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**Sunday 3 October 2021 to Sunday 10 October 2021**

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Sunday 3 October 2021

# Turn the page!

by Sonia Hulme

**Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these (Mark 10:14).**

Read Mark 10:2–16

My current work involves supporting a class of five-year-olds in their first year of schooling. To mark the Easter journey, their teacher shared the crucifixion story from a colourful children’s Bible. Many months later, I am struck by how many children wander over to those Bibles to flick through the 400 pages until they find the story again. One little boy, who comes from a family with no real faith background, seems especially caught up in the story. It’s a regular occurrence to be met with him pointing vehemently at the picture of Jesus on the cross and exclaiming in his high-pitched five-year-old voice, ‘Look! It was the saddest day’. Their lovely teacher also did share the resurrection story with them, so we leaf through the pages until we find a picture of the risen Jesus and remember together that Jesus didn’t stay dead, and the story has a happy ending. Satisfied for the moment, he wanders off, clutching his Bible. Tomorrow, we’ll probably do it all again!

In today’s reading, children are being brought to Jesus to be blessed, and his comments are intriguing. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them. You must receive the kingdom like a child if you wish to enter it. What kingdom qualities do children possess that make Jesus stop and talk to his grow up followers about? Part of it is their utter dependence. The children in today’s passage could not even come by themselves; they had to be brought and maybe even carried. But was Jesus also speaking about their forgetfulness? Children need constant reminding about many things. Did he know part of the childlikeness lay in the fact they would need this constant reassurance, that they would get stuck in the sadness of life and all the things that had gone wrong, forgetting what had been accomplished on the cross and the great hope they had because the cross is not the end of the story?

So, my five-year-old friend, I am not so different to you. It’s healthy to acknowledge the sadness and struggle in my life and the lives of those I love. It’s okay to feel it – like you do when you look at the picture of Jesus on the cross. It’s okay to sit with the injustice of it. Like you, though, I need regular, daily reminding to turn the page and remember. Jesus didn’t stay dead. He lives with us now. He accompanies us now in our sorrows and joys, and he is leading us into a glorious future with him in eternity. Thank you for reminding me.

**Sometimes I am like a little child, Lord, stuck in the crucifixion story as I observe the death and injustice all around me. Help me to notice it, be moved by it, and then turn the page to be reminded of your resurrection hope. It’s not just hope for my future with you, but in my current circumstances as well. Help me to be part of your resurrection hope in someone’s life today. Amen.**

Monday 4 October 2021

# Watch your water source

by Sonia Hulme

**May you rejoice in the wife of your youth … may her breasts satisfy you always, may you always be captivated by her love (Proverbs 5:18-20).**

Read Proverbs 5:15–23

How do you feel, reading this verse? Do you wonder how on earth it got through the selection process for Bible verses and why it would be chosen for the reading for the day? Talk of breasts and bosoms indeed … I did not click on today’s devotion for this!

This chapter of Proverbs is certainly quite earthy in its language and pointed in its instruction to the young men it is addressing. In seeking to equip them to live well among the major temptation of their day, they are encouraged to seek sexual satisfaction in committed, faithful, respectful relationships. This is good advice for all of us. If you are married, guard and protect your relationship. Treasure it, relish it and work for its health, knowing that one day it will end.

If you are single, your relationships are very much God’s concern and under his care. His desire is for them to lead you towards a greater life and wholeness. Your sexuality and your closest relationships are of interest to him. Nothing is outside of God’s care and concern! If he is interested in your sexuality, then he is interested in every other area of your life. Your everyday life is all he has to work with; it’s where he wants to meet you. So, invite him into the brokenness and woundedness, where you may have been left hurt, lonely and afraid.

The young men who were the audience of Proverbs were tempted to look in unhealthy places to numb their pain, fill their loneliness and find satisfaction. So may we be. Earlier in the chapter, they are advised to ‘Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well’ (Proverbs 5:15). God was the ultimate source of their water of life, but they looked elsewhere. So do we. Where are you tempted to turn away from his offer of fresh flowing water and drink from a contaminated puddle? Your phone? Food? Social media? Your sexuality? When these intended good gifts from our Heavenly Father are used instead to numb our pain, they will never truly satisfy.

**Lord, I confess the choices I make which do not lead me towards greater life, peace and wholeness with you. [Spend some time naming some struggles specific to you.] These are unsatisfying counterfeits, and I give them to you. Let all of my life come under your loving gaze as I walk into today as your loved and forgiven child.**

Tuesday 5 October 2021

# The unattainable woman of Proverbs 31

by Sonia Hulme

**A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies (Proverbs 31:10).**

Read Proverbs 31:10–31

Another passage from the intriguing book of Proverbs. Thank goodness we have moved on from breasts and bosoms! But there’s more female imagery today, which is not surprising, considering the target audience of this ancient piece of writing. Young men, who were being prepared for life in court, who would lead and rule, needed schooling about living well. What better language to use to catch the attention of testosterone-fuelled teenagers than that of young women? Proverbs outlines their two choices – the path of wisdom (portrayed as a wise lady) or the path of foolishness (portrayed as a temptress and adulteress who will lead them astray). The ‘perfect wife’ which ends the book of Proverbs, then, can be seen as the ultimate portrayal of what it means to be wise.

With its male-centred focus, how do we read this passage and embody its truths? If I am not male and not going to rule, what does it say to me? How do I find this precious jewel, this capable and noble ‘wife’ (wisdom), to guide me in my life? For anyone – male or female – Proverbs 31 has a clue in its details. This woman lives well by taking care of the everyday things in her context. They will be different in your 21st-century world, but they are there, all the same. You may not have fields planted out and a husband sitting at the city gate while you make your linen garments, but there are plenty of ‘small things’ in your life, things that need to get done. What are the things you need to take care of, the things no-one else might see except you and God?

Take care of the small stuff, head into your day with Jesus walking beside you, and you are on the way to living wisely and well! When you fail, as you will, let Jesus into those struggles too, and receive his grace to keep on walking.

**Lord, I am thankful you do not call me to aspire to be the Proverbs 31 woman but to be my wisest me in my context with the people you have placed around me. Help me live generously and love those around me with the love you have freely passed on to me. And when I need wisdom to live well, help me turn to you, the source of all perfect wisdom from God. Amen.**

Wednesday 6 October 2021

# Give way!

by Sonia Hulme

**Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21).**

Read Ephesians 5:21–6:4

Paul’s instructions to married couples and families have come in for their share of criticism over the years. Whether you think his words on submission and differing instructions to husbands and wives are horrifying or freeing might depend on your own experience and context in reading them.

I’ve been blessed to be married for 26 years. Our marriage has been good but not always easy. We made the decision early on to invest every few years in something that would help it grow. But we have seen many marriages fall apart around us, and we have witnessed others who have stuck together with difficulty. How might Paul’s suggestion of mutual submission play itself out today?

Jesus chose me to be joined in life with him. My relationship with him is the foundation for all my other relationships. Out of that life-giving relationship springs my capacity to love the other person. So then, all my relationships (including my marriage) involve not just two people but Jesus as well.  Marriage is an awesome chance for growth in my capacity to love, and a lot of that growth happens as I choose to ‘give way’ to the other person. How does that happen in a practical sense? How do I yield to the person I love most in the world when they paradoxically manage to be incredibly so frustrating and selfish? (A question my patient husband has probably asked himself many times over in our marriage.) By thinking of a loving thing to do and doing it. By choosing the next loving thing. By making small daily choices that make a big difference.

And if you are not married? Or you have come out of a messy marriage, bruised and broken in the very relationship God intended to be an echo of his love for his people? Then Jesus gives himself to you every day in sacrificial love, pouring out his heart of love for you and drawing you towards healing and wholeness. If we’ve been hurt, it becomes harder to try again. But God is a God of fresh starts, new chances and new beginnings. Of course, healthy submission cannot happen in a violent or abusive relationship. One-way deferral and acceptance were never part of God’s plan.

Is there a relationship where you might practise healthy submission, thinking of the other, turning towards them in a loving, practical way? Perhaps it might be with your children or in your church community? As a follower of Jesus, I am called to give way (submit) to God in my life, expressed in love for him and, flowing out of that, love for others.

**Jesus, in a world where what’s best for me and how my needs are being met, submission is counter-cultural. Help me reflect your light by how I love you and others today. I name before you a relationship that needs your healing. Help me enter into your new, radical way of love with this person today. Amen.**

Thursday 7 October 2021

# What if God were one of us?

by Sonia Hulme

**Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:18).**

Read Hebrews 2:13–18

The author of Hebrews was writing to a people under pressure. The early Christian community was struggling to persevere in the face of persecution. Some were considering turning back to Judaism to escape it. Was Jesus really the Messiah for whom they had waited? Why, then, were his people facing persecution and not victory; why had they been left to suffer by themselves?

What sort of Messiah was he, if not one who would sweep to power and exert his rule by force? The author of Hebrews takes great care to outline his God-ness (‘the radiance of God’s glory, the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word’ Hebrews 1:3). But he doesn’t stop there. He reassures that this is no remote King. He is God-come-near – fully God, yes, but fully human as well. He lived a fully human life, a full human experience. And so, he can identify with those he came to live among and serve through his death and resurrection.

He suffered, he was tempted, and he struggled as he faced death. We might immediately think of his temptation during his 40 days in the desert, but the struggle didn’t stop when he left the wilderness. After the feeding of the 5000, people wanted to make him a king in their mould. On other occasions, he was challenged to perform signs and miracles so people would believe him. He wept tears when his dear friend Lazarus died. He was moved with compassion for the people of Jerusalem. In the garden of Gethsemane, as he faced death, he sweated blood at the thought of what lay ahead. His humanity was raw and real, and he wants to come alongside us in ours.

Are you suffering today? Maybe with an illness, a broken relationship, a lack of purpose, an unanswered prayer? What are you facing that is almost too much for you and driving you to the point of wanting to give up? Are you tempted to doubt and be discouraged and wonder if it’s worth persevering with faith? Do you fear death?

Jesus has been there; he has lived what you have. He became like us ‘in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest’ (Hebrews 2:17). Because he totally shared our humanity by becoming one of us, he can empathise with our pain and suffering. He wants to walk with us now and carry us home.

**Lord, I name the struggles before you which are causing me to doubt. I name the temptations I face to turn away from you and the fears which are real for me today. I let you into the dark places I struggle to show others and ask you to stay with me there as we face them together. Amen.**

Friday 8 October 2021

# Open the door

by Sonia Hulme

**Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels unawares (Hebrews 13:2).**

Read Hebrews 13:1–6

Giving examples of those who lived by faith and encouraging his readers to persevere in testing their faith, the writer seems to sense he’s near the end of his opportunity to encourage. So, he pushes to squeeze as much practical advice as possible into the six verses of today’s reading. Marriage. Money. Contentment. The welfare of prisoners and those being mistreated. And the person mentioned in today’s verse, the stranger – who could be an angel.

I have a bus stop outside my home. One night, heading out late to pick my son up from work, I noticed a lady waiting for the bus. She was still there on our return. There was nothing unusual in that, except it was a Saturday night, and it was cold and the buses are not very regular then. Briefly wondering if she was okay, I headed inside and promptly forgot about her. As we headed tiredly up the stairs to bed, there was a knock on the door**.** It was her … bus stop lady. She asked if we could tell her the name of our street so she could call a taxi and get a lift home. It was clear the bus wasn’t coming. Because I was a bit unsure, I gave my husband a look that meant, ‘I should drive her home. Actually, maybe it’s not safe for just one of us to drive her home. Maybe we should drive her home. Can you drive her home, and I’ll come too?’ He’s good at interpreting my looks, and he’s kind, so we headed out together for the trip to her house.

On the way, we asked her about herself, and her story started coming. She lived alone in government housing. She had no car, and a visit to her disabled son required three buses. She’d become confused on the trip home and ended up in our street, outside our house. On dropping her at her door, we asked if she would like a phone call later and maybe a visit to see if she was okay. I wrestled over this with a ready list of internal excuses. I’m way too busy already. But she seemed lonely, and if we were aware of that and had an ability to respond (response-ability), then what were we called to do? We exchanged numbers, and we’ve stayed in touch, visiting several times.

Have you wanted to reach out to someone and hesitated? Sometimes there’s fear, isn’t there? Stranger danger. What if they abuse my care, what if they ring all the time, what if they’re a serial killer? The bus stop lady wasn’t. She was just a lonely person who had had a hard life, the victim of other people’s choices, in need of a friend. God put her outside our house, outside our door and gave us an opportunity to respond.

Who have been the strangers in your life? Maybe you’ve been the stranger and on the receiving end of someone else’s care and love? I certainly have. What a blessing it is to join him in his work in the world – in entertaining angels.

**Thank you that when we were strangers, you welcomed us into your family. As we have the opportunity to welcome others, give us the grace and wisdom to respond well and with love. Amen.**

Saturday 9 October 2021

# This is your life

by Sonia Hulme

**Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom (Psalm 90:12).**

Read Psalm 90:12–17

The days creep along, don’t they? When you are at school, it feels like you’ll be there forever. When your children are young, you wonder if you’ll ever exit the exhaustion. When they are teenagers, you wonder how many days you’ll have spent transporting them to sport, music, parties and part-time jobs. Your own work takes more days, broken up by weekends and holidays. Then retirement, which seems exhausting too, for many. And I suspect when you are older, some days are quiet and lonely, and you begin to wonder how many more days there will be. We have a finite number of days to live, and today’s verse gives us a pause. Number our days? How do we do that? We don’t know whether our lives will be ‘short’ or ‘long’ (by our standards), and we’re often too busy surviving them to really stop and consider what’s been and what’s left.

One practice Christians of varying traditions have used through the centuries is a daily examen, or review, a daily ‘stocktake’. It involves spending a few moments in God’s presence at the end of the day, going back over it and asking a few key questions. There are many variations, but most go something like this:

1) What am I especially thankful for today? Where was I most able to give and receive love?

2) What has troubled me today? Where/who did I struggle to love?

3) Where did I notice Jesus today?

4) Where do I need forgiveness? Is there someone I need to fix things up with?

5) What am I being invited into tomorrow? Where will I need God’s help?

Over time, Christians who practise this regularly say they are more able to notice God’s activity in their lives. By looking behind for his presence, it helps to be aware of him right in front. It builds awareness that he is active in every moment of our lives. By pausing and reflecting, we come to realise that every day is a gift. Each one contains an invitation from our loving Heavenly Father to walk with him and treasure the moments and days that make up a life.

**I confess I am not very good at noticing you, Lord. To be honest, often, I forget to look. But you are the author of each day of my life and I am grateful for the gift. Help me become aware that my life is full of your presence; I just need help to see it. Open my eyes to see where you are already at work and to be grateful. Amen.**

Sunday 10 October 2021

# Living by faith

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!’ (Mark 10:23).**

Read Mark 10:17–31

In the early 90s, I was part of the ‘Christ Knows No Distance’ team, ‘Highway One’. A full-year commitment. I, along with, six other young people left our homes, families, jobs and security. We would visit a church and stay with them for a few weeks. We helped them with outreach in their community, and we used music, drama and testimony to share the love of Jesus. As a ‘faith ministry’, we had no income. We trusted that the Lord would provide – and provide he did! We were billeted out into the homes of generous Lutheran congregants, and gifts – monetary and in-kind – made our ministry possible. It was an amazing time of growth and challenge to see what God was doing in people’s lives and to inspire, encourage and witness.

Fast forward 20 years, and I am a wealthy man – even as pastor on extended medical leave. I own a property, vehicles, technology and a wardrobe of lovely clothes! I live in one of the richest countries in the world. God has provided me with more than I need. By world standards, I truly am a wealthy man!

So how are we wealthy Aussies and Kiwis to react to Jesus’ words? Are we to give all we have away and ‘live by faith’ as the disciples did? Maybe! I know some who have been called to live like that, just as I did for a year. But, if these verses talk about ‘how hard it is to enter the kingdom of heaven’ for the wealthy, the previous verses 13 to 16 talk about people who find it easy to enter the kingdom of heaven!

Read Mark 10:13–16.

Yes, it’s children! Why? One of my favourite Bible commentators, Brian Stoffregen, puts it like this:

I think that the reason it is harder for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God than children is that the wealthy have usually been very successful in running their lives by themselves. They don't have to be dependent on anyone. They can buy it themselves. In contrast, young children know about being dependent on others. They know that there are many things beyond their abilities to do. Perhaps that's why it is easier for them to enter the kingdom. They know that they need help and are willing to accept it.

Giving up control. Letting go, and ‘letting God!’ Not getting sucked into the eternal vacuum of materialism in a vain attempt ‘find contentment’.

Learning to let go. Learning to give. Learning to ask for help.

**Lord Jesus, in this quiet moment with you, open my ears to hear your voice. You are Lord of my life. I offer to you myself, my time and my possessions. Send me where you will. Catch me as I let go of all the trappings of this world. Help me to depend on you for all my needs. Amen.**