchildren was a terrible disgrace.

#### TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY

- What factors would Ruth and Orpah have to take into account in deciding between going to Judah or staying in Moab? Have you ever had to make a decision like this? What things helped you?
- Most people today are loath to believe God is responsible for disasters in the world. Is this how Naomi thought? (see Is.45:7)

**DAY 3** *Your God will be my God*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 1:14-18

**THE POINT** Orpah and Ruth are now faced with a difficult decision with far-reaching consequences but with little to help them know which option would be for the best. Orpah was more influenced by experiences and circumstances; Ruth by her faith-commitment to the God she had met through the testimony of Naomi's life. Ruth was prepared to trust this God in spite of all that had occurred.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Orpah and Ruth had the same facts to go on but made quite different choices. Trusting God for who he is rather than being led by personal feelings/experiences will prove to be the best option.
- Naomi's life and faith had been a powerful testimony to Ruth that the Lord can be trusted even when our experience of his providence might suggest the opposite. Ruth was now willing to stake her whole life on this conviction.
- Naomi knew that Ruth would be a great help and comfort to her if she stayed with her, but her prime concern was Ruth's welfare.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Does your life and testimony inspire others to trust the God you serve, even in spite of the hardships and adversities they face? Do you keep trusting God's Word if things are going wrong?

**DAY 4** *The LORD has afflicted me*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 1:19-22

**THE POINT** Although they were a great source of bitterness to her, Naomi accepted her trials as the active providence of a sovereign God. She didn't try to say that they were somehow 'out of his hands' or even that he simply permitted them to happen as if against his better judgement. She knew that everything that happened to her was God's will for her (as Paul did in 1 Thessalonians 5:18).

**THE PARTICULARS**

- The Bethlehem townsfolk were surprised to see Naomi coming home with such a different outlook from the one she had when she left; it would have been hard for her to face their probing.
- Naomi could see that her given name, 'Pleasant' was no longer appropriate for her situation; better she were called 'Bitter'.
- Naomi has now reached her lowest point: God-forsaken and disgraced. At this point we are told of the barley harvest which is about to play a major part in her restoration. God is so good!

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Very few Christians today seem to have the faith of Naomi or Job or Paul – a faith that sees God in absolute control of ALL their circumstances, every blessing, every disaster. Do you?
- In hard times, do you look for the 'barley harvest beginning'?

**DAY 5** *As it turned out...*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 2:1-3

**THE POINT** What often appear to us as chance encounters or coincidental timings are really our sovereign God working out his purposes.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Having been told about the barley harvest (1:22), the reader is now introduced to Boaz, the man who holds the key to Ruth's and Naomi's future; but the women themselves are yet to discover him. It is encouraging to know that God is always a step ahead!
- Ruth is not afraid to go out and work hard to earn her keep. But nor is she unmindful of her duty toward, or respect for, Naomi.
- The Hebrew of verse 3b is literally: 'Her chance chanced upon the portion of the field associated with Boaz ...'. Some call this luck, or Fate, or coincidence; we see it as God's guiding hand.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Can you own this statement in the Heidelberg Catechism (Q27) – "Providence is the almighty and ever-present power of God by which He upholds, as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty – all things in fact, come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand."

**DAY 6** *Grace and grind*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 2:4-7

**THE POINT** Again we see God's sovereign grace at work as Boaz arrives on the scene and notices a new woman picking up scraps in his field which 'her chance chanced upon'. (God's gracious provision for this to happen is described in Leviticus 19:9-10.) But we also see, going hand in hand with God's grace, his elect people, not taking it for granted but working hard in menial tasks.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Boaz was a godly employer who had a genuine concern for the welfare of his employees and enjoyed a relationship with them of mutual respect, openly acknowledging the Lord in all he did.
- Boaz seemed to take a special interest in Ruth from the start.
- Gleaning wasn't much further up the social ladder than collecting food from garbage bins in the park! But Ruth was prepared to work hard at this menial task so that she and Naomi could eat.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Is there some small influence you could have to make relationships in your workplace, or even your home, more like Boaz's?
- What wrong attitudes does our 'welfare state' encourage? How could we change things to make it more like God's welfare system (eg 'work for the dole')? What does Ruth teach us?

**DAY 7** *Good and faithful servants*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 2:8-13

**THE POINT** Ruth is to join the select group of Gentile women, foreigners to God's Covenant, who are to be part of the human ancestry of Jesus, the Son of God. If you or I had walked beside her in the field as she gathered up the 'crumbs that fell from the master's table' and told her of this, I doubt she would have believed us. For now, she was happy to be taking refuge under the wings of the God of Israel. What safer or better place is there to be?

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Boaz had found out a little bit about Ruth – that she was an alien from Moab and was connected to Naomi – but it was enough for him to realise he had a fatherly responsibility to make sure she was provided for and protected from possible exploitation.
- Ruth was humbly grateful for his concern and felt unworthy of it.
- Ruth's quiet, godly demeanour and her unpretentious devotion and commitment to Naomi had not gone unnoticed by others.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- How do Boaz's character and actions anticipate God in Christ?
- What can you learn from Ruth in the way you respond to God's gracious work in your life? Are you content and faithful in the Lord's humble service, regardless of possible future rewards?

**DAY 8** *A picture of God*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 2:14-18

**THE POINT** God uses many different illustrations in his Word to help us to understand his relationship to us. One is of a father to his children; another is of a husband/lover to his wife. Boaz models both of these and we already see the inner conflict it is causing him! Did others wonder about his 'over-the-top' generosity? But that is how God wants to be with us, the Bride of Christ!

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Boaz's treatment of Ruth is a picture of God's treatment of us -
  - he invited her to share his bread and wine (14);
  - he arranged for her protection when she trespassed (15);
  - he made her task easier and more rewarding than normal (16);
  - his rewarding of her labours was above and beyond her needs (14, 17, 18); two household laundry buckets full of grain after one day's reaping and threshing would have pleased a hired worker, and she was only a beggar collecting scraps!
- Ruth shared her blessing with her mother-in-law.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Are you aware of God's abundant blessing in your life? Do you notice the gracious, unobtrusive provisions he makes for you? Have you thanked him for them? Do you share them?

**DAY 9** *Our Kinsman-Redeemer*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 2:19-23

**THE POINT** This passage introduces us to the term 'kinsman-redeemer', a significant OT concept, spelt out in detail in Leviticus 25:23-55 and 27:13-33, and has the idea of money being paid on behalf of a close relative to buy back (redeem) what was rightfully his but had been 'lost' through poverty or other misfortune. The two parts of the term, 'kinsman' and 'redeemer', cannot be separated, and we therefore can't help but recognise its applicability to Boaz's future descendant, Jesus Christ. In these events God is declaring his intention to send his only Son to become one of us (our Kinsman) and give his life as ransom for our sin (our Redeemer). Naomi's faith in Boaz is looking beyond him to his God.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Perhaps for the first time Naomi was beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel. The barley harvest, Ruth meeting Boaz their kinsman-redeemer, his kindness and generosity, the prospect of a marriage for Ruth that would change everything ... Naomi seeing her prayers being answered at last ... hang in there, girl!

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- The story of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz was part of Israel's treasured history for 3 generations before David became her great king, and for another 1,000 years before Jesus was born. God is faithful.

**DAY 10** *'Will you take this woman'*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 3:1-5

**THE POINT** Over the centuries, mankind (& womankind) have devised many schemes to instigate marriage – some subtle, some not so subtle. There was nothing subtle about Naomi's plan for Ruth. It was obvious to all concerned that Ruth was requesting marriage, and in the most forceful way possible! God had already shown by his amazing providence that this was the next logical step and was part of his sovereign will – so there was no point now in letting things take their own course. It was time for action. We might be embarrassed by Ruth's throwing herself at Boaz like this but how would we feel if, because of his age (v.10) and kindly nature, he was content to keep on in the 'father' role only?

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Naomi obviously tried to sound a bit off-handed in the way she introduced her plan to Ruth, but soon made her intentions clear.
- Ruth, an alien, had confidence in Naomi's understanding of the customs of the Lord's people, and that Boaz would act wisely.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Is it inconsistent for a Christian to say, 'I believe God is sovereign and I trust him fully with every detail of my life' and yet to 'seize the day' when the opportunity arises as Naomi did?

**DAY 11** *Risk yourself for God*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 3:6-11

**THE POINT** There was an element of risk in Naomi's plan; there always is when we step out in faith. In the secluded end of the barn Boaz could have misunderstood Ruth's motives and taken advantage of her or turned against her and accused her of sexual harassment. Or, if Ruth was seen coming or going, rumours could have been spread. However, the risks were minimised by Ruth's acknowledged impeccable character and Boaz's proven track record (2:22). We are not surprised to see the plan succeed perfectly.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Ruth put to the test her faith in Naomi, or rather, Naomi's God.
- God was faithful in his role by giving Boaz a nudge (8).
- What we've suspected all along is now clear: Boaz was not only deeply concerned for Ruth's welfare, he was head-over-heels in love with her, and is relieved to find she too is with him.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Are you prepared to take risks for God in order to receive his blessing? Does the quality of your daily walk with him help you to take such risks with impunity?
- Ruth's main desire was for 'salvation' through her kinsman-redeemer. Have you asked Jesus to cover you with his garment?

**DAY 12** *The fruit of the Spirit*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 3:12-18

**THE POINT** Boaz's character is really put to the test here. He is aware of another more eligible kinsman-redeemer so he can do nothing in respect to Ruth until he has given him the opportunity for 'first refusal'. He cannot let Ruth leave until it is light enough for her to go home in safety, but he must act honourably towards her in the darkness and seclusion until then. She must leave early enough for there to be no possibility of gossip. Boaz passes the test with flying colours, showing again his Christ-likeness.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- It is a helpful exercise to check out Boaz's character and behaviour against the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23. Look for specific examples of love (ie real 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 love), joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. How might you have scored in this test?
- Even in these stressful circumstances, Boaz did not allow the uninvited guest to go home empty-handed.
- Naomi knew human nature well enough to be sure that things would move fairly fast from this point on.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Which parts of the fruit of the Spirit give you the most trouble?

**DAY 13** *Christ loved the Church*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 4:1-6

**THE POINT** At every point in this story Boaz's godly character shines out like a beacon. Here we see it in contrast with the other eligible kinsman-redeemer. Boaz always puts the needs and the happiness of Ruth ahead of his own; his rival is motivated by self-interest. Again, Boaz gives us a picture of our Kinsman-Redeemer who 'though he was rich, yet for (our) sakes became poor, so that (we) through his poverty might become rich' (2 Corinth. 8:9).

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Boaz's arranging for the 10 elders to be present as witnesses in accordance with the requirements of Deuteronomy 25:7-10 was a sign of his confidence that his rival for Ruth would decline. It would prevent possible criticism that he had jumped the queue.
- Initially, in fairness, Boaz presented the offer in the best possible light, so much so that the rival accepted! What a disaster!
- However, when faced with the prospect of having to marry a secondhand foreigner as part of the deal the other man realised, 'I might endanger my own estate'. He put his own needs first.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- As well as Boaz's fatherly concern for Ruth's welfare he loved her passionately. Jesus is also passionate about his Church.

**DAY 14** *Forfeited blessing*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 4:7-10

**THE POINT** A number of pivotal events in the history of God's saving purposes sadly involve a person who puts self-interest ahead of God's covenant requirements thus losing the blessing he should have received. Among the many examples are Esau and Saul. The man who could have married Ruth is another example.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Boaz's rival performed the formal symbolic action to forfeit his right to marry Ruth and obtain Elimelech's inheritance, thus becoming 'The Family of the Unsandaled' (Deuteronomy 25:10).
- Boaz's decision to have the elders present as witnesses paid off and he was covered against the possible accusation (even posthumously when David became King) of shady dealing re Ruth.
- In fulfilling the levirate law Boaz not only ensured Elimelech's 'resurrection' through offspring, he also maintained the eternal God's Plan that would ultimately produce the One who would make resurrection to eternal life an unambiguous reality.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Have you ever been in danger of losing God's ultimate blessing in the interests of satisfying a short-term personal longing?
- God is resolutely committed to his Plan of salvation. Are you?

**DAY 15** *May the Lord bless you*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 4:11-12

**THE POINT** Here we see all the people and the elders, not only witnessing the sealing of a beautiful covenant relationship, but seeking God's richest blessing upon it – and they do this in harmony with his established covenant dealings with his people from of old.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Names mentioned in the witnesses' prayer for Boaz and Ruth as examples of the kind of blessing they sought for them included – Rachel and Leah; Leah (mother of Judah) because she was in the Messianic line through David (to Jesus), but Rachel mentioned first because she more closely fits Ruth's case as the more humble and needy recipient of God's grace and mercy;
  - Ephrathah/Bethlehem because it anticipates the birthplace of David (and Jesus);
  - Perez, Tamar and Judah because their part in the Messianic line is similar to that of Ruth (Tamar was a foreigner who bore Perez under the levirate arrangement, Genesis 38).
- Bearing witness to God's grace and seeking blessing for others in prayer are very commendable activities for our involvement.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- How much and how often do you ask God to bless others?

**DAY 16** *To you is born... a Saviour!*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 4:13-15

**THE POINT** Jesus' birth, life, cross and resurrection epitomise the true pattern of God's providence: suffering is part of the preparation for joy and blessing (cf 1 Peter 5:10). We see this same pattern here.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- The Sovereign Lord had guided and directed every detail of their lives to this pinnacle where Boaz took Ruth to be his wife. The same sovereign Lord enabled Ruth to conceive and bear a son.
- The birth of this son was Naomi's 'salvation'. Without him her life seemed to be (in her culture) without sense or purpose; because of him even her past trials and struggles now had meaning.
- Naomi's friends recognised the significance of what was happening, saw the Lord's hand clearly in it, and therefore praised him and looked for some future significance in this boy's life.
- 'Seven' signifies completeness; to have 7 sons would be a clear sign of God's approval. Naomi, the one whose life till now had indicated only disfavour and rejection, is, because of Ruth's love and loyalty, seen to be even more blessed than a mother of 7 sons!

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- At times when you really struggle with God's providence in your life, do you praise him for Jesus, your Kinsman-Redeemer?

**DAY 17** *Naomi has a (grand) son!*

**THE PASSAGE** RUTH 4:16-22

**THE POINT** These last 7 verses bring the whole story of Ruth together, explaining how God's perplexing providence in one person's life becomes a key piece in the big picture of God's saving purposes for lost humanity. It helps us to see that God is still in control – that he still uses ordinary, faithful people, in the midst of the difficulties and trials of their life, to carry out his sovereign will.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Little Obed was the key to understanding all Naomi's struggles.
- Obed ('Servant') is yet to play his faithful role as a vital link in the chain of salvation history. That's all we know about him!
- Naomi doesn't know the full story, but she does know that her grandson's father, Boaz, is a descendant of Perez, the levirate-produced son of Judah to whom a great promise had been given: "The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his." (Gen. 49:10). That was enough.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Does the story of Ruth help you cope with any unfinished jigsaw puzzles in your own experience of God's providence?
- What does this story tell us is Jesus' place in human history?

**DAY 18** *Sharing our faith*

**THE PASSAGE** PHILEMON 1:1-7

**THE POINT** Paul is faced with a delicate task. A slave has escaped from his master, Philemon, (probably with property), has met Paul in the prison in Rome and has become a Christian. Obviously Paul should send the slave back, but he must be sure that Philemon will accept this forgiven sinner with genuine Christian grace. He therefore sends this positive, tactful letter with him.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Paul, imprisoned in Rome for openly proclaiming the Gospel, sees himself as a 'prisoner of Christ Jesus', ie, not because he's done anything wrong, but as part of God's providence for him.
- Philemon and fellow believers met together as a house-church.
- Paul had a deep and ongoing, prayerful concern for the various church groups that were planted during his missionary travels.
- Paul was grateful to God, and greatly encouraged, whenever he heard of converts growing in faith and in love for each other.
- Paul saw evangelistic activity and zeal as an important part of a Christian's life, leading to better understanding of God's ways.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Are you encouraged by regular contact with other believers?

**DAY 19** *No running away from God*

**THE PASSAGE** PHILEMON 1:8-16

**THE POINT** Paul understands Philemon's legal rights in regard to the run-away slave/thief – Onesimus could be executed. But he wants him to see that kingdom values are different, involving the new concepts of forgiveness, unity, equality, mutual support, etc.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- Paul tries to maintain a sensitive, tactful balance: as Philemon's spiritual father he could demand obedience in the Lord; but he chooses instead to appeal to Christ's love in him for a spontaneous decision to treat Onesimus as a true brother in Christ.
- Paul's grounds for his appeal include:
  - Compassion: his age and circumstances prevent him from doing anything; he needs Philemon to be sympathetic in this matter;
  - Fellowship: Onesimus is now a brother, not just a slave;
  - Fairness: Paul is making a sacrifice sending Onesimus back, and Philemon really 'owes' him a useful helper anyway;
- Paul uses humour (Onesimus means 'useful') to argue his case.
- Providentially, God has turned a bad situation to a good result.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Do you see God's hand at work even in adverse circumstances?

**DAY 20** *Mutual responsibility*

**THE PASSAGE** PHILEMON 1:17-25

**THE POINT** Paul wants all those who share with him in the work of the Gospel to recognise and be aware of their responsibilities to each other and to the whole fellowship of believers.

**THE PARTICULARS**

- As in his letters generally, Paul adopts an encouraging positive approach to achieve his aim in preference to being adversarial.
- Paul tactfully appeals to Philemon's better nature, while at the same time reminding him gently of his obligations in the Lord, and being prepared to go the second mile himself if necessary.
- Paul is very personally and emotionally involved in this matter.
- Paul sees all his work for Christ as an ongoing partnership with others, not afraid to express his dependence on them, and keeping all the team members in contact with each other.

**TO PONDER ... AND TO PRAY**

- Are you always careful to be tactful in dealing with others?
- Is there a need in the Church today to re-emphasise our responsibilities to the Body of Christ? Do we tend to be too off-handed about our commitment to Church? How much does western society's self-centredness influence our community in Christ?



## Across Australia

### Elaine Rickard

We note with great sadness but in submission to the will of our Father in Heaven the sudden death of **Elaine Rickard**, the daughter of **Rev. John** and **Mrs Heather Rickard** during her sleep on 4 March. Elaine was 16 years old. Prayer is requested for the Rickard family, and the congregations where they minister – **Numurkah**, **Tallygaroopna** and **Cobram** in Victoria.

### At the front

**Rev. Dr. Paul Swinn**, who resigned from the **Auburn** congregation (Vic) last year to become a chaplain in the British Army, is on active duty with British troops in Kuwait.

### Seven score and ten

**St Andrew's Penrith** (NSW) turns 150 this year, with a major celebration service held on 30 March, at which the NSW Moderator, **Rt. Rev. John Irvin**, preached. Festivities conclude with a day of celebration on 26 October when the Moderator-General, **Very Rev. Jack Knapp**, will preach. Any past parishioners who would like to attend either of the major functions are invited to contact session clerk **Randall Roberts** on 02 9623 0777; email [marran@bigpond.com](mailto:marran@bigpond.com), or write to 24 Ovens Drive, Werrington County, NSW 2747.

### PIM encouraged

Five couples expressed serious interest in becoming patrol workers and more than 70 people attended the **Presbyterian Inland Mission** open day held near **Bacchus Marsh**, Victoria, in early March. Members of the PIM committee with superintendant **Jack Knapp** and patrol padres **Bill** and **Bronwen Gray** (North

Queensland Patrol), **Owen** and **Sally Oakes** (South-West Queensland), **Terry** and **Judy Sadler** (North and South Western NSW Patrol) **Barry Rossiter** (SA Patrol) and **David** and **Doreen Hart** (Mid-West WA Patrol) met to strengthen and develop the ministry of the Presbyterian Church "beyond the furthest fences".

To cap the day off a campermatic was donated to the Flynn (SA) Patrol through a generous gift of \$25,000 received from one of the visitors. Then more than 300 people attended a special PIM service at **Scots Church**, Melbourne. The sermon was delivered by the **Rt Rev. Trevor Morrow** from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, who is visiting Scots as the Turnbull Trust preacher until May. The offering (nearly \$16,000) was given towards the establishment of the new PIM patrol in the Kimberley-Pilbara.

### New posts

A large congregation gathered to witness the induction of **Rev. Chris Siriweera** into the **Surrey Hills** congregation in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne on 31 January. **Rev. Gerald Vanderwert** of **Donvale** preached.

**Rev. Moses Hahn** was inducted to the **Abbotsford-Five Dock** (NSW) parish by the Presbytery of Sydney on 1 January. On 14 February the Presbytery held a service of ordination for **Mr Harrijanto Rusli** to the ministry of word and sacraments. Mr Rusli serves as assistant to the minister of the **Indonesian Presbyterian Church, Randwick**.

**Rev. John McClean** was inducted as lecturer in theology at the **PTC Sydney** on 7 February at **St Andrew's Bathurst**. **Rev. Peter Moore** of **Coffs Harbour** preached.

**Matt James**, who has been appointed to the **Croydon Hills** congregation in outer Melbourne, was licensed to preach the gospel by the **Melbourne North Presbytery** on 21 February at a service at **Bundoora**. The preacher was **Rev. Dr Neil Chambers**, minister of Bundoora.

**Rev. Tony Parle** has been inducted minister of **Epping/Lalor** in northern

Melbourne by the **Presbytery of Melbourne North**. **Rev. David Schultz** of **Tatura** preached.

**Rev. Ken Brown** was inducted into **Drouin** (Vic) on 12 February, after ministering as supply for two years. **Rev Bob Boan** of **Morwell** preached.

**Rev. Rudi Schwartz** was inducted into the charge of **St Andrew's Townsville** on 5 February. At the same service, **Mr David Hopper** was commissioned as assistant to the Brisbane-based director of Christian Education, **Rev. John Nicol**.

### Moving on

The following ministers have recently demitted/resigned: **Rev. Martin Levine** from **Becroft** in Sydney, **Rev. Ross Tucker** from **Western Newcastle** (NSW) and **Rev. Victor Johnson** as colleague to the minister of **Tamworth-Manila** (NSW).

### Sayonara

Following last minute visa delays, **Nerida Bell** ([neridainjapan@yahoo.com.au](mailto:neridainjapan@yahoo.com.au)) of **Ashfield** (NSW) left for Japan at the end of February. She will be working with the **Kaihin Makuhari Grace Church**, a small congregation that meets in an apartment. Nerida hopes to reach many Japanese people with the message of Christ through English language classes, which include Bible-teaching opportunities.

### PYW camp

**Rev. Don Elliot**, who has a Masters in marriage and family therapy, was the speaker at the **Presbyterian Youth Victoria** camp held over the March long weekend (7-10). The camp was held at the Rutherford Park Country Retreat near **Blampied** in central Victoria.

### Refreshing fellowship

The five congregations that make up the **West Wyalong** (NSW) parish met on 30 March in the **Pioneers Memorial Church** in West Wyalong for a joint service. Distance makes it hard for the five con-

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gregations (West Wyalong, Barmedman, Weethalle, Tallimba and Mirrol-Mahda) to meet. They gathered as part of the parish strategy "Revive to Survive". By this West Wyalong is attempting in the face of the drought and the general rural decline to marshal its resources to continue its ministry. **Mr Lance Jackson** is supplying ministry in the parish under the guidance of interim-moderator **Rev. A.C. McMillian** of Wagga Wagga.

### Drawing the masses

Nearly 400 people attended the service to mark the opening of the **PTC Melbourne's** academic year and the conferring of degrees and diplomas on 17 February at the **Canterbury church**. The **Australian College of Theology** was represented by **Rev. Dr. Peter Adam**. **Rev. Jared Hood** of Moe-Yarram received a Master of Theology. The commencement speaker was **Rev. Dr Neil Chambers**.

### Planting at Ashtonfield

The **Presbytery of the Hunter** last year decided to develop a new congregation to serve growth areas in the **Maitland** area. The fledgling congregation will be led by **Rev. Russell Vandervelden**, who previously ministered at **Coonabarabran**. "This is a very exciting development, and we are grateful for God's leading and care at the start of this new local Church," said the clerk of presbytery, **Rev. John Macintyre**.

### Thronging to school

The 2003 commencement service of **St Andrew's** school in Melbourne saw the largest attendance in the school's 20-year

history. The service was held in the **Canterbury church** and featured the college choir and a 20th anniversary birthday cake. Victorian moderator **Rev. John Wilson** was guest speaker.

### Giving freely

The **NSW PWA** has presented \$41,000, the fruits of market day 2002 (6 December) to **Mr Colin Llewellyn** and **Rev. Max Hogg**, to be used by the **Presbyterian Social Service Department** in the three children's homes at **Blakehurst, Jannali** and **Fairfield**. The proceeds of the 2003 market (1 October at Willoughby Civic Centre, Chatswood) have been designated to assist the **PIM** in acquiring a new Landcruiser Patrol Vehicle for the North West Patrol area of **NSW**.

### Drought relief

**Owen** and **Sally Oakes**, the ministry team of the **South-Western Queensland Presbyterian Inland Mission** patrol have been able to distribute nearly \$2000 in drought relief grants and assistance in various places within their vast patrol area. Further donations for drought relief can be sent through the **PIM Superintendent**, **Rev. Jack Knapp**, (02) 4358 1940, 25 Lakeway Drive, Lake Mamora NSW 2259.

### Mission melding

In late February the **NSW Superintendent of Ministry and Mission**, **Rev. Bruce Meller**, the **Queensland Director of Home Ministry**, **Rev. John Nichol**, and the **Victorian Director of Home Mission**, **Rev. Bob Carner** met in Melbourne to explore ways of promoting

and co-ordinating home mission work between the three state churches. They discussed a common standard for admission to home mission service and a scheme whereby active retirees could be involved in assisting in congregations in different states while enjoying holidays around Australia.



### Around the World

#### Saudis off list

**US Secretary of State Colin Powell** has designated six nations as "countries of particular concern" for abuses of religious freedom but rejected widespread calls for Saudi Arabia to be included on the list.

Powell identified China, Iran, Iraq, Burma, North Korea and Sudan as such — the same six he designated last year — keeping in place the possibility of sanctions against them, State Department spokesman **Richard Boucher** said.

"Last year, these six countries were also designated," he said in a statement. "Regrettably, the status of religious freedom has not significantly improved in any of these countries since that time."

*Washington Times*

#### Children slain

**Fourteen** Christians, including three children, have been brutally killed in an attack on a Christian village in the southern Philippines by Islamic separatists.

According to *The Barnabas Fund*, some 50 rebels entered the village, located on the Zamboanga peninsula, on the southern island of Mindanao and rounded up the defenceless villagers before opening fire on them. One child is reported to have died in his mother's arms, three others were injured and three more are reported missing. Grenades were also thrown into homes, others were raked with bullets and set ablaze.

The *Barnabas Fund* reports that Islamic separatists in the majority-Christian Philippines have been fighting for an independent Islamic homeland in the south of the country for the 5 million Muslim Filipino community since 1972.

*The Barnabas Fund*

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## Missionary killed

A Southern Baptist missionary was killed and another missionary and her child were injured when a bomb exploded on 4 March at the airport in Davao City, Philippines.

**William P. "Bill" Hyde**, 59, died in surgery from severe head and leg injuries. **Barbara Wallis Stevens**, 33, was slightly injured and her 10-month-old son, **Nathan**, also was wounded.

At least 17 people were killed and 100 injured in the attack, which occurred outside the arrival terminal of the Davao airport in the Philippines' second largest city.

*International Mission Board*

## Travesty of justice in Egypt

An Egyptian court has acquitted nearly all 96 suspects charged with atrocities in connection with violence which broke out in the village of El Kosheh in January 2000, leaving 21 Christians and a Muslim dead.

As in the previous February 2001 ruling, only four men received sentences, according to *Christian Solidarity Worldwide* (CSW).

CSW reports that Mayez Amin Abdel Rahim was sentenced to 15 years for the killing of the sole Muslim victim, an increase of five years from the previous verdict. The other three men, all Muslims, received two-year and one-year sentences for setting alight a truck.

CSW reported the acquittals have come as a deep disappointment to Egypt's Christian minority, who had hoped to see justice done at the retrial.

## Westminster principle

A conservative thinktank has called on the bishops of the Church of England to apologise, and suggests they should resign en masse for allegedly failing to take responsibility for falling church attendances.

In a pamphlet entitled *Called to Account*, published to coincide with the enthronement of **Rowan Williams** as **Archbishop of Canterbury** recently, the social affairs unit claims – using figures largely published by the church itself – that the Church of England's leaders have scarcely acknowledged that it is on the road to disaster.

The pamphlet claims the church has lost half its members, children's attendance has collapsed and the only thing expanding is bureaucracy.

*The Guardian*

## Apology in Georgia

At the meeting with the religious minorities held in **Evangelical Baptist church** in Tbilisi, Georgian State Minister **Avtandil Jorbenadze** apologised in the name of **President Shevardnadze** for violent attacks against the religious minorities.

"We are concerned with the raids and attacks against the religious minorities and we are ready to cooperate with you," Avtandil Jorbenadze said at a recent meeting.

## Ethiopian Christians freed

Evangelical church leaders **Kiros Meles** and **Abebayeh Desalegn** have been freed after being jailed without charges for 10 months in the northern Ethiopian town of Maychew. According to the magistrate who ordered their release, no evidence existed against the two Pentecostal elders, under investigation for alleged murder. "It is a shame for them to be in prison," said the magistrate, found no evidence against the two Pentecostal elders.

*Compass*

## Porn outranks church

Church leaders in the United Kingdom are angry that a pornography baron can apply to run a radio or television station but Church organisations cannot.

Senior churchmen, led by the **Archbishop of York, Dr David Hope**, accuse the Government of discrimination. The **Bishop of Manchester**, the **Rt Rev. Nigel McCulloch**, said he was "perplexed, bewildered and utterly dismayed" that religion was being treated so unfairly.

The only other groups facing a ban are convicted criminals and political parties. In contrast, almost anyone else, from brothel owners and publishers of pornography to advertising agencies and foreign businessmen, can submit applications.

The Government defends its stance by saying that there are few licences to go around and that it needs to "avoid discrimination" between the "many different religions practised in Britain", although its new watchdog, Ofcom, has discretion to overrule such a ban.

*Telegraph*



## On the Agenda

### Fears for Papuan Christians

Fears are mounting over the political situation in **Papua** and the fate of the many Christians there. Reports confirm widely held suspicions that while the Muslim extremist group **Laskar Jihad** did disband in Maluku, it did not disband in Papua.

In late February the *South China Morning Post* published an article entitled "Islamic extremism gains a foothold in Christian Papua". It portrays increasing co-operation between the Indonesian military, the Kopassus special forces, and the Laskar Jihad.

"The mainly Christian Papua province-PNG border area has become home to Islamic fighters of Laskar Jihad, Papuan militia groups trained by Indonesia's Kopassus, and Free Papuan Movement (OPM) guerrillas. What has emerged (from police investigation) is that the northern area of the Papua-PNG border is now a training area for Islamic militants backed by the Indonesian military," reported the *Post*.

Other reports suggest the Islamic militants of Laskar Jihad have been arriving in Papua from the conflict in Ambon for the past two years. The setting up of an office in the town of Sorong last year was a front for their activities in that area, which locals say included the establishment of 12 training camps that were in remote areas and guarded by members of Kopassus.

"The rhetoric of the Laskar Jihad group fits comfortably with the aim of the Indonesian military in Papua. One of their objectives is to protect the unity of Indonesia in Papua. They are using Islam to claim they are fighting against the Kaffir here in Papua," commented **Johannes Bonay**, the head of ELSHAM, a group that monitors human rights abuses in Papua.

In a report last year, **Rev. John Barr** of the Uniting Church's Unity and International Mission wrote about the issue of dividing Papua, making a majority of districts/new provinces in Papua dominated by Muslim migrants.

"Papuaans see this as a sinister strategy designed to isolate indigenous Christian majorities in the eastern section of Papua while most of Papua would then come under the control of newcomers. Many Papuaans see this as another strategy aimed

at the eventual Islamisation of Papua," Barr reported.

Papuan religious leaders from the Catholic, Protestant and Islamic congregations have issued a joint statement opposing the plan.

*World Evangelical Alliance –  
Religious Liberty e-mail conference*

## Whipping up controversy

**J**udicial flogging, as a form of Sharia law, is common practice in scores of Muslim countries throughout the Middle East and parts of Asia and North Africa.

In recent months, crimes such as drinking alcohol, participating in demonstrations and being a single woman in the company of an unrelated male have all led to floggings in **Saudi Arabia**.

Recently the gaze of Australians was drawn to Saudi Arabia, where a Melbourne man, **Robert Thomas**, 56, has endured 250 lashes with a bamboo cane in the past two months. He is being punished not for his own crimes, but for those of his Filipina wife who allegedly stole medical supplies from the hospital where she worked as a nurse.

According to Amnesty International Australia, Mr Thomas's barbaric treatment is the latest in a long line of torture and human rights violations that have been meted out in the kingdom.

"Amnesty International Australia regards the punishment inflicted on Mr

Thomas and his wife as amounting to torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment," said Amnesty's national president **Russell Thirgood**.

"Unfortunately, this is reflective of a pattern of human rights violations in Saudi Arabia."

Mr Thirgood said there were "inherent structural problems" in the Saudi criminal justice system.

These problems include a lack of safeguards against false arrest, no access to lawyers or family for detainees, secret trial proceedings and confessions that are extracted by torture before being used to secure a conviction.

Men, women and children are flogged in Saudi Arabia, not only in prisons and police stations, but also in public squares.

There is no limit to the number of lashes a Sharia court can impose for a single crime. In February last year, a man was sentenced to 4750 lashes and six months' jail for having sex with his wife's sister. The man's punishment, which continues to be handed out in the port city of Jeddah, is being administered at a rate of 95 lashes per session.

In general, a period of 15 days is set aside between lashings for those sentenced to multiple strokes of the cane. However, this period has proved to be insufficient for damaged skin to heal, with each new set of lashings opening up prior wounds and creating fresh ones. Extreme pain, bone damage and bleeding are the norm.

Filipino airline employee Donato Lama was arrested for allegedly preaching Christianity, after Saudi authorities discovered a photograph of him engaging in a secret Catholic prayer service. After being tortured into signing a confession, he was sentenced to 18 months' jail and 70 lashes.

"I was brought to the whipping area, they tied me to a post, my hands were handcuffed and they also shackled my legs," Mr Lama recalled.

"The whip was 1.5m long with a heavy lead piece attached to the tip.

"It was terrible. Some fell on my thighs and my back. I would fall when the whip reached my feet but the prison guard would raise me up to continue the whipping.

"I was amazed to find myself still alive after the 70th lash was given. It lasted about 15 minutes."

A Filipina woman who was working as a maid in the Saudi capital of Riyadh in 1992, was arrested by religious police for attending a party at which a man, unknown to her, was present.

Deceived into signing a confession she thought was a release order, the woman was sentenced to 25 days' jail and 60 lashes.

"I thought it will be fast but no, it was done one at a time," she said. "I started counting and when it reached 40 I thought I could not make it. "I prayed so hard. At last it reached 60. I could not explain the pain I experienced."

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# A promising faith

*All riches imaginable are contained in God's promises.*

In a day when so many followers of Christ are leading drab, defeated lives, we must wonder to what promises they are clinging for purpose and joy in life. For the prospect of living each day in the peace that passes understanding, joy unspeakable, a heightened sense of purpose and expectation, and the presence and power of the Lord of glory has not diminished one whit from what previous generations of the followers of Christ have known.

Yet this is only available within the framework of God's covenant and His promises. As the followers of Christ in all ages have lived overcoming, victorious lives, turning their world upside down for Christ so we today may live as well. That so few contemporary Christians experience the life of faith like this is testimony to the fact that we are concentrating on the wrong promises.

The promises held out by our mundane experience, as valid as they may be, can easily become idols, created objects in which we place all our hope and to which we give the greatest measure of our devotion, expressed as time, energy, and mindset. As long as our primary focus in life is on the promises of work, home, wealth, relationships, or diversion, we consign ourselves to a life of defeat and disillusionment as Christians. We hope to know the abundant life in Christ while we trust in the promises of our own hands.

We must learn instead to put the activities of our daily lives, and all the promise they hold, into the perspective of God's covenant and His precious promises. Only then will our joy and peace be informed by God's Word and not the works of our own hands. And only then will we know the kind of purpose and power for living that is able to take us beyond ourselves into new realms of spiritual experience as the servants of the living God.

How do we begin to do this? We must learn to see the promises of God throughout His Word and claim those promises as our own. When I was a new believer I would often use a colored pen to mark my Bible, underlining commands in red, doctrinal passages in blue, and

promises in green. Over the years of doing this I was amazed to see how much green ink appeared on the pages of my Bible! The promises of God are so many and varied, yet they all fall nicely under one of the six promises made to Abraham, all of which are fulfilled in our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

We tend to read the Bible only for new insights into deep doctrinal truths, or for crisp commands or pithy platitudes to guide our daily paths. But until we begin to notice, meditate on, claim for ourselves, and act in our daily experience on those promises of God's covenant, we shall never know more than the most meagre morsel of the full and abundant life we have in Christ. Until we see those promises as *our* promises and begin to lay hold of them for our daily experience in Christ, our Christian life will continue to be clouded by the idols of our mundane experience and, therefore, will lack the fullness He Himself wants us to have.

Like Abraham, we need to allow the promises of God to inform and shape our vision of the kind of life we want for ourselves. How small the vision of most Christians appears by contrast!

How do we as the followers of Christ see ourselves in this post-modern world? Obviously, for the millions of believers who immerse themselves in eschatological fantasies of an imminent rapture, their vision is one of merely holding on and waiting. No need here to claim promises about being a blessing to the nations or of raising up succeeding generations in

the knowledge of the Lord. We're not going to be around long enough for any of that.

Millions of other believers are so caught up in the mundane world of getting and spending that they have little time to devote "on their knees" to knowing and enjoying the Lord and living as His servants in the world.

And millions more are content with a merely cultural Christianity that finds them going to church, perhaps reading their Bibles and praying at meals, and trying to keep their noses clean before their neighbours.

Unless we nurture a vision more firmly rooted in the promises of God's covenant and the almighty power of God to do in, for, and through us more than we might otherwise expect, we shall never know the power of those precious promises in anything more than a perfunctory manner. But by understanding those promises, meditating on them deeply and long; by arranging them into components of a personal vision and calling upon God for grace to live according to that vision; and by going forth to follow that vision in our daily lives, we can begin to know more of what Abraham must have experienced.

*This extract is taken from T.M. Moore, "I Will Be Your God", How God's Covenant Enriches Our Lives (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002).*

T.M. Moore

***We must see those promises as our promises, and lay hold of them for our daily experience in Christ.***

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# Mastering submission

*Six secrets about what the Bible really teaches.*

One summer Saturday, hot and sweaty, I finished mowing the lawn and realised, this is the perfect time to spray *Weed & Feed* on the grass. I didn't have any *Weed & Feed*, though, so I walked into the kitchen and told my wife, Karen, "I'm going to the store."

She said, "But the kids and I are waiting for you to go to the pool with us."

"That can wait," I said flatly.

"Honey," she said with emphasis, "we promised the kids we'd all go."

The next thing I knew, we were arguing.

Some time later I thought, She wanted you to go to the nice, cold pool, and you argued for the right to stay and work in the heat? You are terminally dumb. But this argument wasn't about logic. It was about what I wanted, and what she wanted could wait.

Almost every day in marriage, you and I find ourselves in a struggle. Our spouse makes us mad. We can't get what we want. What makes these situations especially difficult is that usually, underneath whatever the argument seems to be about — such as getting *Weed & Feed* — it's really about power.

The Bible offers tremendous wisdom on what to do in these situations. From its pages we can learn how to move beyond many of the power struggles in marriage.

In Ephesians 5, the apostle Paul explains to Christians how to live the Christian life: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (verse 21).

The word submit is surely one of the most difficult, disliked, and divisive words in the Bible. But Paul says to these Christians, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Whatever the word submit means, it's something Paul thinks every Christian can and should do. He then illustrates how to submit by giving three examples from relationships in his day — wives and husbands, children and fathers, and slaves and masters. In each example, one person has more power, and one person has far less power.

Take, for example, wives and husbands. In Paul's day, a wife had no legal rights.

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**Kevin A. Miller**

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Her husband could do whatever he wanted in legal affairs without her consent. But a wife had to get her husband's permission before she could buy or sell property or even make a will. Husbands also had the financial advantages and virtually all the education. They had the support of pagan philosophy, which taught that women are damaged, inferior forms of males.

Whenever there's this kind of imbalance of power, what's the person holding greater power or authority likely to do?

Lord it over the other person, control her, use her to make his life easier.

And what's the person holding less power or authority likely to do? Resist, rebel, make the husband's life miserable in some way.

***If you're filled with the Holy Spirit, then you'll instinctively submit to each other.***

But Paul offers a better solution, a way to move beyond power struggles. It's called submission. He says, in effect, "In life, when you're in a place of less authority and power" — which in his day included wives, children, and slaves — "don't resist and resent and rebel. Out of reverence for Christ, respect and honor and work hard at pleasing the other person. And when you're in a place of more power" — which in Paul's day included husbands, parents, and slave masters — "don't lord it over the other person. Don't use them to make your life easier. Instead, use your power to benefit them."

Submission means I voluntarily limit what I might do naturally in this relationship in order to benefit you. If I have more power, instead of doing what I might do naturally and use that power to make my life easier, out of reverence for Christ I'll use my power instead to serve you. I'll give up even my life in order to

benefit you.

Submission also means that if I have less power, instead of doing what I might do naturally and fight you every step of the way, I'm going to show you respect and honor.

Now comes the tricky question: How do you apply that? How do you live out the Bible's principle of submission in your marriage, today? Here are some things I've heard Christians say:

The husband should make all important financial and other decisions for the relationship.

The husband and wife should work together on all important decisions, but the husband has the final say.

The husband should go out to earn the family's daily bread, and the woman should stay home to bake it.

The husband is the president, and the wife is the executive vice-president.

The husband should control the TV remote (actually, I've never heard preachers say that; I just threw that in).

Those may or may not be valid applications of Ephesians 5. I'd simply like to point out that in Ephesians, Paul doesn't say any of those things. As scholar Claire M. Powell writes, "Paul never specifies any cultural action or practical application from this passage." Paul seems to believe that if you're filled with the Holy Spirit and you want to live out of reverence for Christ, then you'll instinctively submit to each other. You'll yield the right of way.

That said, I want to offer six secrets that I believe express from this passage what submission means. They can help you ensure you're capturing the beauty of submission in your marriage.

Secret 1: Submission is personal.

Submission is a doctrine you apply to yourself. Notice Paul doesn't say, "Husbands, tell your wife to submit" — or, "Wives, tell your husband to step up and be spiritual head of the home." Instead, he speaks to each person and asks each to work on his or her own attitude.

Secret 2: Submission is spiritual.

Unless you're filled with the Spirit of God, it makes zero sense to submit to

another person. Why would you ever do that?

In Ephesians 5:21, when Paul says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ", the word submit in Greek isn't a command. The command is back in verse 18: "Be filled with the Spirit." Submitting is an expression of that. So the text should read, "Be filled with the Holy Spirit ... submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ."

**I**f you're a follower of Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, then when you hit a power struggle in your marriage, you'll submit to your spouse. It will come supernaturally through the Holy Spirit's power within you. There's no other way you and I can submit than by God's Spirit. Submission is spiritual.

Secret 3: Submission is mutual.

In Ephesians, Paul actually introduces something radical to the culture: that people with more power have responsibilities, too. Paul says to husbands, "Yes, you've got authority, but you've also got responsibility." In fact, Christian teachers from the earliest centuries, such as John Chrysostom, have pointed out that what Paul asks the husband to do is actually harder than what he asks the wife to do. He asks the wife to show respect and submit; he asks the husband to die.

When Paul writes, "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her," that's a nice, poetic way of saying, "Jesus chose to submit himself to the whip, the thorns, and the nails for our benefit. That's the example for husbands. Are you daily dying to what you want to make sure your wife gets what she needs?"

It's true that Paul asks people to submit in different ways, depending on whether they have less or more power, but the person with more power must also submit. When that occurs, something amazing happens in the other person. As my wife, Karen, says, "Show me a man who lays down his life for his wife, and I'll show you a wife who has no problem with submission."

Secret 4: Submission is beneficial.

Many people think submission is a terrible doctrine. But God didn't give us this doctrine to put us in prison; he gave it to us to set us free.

Think about how much submission helps the person with less power. In Paul's day, as author Jill Briscoe writes, "the Christian wife was about to be offered her

first opportunity to have her husband ask her what she felt about selling their 13-year-old daughter into slavery. She'd never been asked before." The person with less power was empowered, a process that's only grown in its beneficial effects up to our time.

Submission also benefits the person with more power. Richard Foster explains that "submission leads to liberty, the liberty to be able to let go of the terrible weight and burden of always needing to get my own way".



**Submission is the only answer to the constant frustration and anger we have in our relationships.**

You'll know if you're doing submission properly if you and your spouse are becoming better people. Are you growing in freedom, joy, and character? If you're not, then there's something wrong, because submission is beneficial.

Secret 5: Submission is practical.

One reason people see submission as The Text of Terror is because they treat it as some absolute law that has no limitations.

My wife, Karen, is a counselor. A woman came to her whose husband was beating her, but she wouldn't leave. Karen was worried for this woman's life, so she asked her what it would take for her to get herself to safety. Because of this woman's understanding of the verse, "Wives, submit to your husbands," the woman said, "I'll stay as long as I have to — even if it means he kills me."

I want to say this in love, but this woman was wrong—terribly wrong. She misunderstood this verse, and she was endangering her life.

**S**ubmission doesn't mean you give up your brain. It doesn't mean that if the person you're submitting to wants to do something illegal, you can do it and say before God, "Hey, I was just submitting to my authority." Scripture teaches (in Romans 13) that Christians must submit to the governing authorities, yet Christ's apostles directly disobeyed a government order (in Acts 4). Why? Obeying that

order would have meant disobeying God. Submission doesn't mean you go along when you're being asked to do something that violates Scripture, your conscience, or common sense.

Secret 6: Submission is countercultural.

In Paul's day, submission challenged a culture that gave men power. It said, "Use your power for the benefit of the other person." In our day, it challenges a culture of power wars. Submission says, "Use your power for the benefit of the other person."

That's countercultural. Nobody wants to yield the right of way. Submission isn't the answer we like. It's not the answer we wanted. But it's the only answer to the constant frustration and anger we have in our relationships. There's no other way.

It's always cut against the grain. Your family or your friends may not understand your relationship. But you and your spouse don't follow the culture, you follow Christ.

The Quest Study Bible puts it this way: "A submissive spirit runs counter to society's values and it always has. However, it remains God's standard for all believers — male and female — for all time."

*Kevin A. Miller is executive editor of PreachingToday.com. He and his wife, Karen, have been married for 20 years and have two teenagers. This article first appeared in Marriage Partnership ([www.marriagepartnership.com](http://www.marriagepartnership.com)), published by Christianity Today International ([www.ChristianityToday.com](http://www.ChristianityToday.com)). *

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## Cinema Watch Chicago

Reviewed by Phil Campbell



I'm probably the only reviewer in the western world who didn't see Nicole Kidman's triumphant *Moulin Rouge*. Musicals are just not my cup of tea. So when it came to the prospect of sitting through two hours of *Chicago*, starring Renee Zellweger and Catherine Zeta-Jones, I was less than enthused.

Contrived story lines and awkward transitions from dialogue to song can make for tortured viewing. Given my natural reservations about the genre, I can report that *Chicago* is fast, sassy and visually impressive, rich with chorus-line kicks and flashing lights.

Zellweger and Zeta-Jones, together with male leads Richard Gere and John C. Reilly, sing and dance up a storm – with no stunt-doubles for the high notes. Artistically, it's an impressive piece of work.

The movie opens with two murder scenes on opposite sides of town. Velma Kelley (Zeta-Jones), star of a sensational Chicago nightclub duo, puts a fatal end to a tryst between her husband and co-star sister. Meanwhile, wanna-be star Roxie Hart (Zellweger) treads a similar path – plugging the guy who promised to make her a star and then slapped her around.

Laconic one liners add a nice touch to the action. "Yeah, I killed 'im and I'd kill him again," says Roxie when she's arrested. "Once was enough, sweetie."

Velma and Roxie meet behind bars on "Murderess Row," and set the scene for a cynical battle to make it to the top.

Lawyer Billy Flynn (Richard Gere) is the key to their aspirations. He knows how to pull the strings, and he knows there's nothing like the publicity generated by a murder trial to kick start a stage career.

Dumping Velma's case, Billy recognises enormous potential in Roxie's crime of passion and cynically turns her into America's latest sweetheart. The press is more than happy to oblige.

Almost hidden amid the glamour, the script offers some apt insights into the fame game. "They love me, and I love them," cries Roxie in the first flush of celebrity.

"None of us got enough love in our childhoods," responds a more seasoned Velma. "And that's showbiz."

The foil for all the action is Roxie's husband Amos (John C. Reilly), who sticks by his girl through everything – prepared to take the rap for Roxie's crime, penniless after paying for her lawyer, he's ignored at every point by his fame-hungry wife. Critics have described Reilly's musical performance as "miraculous" – the song *Mr Cellophane* is both musically strong and emotionally moving. "You can look right through me and never know I'm there," sings Amos... "I'm Mr Cellophane." In the headlong pursuit of personal ambition, Roxie hasn't noticed the one person in her life who is prepared to love her with no strings attached.

Roxie has some hard lessons to learn. "You're a phoney celebrity," says lawyer Flynn as he moves on to his next hot prospect. "In a couple of weeks nobody's going to know who you are. That's Chicago. It's all a circus. The whole world.

**"It's all Showbiz. How can they see with sequins in their eyes?"**

It's all Showbiz. How can they see with sequins in their eyes?"

That's the cue for yet another song and dance routine, but the irony is exquisite. Razzle 'em, dazzle 'em, and you can get away with whatever you like. Which raises an interesting point – if we're still watching techno-war reports on TV by the time you read this, try to see beyond the sequins.

*Chicago* isn't a movie for everyone. While there's no nudity, and limited strong language, the overall tone of the movie is sometimes uncomfortably brash. And if, like me, you're simply not a musical fan, the time in the cinema can seem to drag. Even so, there's no denying that the depth of Catherine Zeta-Jones' and Zellweger's talents is amazing. I sat right through the credits to confirm that the cast had actually performed their own songs. Add the helpfully cynical jab at the cult of celebrity, and it's a movie that may still be worth catching.

Phil Campbell is a member of the ministry team at Mitchelton Presbyterian Church, Qld. ap



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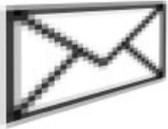
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Letters

**Boldly forward**

To Jack Knapp, Moderator-General of the Presbyterian Church of Australia.

Thank you for your expression of condolence on the tragic loss of the Columbia Space Shuttle and her crew of seven heroic astronauts. Once again, the world is united in a common grief as we mourn the loss of these brave souls. Their endeavours serve to inspire and offer hope for the future.

There are those who question if the cost of space exploration is too great. However, continuation of these brave men and women's legacy of discovery is the greatest tribute we can give to those who so selflessly risked so much.

I take heart from the families of these brave explorers who together, shortly after that tragic day, stated, "the bold exploration of space must go on ... for the benefit of our children and yours".

On behalf of my fellow Americans, I thank you for your support and sympathy. I will be passing your sentiments on to NASA and the President. May we take heart in Commander Husband's favourite biblical passage "Be strong and courageous".

*J. Thomas Schieffer  
US ambassador to Australia,  
Canberra*

**Only unconditionally**

I beg to differ with Peter Barnes (AP, February). The hair-splitting that went on in this article only serves as a smoke-screen for conditional forgiveness. One of the hardest and most valuable of the lessons I believe the Lord has taught me is that I must forgive unconditionally. This is how He forgives me, and His own prayer suggests that I must forgive as He does. Nothing else works. Once we start finding circumstances that justify limited forgiveness, it's too easy to hang on to the bitterness that destroys.

*Jennifer Boer  
Woori Yallock, Vic.*

**Wiser and richer**

I want to thank you for the edition of AP on Proverbs (March). It was a timely edition for our generation and our current times. I found the content extremely positive.

It is always encouraging when I read of the Bible presented in this kind of way. All too often, people parade biblical wisdom as their own, or biblical wisdom is taken and twisted in some subtle way. The practical application of the Bible to normal life is something that is sometimes ignored and difficult to do, so I found your article extremely helpful.

I think you have done the Christian community a service in the way you have presented this and I just wanted to do something that I rarely do, and that is to pick up my pen and say thanks!

*Tony Crook, executive director,  
The Bible Society in Australia,  
Blackburn, Vic*

**Sundered by sin**

Just six months ago, a man whom I admired and loved left his wife and children to pursue an adulterous relationship.

Since then, my Bible readings have comforted me by showing me many

examples of God's graciousness in making wretched sinners into great men of God. God's goodness and graciousness toward every sinner – not just adulterers – is unquestionable.

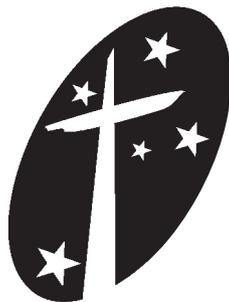
For as long as I can remember, the Presbyterian church has been respected as a place where biblical teaching and doctrinal correctness are valued, and church government reflected respect for orderly management. But what of the problem of adultery? One instance is one too many.

Do you have a mental checklist for the emotional intelligence of your congregation? Do you know when you are being tempted sexually? Do you take it to the Lord in prayer? Are you vigilant in treasuring your husband or your wife, day and night? Do you pray for your minister and his long-suffering wife every day? Do you follow biblical principles when you meet with needy people?

Would you confront a fellow Christian if you saw inappropriate closeness, private jokes, or a tendency toward dependence?

In our community many shocked people are suffering private anguish and public shame as a consequence of adultery. Please pray specifically for each other. God delights in answering our prayers.

*Name and address supplied,  
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# prayer

**APRIL 2003**

- 21 Stanley-Rocky Cape special charge including also Mawbanna, NW Tasmania; about 30 c&a (communicants and adherents), 3 yf (younger folk – Sunday School and youth) and 2 e (elders); vacant.
- 22 Pray for licentiates who have completed their theological studies and taken up work in a parish to which they have been assigned (their “exit appointment”) including Jason and Elizabeth Summers at Alstonville parish; (about 75 c&a, 10 yf and 4 e) and Steve and Lisa North assisting Steve Turner in Tweed Heads parish; (including Kingscliff with about 175 c&a, 45 yf and 5 e. Both parishes are on the far north coast of NSW.
- 23 Rhondda Price APWM/Pioneers worker from Castlemaine, Vic., serving in the Sudan Literature Centre, Nairobi, Kenya and fellow Pioneers (formerly SUM, Action Partners) missionary Rhys Hall from Adelaide, to marry shortly.
- 24 Ho Ju Young Rak Korean parish Homebush, Sydney; with about 55 c&a, 50 yf and 4 e and Stephen and Sarah Kim.
- 25 South Burnett home mission station (Kingaroy, Goomeri and Wondai) Qld; with about 70 c&a, 20 yf and 2 e. Roger Marsh.
- 26 Christian witness in Ecuador, South America, of whose 13 million people (40% Amerindian) 82% are RC, and 6% Protestant.
- 27 Woori Yallock parish Vic; with about 50 c&a, 45 yf and 2 e. David and Roslyn Brown.
- 28 Presbytery of North Brisbane; 5 parishes and 1 home mission station totalling 7 congregations with 575 communicants and adherents; 4 retired ministers, 1 under jurisdiction; Gary Fintelman clerk.
- 29 Shailer Park-Cornubia home mission

station southern Brisbane; with about 15 c&a, and 1 e, Donald and Lillian Kennedy; and the optimum use of their new building.

- 30 Ghana Presbyterian Church meeting at Girraween, western Sydney; George Freeman and Andrew Baryeh, pastors, and Awa Kwakwa, secretary, now elders of the Wentworthville-Girraween parish.

**MAY 2003**

- 1 Christian witness in the Red Sea nation of Eritrea, much troubled by recent conflicts. Some 48% of its 4 million people are Muslim, 41% Orthodox Christian, 4% RC and 1.5% Protestant.
- 2 Orange parish, central western NSW; with about 160 c&a, 20 yf and 9 e; William and Robyn Stewart.
- 3 Horsham-Marnoo parish western Vic.; with about 75 c&a, 15 yf and 3 e; John and Michelle Brennan.
- 4 Dr Daniel and Tammy Priest with two children, APWM/Pioneers workers from Westlakes church, NSW, as they carry out medical work at Rumginae, far western PNG (where the Oakleys served for some years).
- 5 SA General Assembly meeting over the next three days in Whyalla – Alan Clarkson moderator, Rupert Hanna clerk. Conveners, debates and fellowship.
- 6 Dubbo parish, western NSW; with about 385 c&a, 120 yf and 7 e; Bryson and Susan Smith, and Wayne and Jillian Connor.
- 7 Graham and Sandra Chipps from West Leederville, Perth, in ministry as Senior Minister at the International Christian Fellowship, Phnom Penh, Cambodia since 1996. Both are also engaged in educational ministry.
- 8 Tregear parish, western Sydney; with about 100 c&a, 70 yf and 3 e; Tim and Jenny Wilson.
- 9 Nicole Linklater APWM/WEC worker from NSW serving in Chad, West Africa.
- 10 Presbytery of Murrumbidge NSW; 3

parishes and 3 home mission stations totalling 9 congregations with 465 communicants and adherents; Peter Gobbo acting clerk.

- 11 Supply of finance (\$160,000 for the first year and \$69,000 annually thereafter) and personnel for the planned new PIM patrol in the Pilbara Kimberleys region, northern WA.
- 12 Annandale parish (Hunter Baillie Memorial Church) inner Sydney; with about 85 c&a and 9 e; vacant.
- 13 Surrey Hills parish; with about 180 c&a, 20 yf and 10 e; Chris and Rose Siraweera; and Hawthorn parish; with about 20 c&a, 15 yf and 4 e; Graham and Janet Nicholson; both ministers have recently come to these eastern Melbourne parishes.
- 14 Christian witness in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia. The population of some 5 million is 57% Orthodox, 20% Muslim, 17% non-religious and only about 0.8% Protestant.
- 15 Ricky and Kaylene Manton APWM workers in koori (aboriginal) ministry in western Sydney as they work alongside Neville Naden (Anglican).
- 16 St Ives-Pymble parish (one congregation); with about 105 c&a, 10 yf and 1 e; John and Lyn Woodward who have recently come to the parish.
- 17 Claire Schofield APWM/Interserve worker from St. Johns, Hobart, recently arrived in Mongolia.
- 18 Mike and Corinne O'Connor in his exit appointment at Wauchope home mission station including also Comboyne and Rollands Plains; with about 105 c&a, 55 yf and 5 e; and Stephen and Hayley Soldatas in his exit appointment at Kempsey parish; with about 70 c&a, 10 yf and 3 e; both parishes are on the NSW north coast.
- 19 Camberwell parish eastern Melbourne; with about 215 c&a, 95 yf and 17 e; Phillip and Lavena Mercer.
- 20 Presbytery of Geelong, Vic.; 6 parishes totalling 11 congregations with 570 communicants and adherents; 1 research professor, 6 retired ministers, 1 under jurisdiction; Graham Hamill clerk.

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## Books

### Window on the World: When we pray God works

Daphne Spraggett with Jill Johnstone

Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001

*Reviewed by Mignon Goswell*

**T**his companion volume to the larger *Operation World* (also Paternoster Press) is beautifully presented, using colour, photographs, different size prints and appealing boxes of information. The intent of the book is the same as that of *Operation World*, that is, to stimulate a prayerful attitude to the work of God and His church throughout the world. There is no attempt to deal with every country of the world; rather focus is on a careful selection of countries. A great boon of this volume is that some of the world's people groups are also featured, showing how each may be found in a number of countries. Each country or people group is given a double page spread. The Fact Files, flag, Do You Know pieces, and points for prayer mean that information is there for a quick summary or for more leisurely perusal.

This book will immediately appeal to all age groups from young children through to adults. Having been an avid user of *Operation World* for a number of years I was extremely keen to use this book as well. The real life stories of children around the world featured on each page will draw younger readers. As a tool for family devotions, as an aid to excite Sunday school classes about mission work and as a starting point for praying more adventurously and internationally it is highly recommended.

### Esther

Peter Bloomfield

Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2002

*Reviewed by Peter Barnes*

**E**sther is a much-neglected book in the Old Testament, but Peter Bloomfield has provided a sure guide through its history and lessons. The biblical author is unknown to us, although Peter makes

the not-improbable suggestion that it was Mordecai himself. As is well known, God is not mentioned at all in the book, yet He is, as Peter says, "conspicuous by His absence". He is behind everything that takes place; nothing takes place in the book of Esther apart from His will.

Peter writes: "The principle here is that human history, even in its darkest times, is simply a sub-set of covenant history." Given that approach, Peter has no time for moralising sermons on the book – although moral issues are often raised, and Peter, for example, is quick to defend Vashti's refusal to obey King Ahasuerus (i.e. Xerxes) in chapter 1 – rightly so, in my view.

Peter's guide is vigorously written. Although the work is written simply, there is sure scholarship here. Potent use is made of cross-references, especially to the book of Proverbs. It is all clearly explained, and is an ideal work for busy preachers or Bible study leaders. Indeed, there are questions for discussion at the end of each chapter.

One qualm that I do have is that an overemphasis on biblical theology can lead to an underestimation of the moral lessons in the Old Testament, although I think in practice that is not true of this work.

*Peter Barnes is books editor of AP*

### Sunset Victory A Practical Theology of Spiritual Life in Later Years

John Woodward

D. Min., Thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2001

*Reviewed by Stuart Bonnington*

**T**his is a most interesting work, the relevance of which will become more obvious as the years go by! For we live in an aging society in the west, and churches need effective strategies whereby they can minister to and encourage ministry by older people.

One does not need to agree with every detailed psychoanalytical point in Woodward's arguments to be greatly stimulated by what is contained in this very readable thesis. The Presbyterian Church of Australia has many paradoxes, one of which is the age difference between many congregational members

over against the comparative "youth" of many ministers. This has sometimes led to tensions and troubles, as many of us know.

*Sunset Victory* gives a great deal of interesting and important information which, properly assimilated, may help produce a deep appreciation of the place and potential fruitfulness of older persons within the life of the Church of Jesus Christ.

*Stuart Bonnington is minister of South Yarra Presbyterian Church (Vic).*

### Islam in our Backyard

Tony Payne

Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2002

*Reviewed by Peter Barnes*

**T**ony Payne has written half a novel with this work, but this approach makes it very easy to read. It is not so much a treatise on Islam as an apologetic for Christianity which raises the big issue of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism in the Western world has become an industry fuelled by fantasy. Speaking during the recent debate over stem cell research, Senator Vanstone set forth the established wisdom of the day: "Your religion is your business and no one else's. When you make your religion an issue, when you drag it into the political domain, in my view you tarnish it. It follows that I attach little importance to arguments over dogma."

Somewhat lacking in logic and profundity, but there it is! Possibly 90 per cent of Australians would agree with that kind of muddled thinking. Tony Payne demonstrates that the claim that religion is irrelevant in the public domain is miles from the teaching of the Koran. Senator Vanstone's espousal of relativism is an espousal of unreality. Islam makes the dogmatic claim that Mohammad is the true prophet of Allah, and there is no other way. It does not believe that Jesus died on the cross and therefore does not believe that He rose from the dead.

For the Christian, everything – absolutely everything – hinges on Christ's death and resurrection. If Islam is true, Christianity is not; and vice versa. With clarity and with a gracious spirit, Tony Payne confronts the lazy thinking of today with the clear claims of Islam and of Christianity. This is a book to read and lend out.

# Presbyterians reunite

*New Zealand has a new denomination.*

A new national alliance of Presbyterian churches has been established in New Zealand. It comprises seven congregations, some of which have left the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.

The new church, to be called Grace Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, will have three presbyteries, in Auckland, Wellington/Christchurch and Dunedin.

I was one of more than 100 privileged to be gathered for the inauguration at the Bible College of New Zealand in Christchurch on 28 February. Eighteen ministers and elders were invited to sign the covenant, with a worship service led by the newly elected moderator, Rev. Ross Thompson, while Rev. Ian McIver, principal of the Queensland Reformed College of Ministries, preached on Zechariah 4:6-10.

A movement of such significance does not arise unexpectedly or quickly. Theological ferment over a long period of time provided the soil in which these issues took root. The origins lie in the theological struggles of the late 19th century, which came to a head on the crest of the tidal wave of 20th century liberalism.

This included the heresy charges made against the Old Testament professor of Knox College, Lloyd Geering, in the 1960s. Geering taught publicly that Jesus did not rise from the dead, writing "Jesus' bones lie somewhere in Palestine." Sadly, the charges were not sustained by the church, which concluded: "Professor Geering's theological viewpoint was a valid one, and mutually contradictory doctrine may be held and taught within the Church."

Protest and calls for reform came from different quarters, including theological students. Others, discerning that reform from within would never happen, decided to protest by leaving. Ministers, feeling the effects of years of antagonism and isolation, felt forced to resign or to leave, many leaving for Australia, some to join the PCV.

The pressure came to a head for several congregations in the PCNZ during the '70s and '80s, and some ceded from the



**John  
Wilson**

mainline denomination to become an independent fellowship of Presbyterian Christians. With momentum provided by individual vision and strongly evangelical congregations such as EPC (Christchurch), Owaka and St Andrews Manurewa (Auckland), the Grace Theological College was formed under the principalship of Rev Andrew Young in 1994. In the years since, Grace has become known for its scholarship, commitment to reformed faith and passion for training gospel ministers.

During the late '90s certain issues, fruit of earlier liberalism, came to a head. At the July 1996 Assembly of the PCANZ denomination, a move was made to confirm practising homosexual elders and ministers in their positions within the church. The decision was to allow them to continue with their ministry and their biblically prohibited lifestyle without any possibility of being challenged or held accountable for that lifestyle.

This is when many evangelicals declared that their national church had openly departed from its heritage of apostolic biblical Christianity. Churches such as St Andrew's Manurewa and Owaka protested vigorously. In that same year, the Owaka Presbyterian Church withdrew from the denomination. After some years of heartache, the large majority of St Andrew's (Manurewa) office bearers and congregation walked out late in 2001 and met in rented premises – nearly penniless, but wonderfully free.

The new denomination contains churches from Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Ashburton, Dunedin, Gore and Owaka. It is anticipated that other churches who are interested observers on the sidelines may be convinced to join soon. Other than that, the clear vision is for growth by church planting.

As moderator of the PCV, I was invited to speak at the inauguration, address the assembly during its session the next day,

and preach at two of its Auckland churches on the Sunday: Covenant and Trinity. It was helpful to reaffirm our relationship with the brethren in New Zealand – and to spend time with people familiar to many here such as Richard and Dianne Eyre; Peter and Janet Boyd and also Wally Rakete (minister of the Tokomairiro Bible Church) – an interested observer).

Covenant Presbyterian Church (the walkout of St Andrew's Manurewa) is an impressive fellowship of biblical, praying and visionary Christians. Between 150 and 180 were present on the Sunday I visited. Several men met early Sunday morning for a power breakfast and prayer; something they do *each* Sunday.

They have providentially been able to buy the biggest piece of land available anywhere in South Auckland – the old Manurewa Bowling Club, about four acres. It includes a very large meeting hall well provided with all facilities, large car parks, three enormous bowling greens (slightly weedy!), dilapidated storage sheds, and another large undeveloped area.

Their vision is to expand the meeting hall to accommodate more people, then to relocate St Andrew's Christian School (enrolment more than 100) into new buildings on the site and also build a pre-school. They need to raise about \$800,000. Next door, in a converted residence, is Grace Theological College.

Five minutes drive from the bowling club is the new church plant (Trinity Presbyterian), half-way between Papakura and Manurewa in a "lower income" and more industrial area. Planted last year, the church now has 70 to 80 at its morning service.

Pray for the churches of the Grace Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. We should also remember the witness of Christians and churches who have – for their own reasons – decided to remain within the PCANZ. We must not ignore them nor consider that they all have lost sight of true faith.

*John P. Wilson is moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria.* 