

It's About Life

Life in Dark Days

"I like life," someone said. "It's something to do." Someone else said, "Life's OK. It beats the alternative." Not exactly stirring endorsements! How's your life? How's your New Year? The economy is down. World peace is down. Are you down too? Perhaps you're out of work or you face a challenge. If so, you'll find enduring strength in God's Word. Look at this word, for example: "How wonderful to live in the sunshine! . . . Don't take a single day for granted. Take delight in each light-filled hour, remembering that there will also be many dark days." (Ecclesiastes 11:7-8, The Message.*) God knows your days, light or dark. The place where you live—that's the place where He lives, too.

Life Becoming Brighter

Getting older? Cheer up—you have an advantage. The advantage is that you can see your life today in more mature terms than in the past. You can see that God has been patient with your weaknesses. That helps you deal with weaknesses yet to be revealed. Further, you can see that no problem has been too big for God your whole life long. Look what he's brought you through! Here's courage for this new year: "Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful." (2 Corinthians 3:18, The Message.*)

Life in the Good and the Bad

When we watch the behaviour of a baby, we're seeing transparency. Is the baby happy? We know it. Sad? We know it. Playful? We know it. Mad? You get the picture. As adults, we have similar changeability. Happy, sad. Up, down. Positive, negative. But we don't have the same transparency. We cover, we hide, we camouflage. But when our lives are lived in God, we can be the child, because he is our Father. We can be transparent, bringing to God every hope, trial and emotion. "On a good day, enjoy yourself; on a bad day, examine your conscience. God arranges for both kinds of days so that we won't take anything for granted." (Ecclesiastes 7:14, The Message.*)

Life as an Offering

Think about a fish in a fishbowl, or a bird in a cage. How much does the fish or the bird know about the outside? Our own lives can become small, confined. A little round of duties and habits. But God has prepared something better. He gives us life that's bigger, better, and glorious. "I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10.) For today, are you receiving this full life from Jesus? Here's what you can do to make it real: "Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life—and place it before God as an offering." (Romans 12:1, The Message.*) It's an offering God transforms, for your joy.

Family Treasure

A Defence for the Family

Of all the symbols in the Bible for our relationship with God, the symbol of the family is the most dominant and the most powerful. God is our Father. We are his daughters and sons. Christ is our Brother. We are siblings together in Christ. The Holy Spirit is our Comforter—God’s close-knit family influence. God started humanity with a family. He administered salvation through the family groups of Israel. Christ the Saviour came into a family, then established his own “family” of followers. No wonder the enemy is intent on destroying families! But we have a defence—we kneel before our Father, knowing we’re his family and we carry his name. (Ephesians 3:14-15.)

Priority: Family

The Puritans used to speak about the family as an *ecclesiola* or “little church”. Your spouse and your children are sacred trusts God has given you, to cherish and grow in the ways of God. Brother Yun was a house-church leader in China, frequently away from home, often imprisoned. A crisis came, and he changed his priorities. “I started to put my love for God first in my life, my love for my family second, and my love for ministry third.” It saved his family. King David, after celebrating the return of the Ark of the Covenant, went to a more important mission. He “returned home to bless his family.” (1 Chronicles 16:43.) Perhaps it’s time for us to do the same.

Is There a Father in the House?

“We are facing a generation which has parents but no fathers” (Henri Nouwen). It’s a problem Christians can meet and correct, but only with God’s strength. Jay Rockefeller’s three-year-old son one day struck angrily at the TV set when he saw his father there. He saw his father more often on the TV than in person. Our own Father in Heaven blesses us daily with his presence—through the Spirit, through the Word, through prayer. “A father to the fatherless is God in his holy dwelling” (Psalm 68:5). Christian men today can reflect God’s fatherhood, being present for their daughters and sons. And perhaps, being something of a dad for a fatherless child.

God’s Treasures

Men have prominence in the Bible, but prominence and importance are not identical. As pearls compared to steel, rarity means treasure. Male and female were made in the image of God and stand equally before him. While Eve fell first into sin, Adam was one step behind her. When God set up his plan of rescue, it was through the woman that the promise was made (Genesis 3:15). While the generations were recorded through men, the biological transmission of the Messiah met its end in a virgin named Mary. Women among us are God’s treasures. We men are called to regard them as a sacred trust and blessing, honouring their role in the family of God.

Friendship Treasure

The Gift of Friendship

Ruth and Naomi. David and Jonathan. Jesus and John. Paul and Timothy. Friendship, like family, is a gift from God. It's the free-will binding of one heart and mind to another, so that each shares a oneness even while independent. Unlike marriage and family, friendship has no status in law. It is freely entered into and freely maintained. Friendship is an enormous treasure for singles, but it's also important for married individuals. Christian friendship energises hope. It affirms faith. It inspires courage. It conveys wisdom. It transmits joy. No wonder Jesus invites us to be not merely his followers, but his friends. "You are my friends. I have called you friends" (John 15:14, 15).

A Covenant of Friendship

"The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul." (1 Samuel 18:1.) The word for "knit" means to tie, wrap around, bind, join together. It's the language of covenants. "Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul." When two people can be individuated and responsible adults, while at the same time bound with cords of love that make them one in heart and mind—that's mystery. It's connection. It's rare. No wonder God uses friendship as a symbol of the covenant relationship he wants between us and him. Jesus would like to have you as his friend! Are you in covenant friendship with him today?

Lonely in Friendship

Friendship is one of life's finest gifts. And it's a superb channel for Christian faith. If you have at least one close friend, you're blessed. "Better a nearby friend than a distant family" (Proverbs 27:10, The Message*). But remember that friendship is not supposed to get rid of all loneliness, because loneliness has value until the resurrection, when we're fully restored to our Friend Jesus. When we love Jesus, we're lonely for him; we miss him! Rich Mullens said it well: "If we are looking for relief from loneliness in friendship, we are only going to frustrate the friendship. Friendship, camaraderie, intimacy, all those things and loneliness live together in the same experience."

Friendship for Christ's Sake

We should not be in friendship with the world. But we must connect with *people* in the world, for Christ's sake. One day Josh McDowell spoke to 1,500 high school students on the subject of intimacy. Six teenage Gothics stood in front of him, dressed in black, tattoos and body piercings all over. They scowled. At the end, the leader leaped toward Josh. The crowd gasped. But with tears running down his face, the Gothic said "Mr. McDowell, would you give me a hug?" As they hugged, the Gothic said, "My father never once hugged me or told me that he loved me." This is the look and feel of a world in need of our connection. Will you meet that need?

Priesthood of Prayer

The Highest Service

Some say God loves people so much that our prayers for them can't actually make a difference. "God will do what God is going to do, with or without our praying." This sounds logical. But logical and biblical are not always the same. Jesus said, "I have prayed for you." He's our Priest, and interceding is his job. But he calls us priests, so it's our job too. "He has made us priests" (Revelation 1:6). Priests lift up people by name before God in prayer—and it makes a difference. "The one great need . . . is intercessors," wrote E. M. Bounds. "Intercessory prayer represents the highest form of Christian service." Ready now? Let's get on our knees for the highest service.

One Critical Work

Here's a strange one. "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24). Something lacking in Christ's anguish? Yes, in the sense that Jesus finished his solitary battle—but the cosmic battle goes on through us. As his body, the church, we're called to fight for the people of our planet. Oswald Chambers suggests the struggle is driven by one dynamic—*intercession*. Will we stop our frenzied activity? Will we quit our fascination with the things that can be tabulated and applauded? Will we enter Christ's anguish by engaging in the quiet, critical work of pleading with God for the souls who come across our path every day?

Prayer for the Lost

We love to pray. For our health, for our loved ones, for our finances. For God's guidance, and for intimacy with him. Excellent! All good things to pray for. But something is missing, and that something is prayer for the lost. One survey indicates that only about 3 per cent of people who pray, pray for strangers. When Jesus prayed, he prayed for the lost of Jerusalem and for the lost of the world. The apostle Paul said: "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers and intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone. . . . This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved." (1 Timothy 2:1–4.) Will you begin now to intercede for strangers around you?

The Prayer Department

"You prayer people can pray if you want to; but I'll be out there doing some actual work." "Prayer ministry? Oh, that's not our department." I've heard these things said! Such views are against God's Word, placing God's people exactly where the enemy wants them. God's Word speaks of only one thing that should be done by all believers everywhere, all the time—and that is to *pray*. True prayer is not an alternative to work. It *is* the work. The only Christian work that is truly effective is work saturated in prayer and powered by prayer. Jesus said evil is overcome only by the discipline of prayer (Mark 9:29). When intercessory prayer becomes everyone's department—that's when the work will at last be done.

Connecting for Christ

Famous for God

Stephen, Peter, Paul, Timothy. You know these names from the early Christian church. How about Phoebe, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis? Heard of these four women? What about the apostles Andronicus, Junias and Urbanus? What are their stories? We don't know; all we have is their names. But God knows. All these people—men or women, old or young, this culture or that one—received God's Spirit and made connections for Christ. Only a handful became famous. But all became famous in God's sight. You, too, can be highly appreciated in Heaven, as you connect for Christ in your world. To the honour roll of Phoebe and Junias and all the rest, your name can be added.

Question of the Day

When we stir into consciousness each morning, questions invade. What day is it? What do I have to do today? What problem didn't go away while I slept? Here's a question to inject: How can I be an instrument for Christ today? How can I convey a specific blessing to somebody, and who might that person be? These questions are prayers, and prayer improves our day. No matter how big your own issues, somebody around you has bigger issues. Make a phone call. Send a message. Write a card. Give a gift. Make a visit. Hold a hand. Others use the day to sink deeper into their own problems. We can use the day to give blessing to someone in Jesus' name—and as we give, we receive.

Presence for God

Sodom's level of sin called for complete cleansing by fire. But Abraham had relatives there, so he bargained Sodom's reprieve for fifty good people, then forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty, and finally ten. In the end, a meagre total of four were dragged by angels to safety, and even one of them didn't last. But don't miss this point: God would have spared a wicked city for just ten good people living in it. This is the power of "salt" and "light" in places ruined by sin. Never underestimate the importance of your own presence for God wherever you are placed—your home, your neighbourhood, your workplace or school, your town or city, your nation. Your presence there is enough for God to grant His presence there, too.

Leading from the Back

If there's one thing God's Word doesn't allow for Christians, it's a pattern of isolation. The church is body, temple, salt, light, yeast, fellowship, army, sheepfold, branches. These words mean involvement, inclusion, sacrifice, and connection. You may be a private person, a loner, an introvert. So, minister to others like you! There are thousands of people like you in the church, and millions in the world. Jesus didn't call extroverts; He called disciples. The many who work quietly in the background to create connections for Christ make a more profound contribution than the few who lead from the front. Will you lead from the back today?

Stories of Trust

In the Presence

A man named Brother Yun served many years as a leader in China's underground church movement. "You must have had a terrible time in prison," people would say. "What are you talking about?" he would respond. "I was with Jesus and had overwhelming joy and peace in his intimate presence." Yun thinks those who don't know what it is to experience God's presence are the ones who really suffer. He reminds believers we have a cross to bear—perhaps ridicule or rejection. "When you're faced with such trials, the key is not to run from them or fight them, but to embrace them as friends. When you do this you'll not fail to experience God's presence and help."

Opportunity to Trust

In the early to mid-1800s in America, courageous people formed a secret network of routes and safe houses to help slaves realise their freedom. Churches were an important part of the network. For his involvement, a Methodist minister named Calvin Fairbank was caught by authorities and imprisoned for twelve years. He kept a log of his beatings. During his incarceration, he received a total of 35,105 lashes with the whip. As the world cascades into turmoil over spiritual freedoms, who knows which of us might be called to suffer on account of our integrity? Will we endure? In Christ we will endure, and the trust learned through small trials now will have a lot to do with it.

Spirit of Adventure

A memorial in Queenstown, New Zealand, includes these words from the diary of Captain Robert Scott, as he and his men lay dying in their Antarctic tent: "We took risks; we knew we took them. Things have come out against us, and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of Providence, determined still to do our best to the last." Here is the spirit reflected in those who venture for God—the spirit of disciples faithful to the end. Our Lord has promised us many things; freedom from trouble is not one of them. But endurance, resolve and patience are gifts we can count on. "We do not lose heart. . . . Inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Refiner's Fire

Susannah Spurgeon, wife of the preacher Charles Spurgeon, suffered illness for more than 25 years. She wondered, "Why does my Lord permit lingering weakness to hinder the sweet service I long to give him?" One evening, sitting by the fireplace with a friend, she thought she heard a robin singing. A sweet, melodious, mysterious sound. Then her friend exclaimed, "It comes from the log on the fire!" "Ah," thought Susannah, "when the fire of affliction draws songs of praise from us, then indeed we are purified and our God is glorified!" God's Word is both realistic and hope-filled on this subject. Suffering "for a little while" is the fire that refines us and leads us to eternal peace and praise (1 Peter 1:3-9).

More Stories of Trust

A Choice to Trust

Dr. Viktor Frankl wrote about his three years in Nazi concentration camps. He recalled that even in those extreme conditions there were men who “walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the freedom to choose his attitude in any given set of circumstances.” Evidence: Daniel in the lions’ den, Nehemiah building the wall, Christ in his trials, Paul and Silas in prison. The choice of trust does not originate in ourselves. It’s gift, it’s miracle, it’s grace, it’s Spirit. It’s the One in us, who is greater than the one in the world (1 John 4:1).

True Freedom

Armando Valladares was twenty-three years old when he refused Castro’s order not to worship. His refusal brought twenty-two years in prison, with torture and unbelievable deprivation. His first Christmas was spent naked in a tiny cell, with a fractured ankle, covered with urine and faeces dumped over him, sores covering his body, fingertips chewed by rats, his hands bleeding as they were clasped in prayer. With his blood he wrote poems of hope. On another Christmas, Armando led 900 prisoners in carol singing, while guards watched in awe. He wrote, “The greater the repression and torture, the firmer and more resistant my internal framework. My situation is difficult, but I feel and am a free man.”

“I Can Trust”

Hudson Taylor was a modern apostle, giving his life for souls in China. He was familiar with suffering. He endured persecution, criticism, separation, the death of two children, the death of his wife, disabling illness, and perpetual uncertainty. In the Boxer Rebellion, 58 of his missionaries and 21 of their children were killed. At that time one grief-stricken, dying mother said, “I wish I could have gone back there to tell the dear people more about Jesus.” Hudson said “I cannot think; I cannot even pray; but I can trust.” Two firm assurances sustained him: Ebenezer—“The Lord has helped us”; and Jehovah-Jireh —“The Lord will provide.”

The Night and the Morning

The night before his martyrdom under Queen Mary, Robert Glover prayed desperately for the joy of the Lord. But it didn’t come. A friend visited him in prison, encouraged him, prayed with him. But still, Robert had no sense of God’s closeness—none at all. In the morning, he stumbled in darkness of spirit toward the stake at which he would be burned. Then, in a moment, everything changed. The Spirit of God came upon him and overwhelmed him. He clapped his hands together and cried out to his friend, “Austin! He is come, He is come!” For our own dark times, we have God’s total promise: “Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

Stories of Redemption

Complete Release

About 250 years ago in France, a man named Jean Fabre was arrested for his faith. He was 78. He was condemned to be chained as a slave and to labour till he died. He had a son who was young and strong. The son went to the commander, and with tears in his eyes begged him to take him as a ransom for his father. After repeated requests, the commander agreed. For seven years the son served as a slave in place of his father, until public sympathy and outrage led to his release. If this story touches your heart, be touched even more by Christ, who emptied himself, and became a slave, and took your place, and laboured to earn complete release for you (Philippians 2:5–8).

To Jesus Alone

At his own prior request, John Berridge was buried in a corner of a graveyard that was reserved for people who died in dishonour. He wanted that corner to become consecrated. Look at what's on his gravestone: "I was born in sin, February 1716. Remained ignorant of my fallen state till 1730. Lived proudly on faith and works for salvation till 1755. Was admitted to Everton Vicarage, 1755. Fled to Jesus alone for refuge, 1756. Fell asleep in Christ, January 22, 1793." When all is done for you, what will be written? Will it be "lived proudly on faith and works"? Or the blessed affirmation, "Fled to Jesus alone for refuge"?

A Blessed Exchange

At Auschwitz in 1941, a prisoner was missing, presumed to have escaped. By rule, ten other prisoners were lined up to die as punishment. As they were being ordered into the hunger bunker, one man cried out "Have mercy! I have a wife and children." Another prisoner, named Maximilian Kolbe, stepped forward and offered himself instead. Kolbe was a priest. The commandant accepted the exchange. Kolbe went into the cell of death and comforted the others by example and prayer, until his suffering was ended with a deadly injection. You and I are blessed with a High Priest who has taken our place. Let's live with thankfulness in that blessed exchange today.

Taken to Shore

In July 1992 I was paddling a canoe in rough conditions on Yellowstone Lake. I thought I heard a cry, "Help!" I stopped, looked, prayed. Saw nothing. Continued. Suddenly it came again: "Help!" I paddled in that direction, and found a man in the frigid water, barely conscious. I got a line around him and towed him to shore—a strenuous task of twenty minutes. "I've lost my son," he said. "My son's dead." But his son wasn't dead. My paddling friends had found the younger man helpless on the beach, minutes from dying. These two men shouldn't have been alive, but they were. This is the story of our planet. We are lost in deep waters, but a Rescuer has heard our cry, and taken us to shore.

Vision for God

Seeing the Farthest

How far can you see? Five kilometres? Twenty? How about 140 million kilometres? Or 100 million light years? It depends, doesn't it? On things like fog, haze, forests, hills, curves, light, dark, the quality of your eyes, and the availability of a microscope or binoculars. It depends on where you're looking—to the horizon, into a cave, into a life form, or up to the heavens. Some people seem to go through life in myopic fog. Others, in transforming vision. It's important, because the farther we see, the farther we go. "We see Jesus" (Hebrews 2:9). That's the farthest of all vision. But it's also the closest, because the Son of God became a man, and he walks alongside us even in the fog.

Opened Eyes

In a city called Dothan, Elisha's servant got up early to look, and he didn't like what he saw. An army with horses and chariots surrounded Dothan, ready to destroy Elisha. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant cried. Now there's a sentiment we can identify with. But Elisha was strangely serene. "Don't worry," he said. Which didn't help one bit. Then Elisha prayed—not for himself, but for his servant. "O Lord, open his eyes so that he may see." The servant's eyes had been open to human reality. But now they were opened to spiritual reality—a massive army of God's horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha! Make this your prayer today: "Lord, open my eyes, that I may see."

See as God Sees

When you look out on your world, what do you see? A hopeless situation, perhaps. Crime, calamities, war. Love grown cold. Hearts failing for fear. People intoxicated by materialism, consumed by lust. Few who seek God. Hardly anyone who longs for God's truth and his kingdom. Only a handful interested in peace, humility, integrity, or purity. This is what we see. But what does God see? Jesus gave this answer: "The harvest is plentiful. . . . Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (Luke 10:2; John 4:35). This is a shock, isn't it? Where we see a harvest of evil, God sees a harvest for his kingdom. Will you open your eyes, and see what God sees?

See by the Spirit

Abraham looked out on nothing but tents, and saw the City of God. Moses looked out on a horde of ignorant slaves, and saw the invisible God. Stephen looked into the furious faces of church leaders as they hurled rocks at his dying body—and saw Jesus at the right hand of God. We look at the harsh reality of our lives; but eyes of faith can see the spiritual reality—the suffering God behind all things, over all things, in all things. This is a miracle. It doesn't come from our spirit, even with the best psychotherapy in the world. As in the case of Stephen, this miracle comes when we are "full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:55). According to God, you may ask for and receive this miracle, and see in a way you've never seen before.

The Spirit and the Gifts

The Real Discovery

We often hear about “discovering your spiritual gifts”. But Scripture is strangely silent on this point. Scripture simply says that the Spirit hands out gifts, distributing them by his choice and will—gifts of proclaiming, serving, teaching, giving, administering, and so on. There is a human response called for: We must learn about the gifts, eagerly desire the gifts, and use the gifts in proportion to the grace and faith God grants. Self-focused “discovery” misses the reality. In the early church, when you received a spiritual gift, you knew it. The secret is to stop looking merely for gifts, and start looking for the Gift. Discover the Spirit for himself. Then gifts will come, and you’ll know it.

Eagerly Desire the Gifts

While Scripture nowhere tells us to discover our spiritual gifts, it does tell us to learn about the gifts the Spirit gives, and eagerly desire them (1 Corinthians 12:1; 14:1). Having received the Gift of the Spirit himself, what particular gifts of service do you desire? Teaching? Proclamation? Serving and helping? Encouraging? Giving? Leading? Wisdom? Knowledge? Faith? Discernment? Healing? Communication? Administration? Pastoring? Evangelism? Acknowledge the gifts you have received, and thank God for them. Pray for further gifts as you are led, focusing on “the greater gifts”—those that most powerfully build up God’s church (1 Corinthians 12:28; 14:1, 12). Keep in mind, the gifts are distributed according to the Spirit’s will, not our own will (Hebrews 2:4).

Guarded by the Fruit

The gifts of service that were to build up the early church, almost destroyed it in the city of Corinth. There was nothing wrong with the gifts, but there was something wrong with the recipients. There were those who thought their gifts made them better than others. There were some who practised their gift as if it were their own gift and not God’s—with no regard for order, humility, purpose, and compassion. In answer, Scripture says we’re all part of the same body of Christ, with gifts from the same Holy Spirit. There are greater gifts but not greater people. Higher than the gifts of the Spirit are the *fruits* of the Spirit, especially the most excellent fruit of love. Is that fruit guarding your gift today?

A United Body

Feet, hands, ears, eyes. Each distinctive. But each an element of your *one* body. It’s the same with the Spirit’s gifts (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). In the church as in your own body, it’s crazy to have fighting and division. Criticism is out; respect and appreciation is in. Resist the temptation to urge someone to practise your gift because it’s “better” or “expected”. True, we’re called to excel (1 Corinthians 14:12). There’s a place for improvement, training, and challenge. But there’s no place for competition, manipulation or jealousy. According to our gifting, that’s how we serve—with humility, with unity. This is critical. Through your gifts and mine God grows his church and saves the world.

Healthy Church

A Precious Hour

The crisis left the nation ruined and paralysed. On every side, lives were shattered, souls disillusioned. People crowded into churches, looking for answers. It was “a precious and fruitful hour”, according to an observer named Helmut Thielicke. But the time passed without an awakening. The church in Germany did not find a message that met the pain of its populace. Self-assertion, “old guard” politics, and shallow sermons led people to take refuge in psychological refurbishment instead of confession and repentance. In our time, the world seems stirred to war in heart and action. In this “precious and fruitful hour”, you and I comprise God’s church. Will we assert our message? Will we put aside our self-willed, timid ways? Will we receive God’s Spirit and see an awakening?

Heaven’s Light and Power

Christianity is still the world’s largest religion, comprising up to a third of Earth’s population. But when we take a closer look, we find that in countries where most inhabitants consider themselves “Christian”, only 2 to 10 per cent give evidence of it through regular church attendance and personal devotion. Translation: In all the world with its 6.8 billion people, there may be fewer than a couple of hundred million individuals actually living out faith in Jesus Christ. And you are one of them! Praise the Lord. Every one counts. Together, we’re the core of “the body of Christ”—Heaven’s light and power for a dying planet. Will you live as Heaven’s light and power today?

Kingdom Enterprise

If you start an enterprise, you need four elements that will bring success instead of failure. First, you need a *foundation* on which to build your corporate identity. Second, you need a *charter* that outlines your direction. Third, you need a source of *energy* that provides your drive. And fourth, you need a *mission* that describes your destiny. In the business world, we might refer to these as a founder, a business plan, an investment source, and strategic targeting. In the church, we call them Christ Jesus, the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the Kingdom of Heaven. Here we find our foundation, our charter, our energy, our mission. How are these placed in your own enterprise for God?

Dynamic 1: Leadership

What brings life, health and growth to churches today? Detailed descriptions can be condensed to five critical dynamics. The first is *Leadership*. A church without leadership is a church wandering in a private and pain-filled circle. All true leadership springs from Christ, Founder of the Christian faith. Want to lead in your church? Get deeper into the humility and authority of Christ. Teach what he taught. Train as he trained. Be empowered by the same Spirit that empowered him. Lead not by command, but by relationship—drawing people not merely into a system of belief, but into the heart of God. You don’t have to be a pastor to lead. If you’re a true disciple, you may lead.

Dynamic 2: Dependence

What brings life, health and growth to churches today? Detailed descriptions can be condensed to five critical dynamics. The second of these is *Dependence*. Our society admires self-made people who despise dependence, especially on God. But disease, crime, war, loss, and death remind us that strength comes from trust in God. As the church ministers to the world, it will cultivate this trust. Humility, prayer, study of Scripture—these must saturate the lives of Christians, individually and together. It's not by mighty determination that the church reaches the world; nor by the power of plans and programmes. It's by the Spirit of God, and humble dependence on that Spirit (Zechariah 4:6).

Dynamic 3: Love

What brings life, health and growth to churches today? Detailed descriptions can be condensed to five critical dynamics. The third of these is *Love*. Not mushy, sentimental, cosy feelings of niceness; but strident sacrifice of yourself for the good of people around you. Love is not merely avoiding pride and criticism. That's only a start, though some church members have yet to make that start. Love is engaging people for the Kingdom of God as Jesus engaged them—through personal ministry. Love is when the church gets out of its committees and into its communities. First the church must fall in love with God. Then it can fall into compassion with the world that God so loved.

Dynamic 4: Passion

What brings life, health and growth to churches today? Detailed descriptions can be condensed to five critical dynamics. The fourth of these is *Passion*. People get passionate about sports, money, entertainment, and social causes. But passion for Christ and for church is rare. Churches known for their sadness, formalism and mediocrity don't represent the best of Hebrew worship, nor the ministry of Jesus, nor the beginnings of Christianity at Pentecost. Passionate discipleship is not manufactured; it comes from God's Spirit. "Do not put out the Spirit's fire" (1 Thessalonians 5:19). A dead church is like a dead fire—no light, no warmth, no comfort, no joy. But when the wind blows, the embers stir, and a church flames into life again.

Dynamic 5: Adaptation

What brings life, health and growth to churches today? Detailed descriptions can be condensed to five critical dynamics. The fifth of these is *Adaptation*. Babies grow or die. Businesses change or fail. Churches adapt or perish. Change and adaptation are not options for life and health. They are essential to it. Healthy churches follow the method of Jesus and the apostles—searching, stretching, targeting, adjusting. The established church of Jesus' time had grown rigid, unbending, intoxicated with doctrinal definition, self-focused, and obsessed with the control of behaviour. Disaster! Every church must preserve core truth and values, while following the Spirit where *he* goes (John 3:5–10). The mission is never a comfortable church. The mission is the Kingdom of Heaven.

LifeSpot for the Season

Christ in Christmas

C. S. Lewis tells how his brother was on a bus one Christmastime. The bus passed by a church with a nativity scene outside it. Lewis's brother heard a woman on the bus say, "Oh Lor'! They bring religion into everything. Look—they're dragging it even into Christmas now!" It's amazing that the religion of Christ survives Christmas. Through the commotion of the season, is there a nativity scene in you? A place where the Christ-child rests, and snuggles, and grows? A place in you not threatened by the restless pace and fierce materialism of our world? "To us a child is born, to us a son is given. . . . And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

[See also LifeSpots 2008 and LifeSpots 2010]