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**Sunday 30 October 2022 to Sunday 6 November 2022**

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Sunday 30 October 2022

# Lost and found

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount (Luke 19:8).**

Read Luke 19:1–10

Have you ever felt lost?

Maybe not lost in the sense of physical location but a ‘lost in life’ or spiritually lost feeling. Or perhaps you have been ostracised by people and left feeling lost and alone. Maybe you have been directionless in life, drifting with no sense of where your life was going, or perhaps you were heading off a cliff!

Maybe you have lost someone who meant the world to you. For me personally, it has been two years since I lost my mum, and part of me still feels numb and directionless – an emptiness, like something is missing from my life.

Feeling lost is not a nice feeling.

It appears that Zacchaeus is lost at the start of our reading today.

How was he lost? His job as a tax collector for the hated Roman Empire certainly would have made him a social pariah, as indicated by the muttering of all the people in verse 7. Being a tax collector made him ritually unclean – even excommunicated from the synagogues – and outside of God’s mercy. Zacchaeus is lost spiritually and socially.

What is he seeking? Most people who are lost don’t really want to be lost! Verse 4 tells us Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus and discover who he is, but he is too short (and he has certainly fallen short!). Seeking answers, he climbs a tree. To some, this seems amusing: ‘a short loser climbing a tree!’. Personally, I think it is an act of audacity – a brave risk by a desperate man!

How is Zacchaeus found? Jesus sees him. Jesus breaks down the social/religious barrier and speaks to him. Jesus calls him down. Jesus welcomes him. Jesus wants to be with him in the most intimate way – in his home.

How does Zacchaeus react? ‘Look, Lord! Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount’ (Luke 19:8).

Zacchaeus acknowledges Jesus as Lord. He acts immediately in giving of himself freely, releasing his wealth to help those in need and making restitution for his misdeeds. It is a stark contrast to the rich man in Luke 18:18–27 (and Mark 10:22), who walks away empty and lost.

How is Zacchaeus saved? Jesus says, ‘salvation has come to this house’. The word here also means to heal or be made whole. Jesus makes us whole!

**Lord Jesus, save us. Fill our emptiness with your love. Grant us your peace. Holy Spirit, show us how we can reach out to the lost with your love and acceptance. Amen.**

Stephen Abraham is a retired Lutheran pastor and musician who served as a school pastor and church planter in Mawson Lakes, South Australia. Stephen retired early due to a spinal injury, leaving him largely housebound with chronic pain (documented by Lutheran Media on its Messages of Hope YouTube channel in 2014). When Stephen can, he still preaches, takes school chapels and serves his local church. He also writes and records personal songs, worship songs and Christian meditations, which he shares on his YouTube channel ([*youtube.com/StephenAbrahamMusic*](https://www.youtube.com/StephenAbrahamMusic)).

Monday 31 October 2022

# Our prejudice vs God’s forgiveness

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (Jonah 4:2b).**

Read Jonah 3:10–4:11

Since my seminary training, I have loved this strange little book nestled in the minor prophets. Popular culture can’t get past the fish/whale. What I can’t get past is the folly of the reluctant hero and the contrast between our prejudices and God’s compassion.

Let’s recap: Jonah detests the Ninevites. They were the hated enemy. Yet God commands Jonah to preach to them: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me’ (Jonah 1:2).

Most stories have a hero, but Jonah is not one of them! He hates Ninevah and doesn’t want to give it a chance to repent and be spared, so he disobeys God and boards a ship going the opposite way. A storm blows up. Jonah comes clean to the crew and knows that to save them, he has to sacrifice himself by being thrown into the sea. So he goes over and gets swallowed whole by the fish for three days and nights. In chapter two, Jonah prays an amazing prayer of repentance and is vomited back up onto dry land.

Surely, he is now a changed man! Surely now he will be the hero of the story! Read Jonah 3:1–4. What I find amusing here is that Jonah appears to do the bare minimum! There is no explanation about why Ninevah will be overthrown, what their sins are, or even who the people are to repent to!

It is the most reluctant preaching of all time! And yet (much to Jonah’s dismay), it works!

Jonah 3:10 says, 'When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened’.

And now we come to today’s reading, Jonah 3:10–4:11. So let’s get this straight. Jonah holds onto his prejudices, tries to get his own way, gets ‘caught out’ doing the wrong thing and has to come clean, prays for forgiveness and is spared, obeys God but does the bare minimum of what God has called him to do. The whole city, including the animals, repents and is saved. And then, like an impudent teenager in a huff, Jonah is upset that God spared his enemies who repented – never mind that he himself has directly disobeyed God, repented and been spared!

When I read Jonah, I am so amused at its humorous insight into human nature. It is like this book was written with me in mind! When I look back on my litany of mistakes, messes I’ve gotten myself into and even my own prejudices, I too can see the comedy – a history of my vanity and bad choices – and God at work despite all of my nonsense!

What a relief that we have a God who forgives us and is a ‘gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love’.

**Almighty God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, thank you for your patience with me. Show me the error of my ways. Forgive me and set me on the right path. Help me to show your grace and mercy to those around me. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.**

Tuesday 1 November 2022

# The first Reformation!

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**Then Peter began to speak: ‘I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right’ (Acts 10:34,35).**

Read Acts 10:34–43

When I was a young man at university, one of my very secular music history professors asked the class, 'What is the single greatest historical event in the past 2000 years?’

The answer: the Reformation! So, I trust you had a happy Reformation Day yesterday! Today we read about another Reformation-like event, the first that the fledgling followers of Jesus faced.

In a few short chapters in Acts, there is a paradigm shift. A massive movement in thinking for this fledgling Jewish off-shoot that brought into question so much of their identity, heritage and worldview: that non-Jews can be saved!

So the setup: a non-Jewish ‘God-fearer’ (a Roman centurion of all people!) has a vision and is commanded to meet up with Peter. At the same time, Peter has a vision about God commanding him three times to break the Old Testament laws on eating unclean animals. This is shocking; from birth, Peter had been taught from Scripture never to eat what is profane or unclean, but the voice from heaven clearly said, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane’ (Acts 10:15).

As Peter ponders this strange vision, an entourage sent by Cornelius arrives, asks for Peter, and tells him about Cornelius’ vision. Peter goes with them to Caesarea, where Cornelius has gathered his family and friends to hear what Peter has to say. As Peter listens to Cornelius tell his story, the significance of his own vision becomes crystal clear. Peter believes God has shown him that he should not consider anyone unclean; uncircumcised Gentiles can become followers of Jesus!

What Peter says is profound. It is one of the earliest creedal statements summarising the core beliefs of the Christian faith. And those first words from verse 34: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality …’.

I know historically that this took time and lots of effort for the early church to finally fully resolve and accept. But I often ponder what would have happened to Christianity if Acts 10 did not occur. Without it, Christianity may have stayed as a small Jewish sect, and most of us Gentiles wouldn’t know Jesus and be his followers. No church, a much smaller New Testament (if at all!), no missions, no Reformation, no Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand!

So, thank you, Peter and Cornelius, for listening and heeding the Spirit’s prompting and Luke for recording it for us!

**Almighty God, thank you for this first challenge that the church overcame. May it fill us with hope in the challenges we face. Hold us together and lead us forward, Holy Spirit, so we can fulfil our mission to make disciples, baptise and teach. Amen.**

Wednesday 2 November 2022

# Riding on Jesus’ coat-tails!

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring (Romans 4:16a).**

Read Romans 4:16–25

Have you ever ridden on someone’s coat-tails? When you’re on the coat-tails of someone else, you’re enjoying success because of the association with that person. Often, this success is not earned.

Australian Lutherans in the past have associated much with a person’s surname. A known German surname invoked familiarity, an instant trust and understanding. My surname – Abraham – isn’t a German-sounding surname. But my father, Don, was well known to a generation of Lutherans because he was president of the Luther League in South Australia for many years in the 1950s and 1960s.

And so, when I was a young man, I’d meet people of my dad’s era, and I was instantly accepted and felt welcomed purely by that association. I’d simply mention his name, and the smiles and warm handshake would come!

Did I do anything to deserve this instant trust and recognition? No! But I discovered how much this social acceptance meant when I went to New South Wales on the Christ Knows No Distance tour in the early 90s. We went to many Lutheran churches, and after worship, people would come up and ask me my surname. I’d proudly tell them Abraham and wait for the response of welcome and acceptance that had come all my life, and then … nothing! Dad’s name meant nothing to New South Welsh Lutherans! They’d move on to another of our team, hear a German surname, and then the smiles would come!

For Jews in the first century, there was a strong association with Abraham – the father of their nation. They were ‘the children of Abraham’, and their inheritance of the land and God’s blessings was through that association. Like me receiving instant recognition and validation because of my father, to a degree, they were riding on the coat-tails of their Father Abraham!

In chapter four of Romans, Paul takes the Roman Christians back to this great ancestor and sets them straight about the man upon whose coat-tails they rode. In verse three, he quotes Genesis 15:6, ‘Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness’.

Abraham’s salvation didn’t come from his circumcision (verses 10–12). He outlines in verse 13 that the great promise associated with Abraham doesn’t come by him working to earn God’s acceptance; it comes simply by trusting in God.

All of us Christians effectively ‘ride on the coat-tails’ of Jesus Christ! We receive God’s acceptance – his grace, forgiveness and eternal life – not from anything we have done or through any great ancestor, but through Christ’s work: his sacrifice for our sins.

**Almighty God, I trust you. I trust in your Son, Jesus Christ, who gave his life for my sins. For his sake, forgive me and bless me with the inheritance of this new eternal life, beginning right now. In his name, I pray. Amen.**

Thursday 3 November 2022

# Slaves or free?

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).**

Read Romans 6:12–23

Dry July, devotion to a sport, dietary regimes, physical exercise – modern people are beholden to all kinds of self-imposed rules and regulations. We voluntarily subjugate ourselves to them for personal, social or ethical reasons. Many people don’t even realise they do it and accept it as normal behaviour.

Are you morally obliged to have the cricket playing on the TV every moment during summer? No! Do you have to be vegan/pescatarian/flexitarian? Not at all! Are you morally obliged to attend that Zumba class every Thursday? Of course not!

Now, none of these things is a sin. None of them is evil. In fact, they all contribute positively to many people’s lives. Are they life or death? The answer is no; they are a choice. Are some people slaves to these choices? (That’s a genuinely open question I’ll leave with you to ponder!)

Not all sin is a choice. To coin a phrase from the Maybelline makeup advertisement from the 1990s, 'Maybe she’s born with it!’ To quote the Formula of Concord, 'original sin is not a sin that [a person] commits; it inheres in the nature’. The confession of sins in 'The Service – Alternative Form’ puts it this way: ‘We confess that we are born in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves’. But does that mean we are slaves to sin? By no means! ‘For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace’ (Romans 6:14).

It’s powerful to think on that point. Sin is no longer our master – Jesus is! Are we still going to sin and need God’s forgiveness? Of course! But even that highlights that sin is no longer in charge because his forgiveness is freely available. And yes, it’s important that we realise we have freedom. We can still make a real mess of things in our relationships with each other and God. Do we have to fight to avoid this? You bet! Do we need to hold each other accountable? Yes, we do. But our new Master is at work in our lives right now, leading up to eternal life with him, minus the sin!

**Lord Jesus, we confess that we are born in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. But we rejoice that we are no longer slaves to sin – you are our Master. Forgive us, renew us and lead us this day. In your name, we pray, Amen.**

Friday 4 November 2022

# The walking dead or fully alive?

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**I appeal to you … to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship (Romans 12:1).**

Read Romans 12:1–13

Just imagine first-century Jewish Christians. Since the time of Moses, the worship life of God’s people has been centred around the temple in Jerusalem (the largest religious site in the entire Roman Empire). It is where the priestly choir sings, sacred rituals are performed, and animals are killed, cooked and eaten by the worshippers and priests as part of the major festivals.

And now Paul writes this – read Romans 12:1. What? We are to be sacrifices?! Living – dead animals? Is this some of The Walking Dead zombie thing? Not at all. This a loaded statement!

The sacrificial worship of God’s people had been at the temple in Jerusalem (a long, long way from Rome). The sacrifice is where God met with humanity and blessed them with his gracious presence. Now, the gathered body of believers is that place where God meets with humanity!

I’m fascinated too that Paul writes 'present your bodies’ (plural) as ‘a living sacrifice’ (singular). This is a group working together with a singular purpose – even if our ways of working/serving are all different (Romans 12:4–8). And we are to offer our whole selves to God – not just one part of our life, but our whole life!

And how are we to do this? As verse two tells us, it is not by being under the influence of worldly things but by being under God’s. It is about letting the Holy Spirit renew our minds as we spend time in God’s word discerning his will for our lives (which is what you are doing at this very moment in time!). Discerning God’s will for our relationships, marriages, families, work, business and leisure, our life as citizens and in the church.

You aren’t a walking-dead zombie. You are a fully alive sacrifice making a difference in this world for Christ’s sake.

**Holy Spirit, as we have heard from God’s word, come and renew us – body, mind and spirit. We offer you our whole lives. As we serve you today, show us how we can be your people, your light in the world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Saturday 5 November 2022

# Just do it!

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**I call on you, my God, for you will answer me; turn your ear to me and hear my prayer (Psalm 17:6).**

Read Psalm 17:1–9

There are certain relationships that allow for 'imperative verbs’!

What is an imperative verb? These are commands like those given by a superior, like a parent to a child, ‘pick up your clothes’, or a teacher to a student, ‘one, two, three, eyes to me’. They can also be urgent requests between people who trust each other, for example, team players on a field or friends troubleshooting a mechanical problem.

When my son and I go hunting, we work together like a well-oiled machine. There are times we each give each other commands because we trust each other; one can see some quarry that the other cannot, and a whispered command or hand signal is all it takes to indicate where it is and what to do. In my worship band, we follow each other’s cues and direction: 'You sing lead; I’ll do harmony’, 'cut the guitar till verse two’, or ‘pick it up; the speed is dragging!’.

Look for the imperatives in today’s psalm. Does the writer start with a wishy-washy apology like, 'Er, excuse me. I’m sorry to bother you, God’? Do they begin with some flowery words of love and devotion like, 'Oh, I love you, beautiful Saviour …’? Nope, it’s straight to the urgent issue at hand – no holds barred! These imperatives are not commands (because who are we mortals to command the Almighty!), but they are urgent appeals.

The psalm begins with pleas for God’s attention:

* ‘Hear me, Lord’
* ‘… listen to my cry’
* ‘Hear my prayer’
* ‘Turn your ear … hear my prayer’.

And then, the writer gets more specific with the help they need:

* 'Show me’
* 'Keep me’
* ‘… hide me’.

These are urgent requests by someone who trusts the living God. It takes boldness to pray like this. It is not for the faint of heart, and it is not to be done in arrogance or selfish conceit.

But I believe there are times we should pray this way, using psalms like this as a model. We are part of God’s team. When times are desperate, we need to be able ‘boldly approach the throne of grace’ (Hebrews 4:16). As a priesthood of believers, we can appeal to the Father. We make urgent requests using imperative verbs because we are God’s baptised children, clothed in Christ Jesus. So let us do that right now. Think of someone you know who desperately needs God’s help, and let us pray together with boldness.

**Hear us, Lord God Almighty! Hear the cries of your people. Hear the words we speak now in our hearts to you. Hear the names of the people we know need your help right now [name them]. Shelter them, Lord. Ease their suffering and hardship. Rally us to help them where we can. Bring them your peace. We pray, with boldness, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.**

Sunday 6 November 2022

# From what we know to what will be known

by Joanne Corney

**And they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection (Luke 20:36).**

Read Luke 20:27–38

In my faith journey, I have found times of wonder and deep and rich benefits from investigating cultural and original language insights when reading the Bible. Wonderful also have been times when a liberating or comforting sense of elevation has come to me when contemplating the reading. Such times are a gift – often simpler, gentler, not driven by my effort but deep in the impact on my faith experience. Such a space has been mine as I’ve considered today’s reading.

In this reading, we see discussion stemming from a set line of questioning. A question set on a possible scenario involving a circumstance of marriage, widowhood, childlessness, enforced responsibility and ownership – a question that touches on both obligations for now and a wondering of how these subsequent actions reach forward for eternity. Seemingly valid questions of that time as influenced by social order, culture and the governmental model.

Nowhere, though, is it noted by the questioners about the human experience of being immersed in such circumstances – relational love and the loss of a brother or spouse, recurrent loss and grief to the woman and to themselves as brothers, the pain of childlessness if a child has been hoped for, or the two-way gift of kindness – and how it can bountifully bless the giver and receiver if kindness is responsive to need and not offered due to perceived obligation or as a transaction. The questioning seems to have been loaded, but innately, it launches from a platform of obligation – this was a focus, not the heart’s toll.

Jesus responds and takes it to a different platform – the space of eternity, of which we, as yet, have no firsthand experience. As we journey in faith in this life, eternity can be a space that can seem almost familiar but not quite. From this space, Jesus reminds us of what will be eternal. He puts eternity into descriptions that we can begin to grasp on some level as we all know something of death and, generally, we have a perception of angels and have each experienced childhood. He then amps up, taking our focus to God as Father and reminds us of the core place in the Christian faith of resurrection. What a wondersome lift from what we now know to what we believe will be known.

**Merciful God, in our burdens of responsibility and obligations, please help us to do well with what is before us. As it is of help to us, please bless us with comfort and hope from considering ‘always’ with you. In the name of Christ, Amen.**

Joanne Corney is an active member of the LCANZ in Queensland. She has served over many years in voluntary parish pastoral care, ministry and development, and representative roles. During the past seven years, she has worked in the delivery of aged-care chaplaincy for Lutheran Services. Joanne’s areas of service in the church stem from her varied professional roles in healthcare and personal roles in life.