

MY EASTER DISCOVERY

A makeshift stage, someone “plonking” away on an old piano, not a single laser beam or flashing light show, no sound equipment or great actors, just a group of youngsters with a message they hoped would touch hearts and transform lives.

Katy Spakman was 14 when she attended this amateur production put on by a local church – and it changed her life.

Up till that point she was a little girl lost. The product of a broken home, she says she was “on the road to hell” by the time she hit her early teens.

“I was from a non-Christian home and it was not a very pleasant home,” she tells the YouTube channel WhyJesus.

“My dad left when their marriage broke up. I was three or four years old and that left me with a void in my life.

“Before I was 15 I started to get involved with parties. I mixed with ‘the cool kids’ at school and was mucking around with my boyfriend. I was really not on a good track.”

Even so, Katy remembers she used to pray. She attended a Catholic school and so she knew about God and the Bible.

“I would whisper prayers to this Father who was far away,” she shares.



Katy Spakman made a surprising discovery at an Easter camp when she was 14 years old. Photo: Facebook/spakmank

“—
Whoa,
He did
this for
me?
—”

“I had a soft heart towards God but I didn’t know Him. Even though I talked to Him and asked Him things and needed Him in my life, I didn’t know Him.”

Perhaps it was this early sensitivity to God that made 14-year-old Katy say yes when a classmate invited her to a youth camp for

Easter, where the highlight would be a passion play. Passion plays depict the trial, suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

“I remember really enjoying the atmosphere at the camp,” Katy says.

“I could feel the difference in the people and the warmth towards me. I felt really loved.”

However, when the invitation was made for people to “give their lives to Jesus” Katy blanched.

“I was trying to be mature; I was 14 and trying to put on my best voice and I said, ‘I respect what your beliefs are but that sounds a bit too radical for me. That’s not really my style.’

“I didn’t even know what that meant to give my life to Jesus! It sounded so foreign. I was happy in my worldly life.”

Not wanting to be rude, Katy stayed on till the final night of the camp – the night of the drama.

The play, which was interactive, began with a re-enactment of the Last Supper, where Jesus broke bread and handed it out to everyone.

As Katy handed the make-believe bread to the person next to her, “things got weird”.

“I had a supernatural experience where I could feel bread in my hand.

“And then [I had a vision that] the person who was playing Jesus became Jesus and suddenly the Holy Spirit opened my eyes and I wasn’t in that room anymore.

“I was actually in an encounter where I went to Calvary [the place Jesus was crucified].

I watched Him getting whipped, I watched the crown of thorns go on His head.

“By the time I got to the cross I was in love with Jesus.

“I’m like, ‘Whoa, He did this for me?’”

Katy dissolved into tears.

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The day death died

BY ANDREW HALLOWAY

DID you know that your greatest enemy has been defeated?

Death has been conquered – and it all happened back on the first Easter Sunday.

We’ve all had some gloomy reminders recently that death is a reality, whether through the Covid pandemic or the wars and other tragic events around the world. But death no longer has the victory over us, it is NOT the end!

That’s why Easter should be a party, not a funeral!

Invite everyone, get the music on, and get dancing on the grave of death – because we no longer have to fear it. I say again, it is NOT the end.

Yes, Jesus died, but after a couple of days to show He was truly dead, He came back to life on the third day! And with Him He brought the invitations for all of us to a party in heaven that will never end.

When He rose from the dead, Jesus guaranteed that we too can defeat death. How, you ask? He came back to tell us – and He’s the only one who has.

That’s what turned the world upside down 2,000 years ago as Christianity exploded onto the scene, as ordinary people encountered a living Jesus who could transform their lives.

Yes, we die physically, but – if we put our lives in Jesus’ nail-scarred hands – we can live through death and enjoy a whole new life, forever. That’s why Jesus came. Not just to teach us how to live right, important though that is, but to give us eternal life.

That’s why we can call Good Friday “Good”. It was the awful day that Jesus was tortured and executed, but it was also the day death died.

Jesus’ death opens up new life to all who will believe, and His resurrection was the proof!

As Jesus said: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish” (John 10:28).

Have you joined the party yet?

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BACK PAGE

UNSTOPPABLE FAITH
BILLY VUNIPOLA

DON'T SETTLE FOR ALMOST

BY JOHN HUTCHINSON

THE young driver hit a tree. His car was a write off. Adding to the dilemma, it was his mother’s car.

I couldn’t believe his words. He said, “I almost made it around that bend.”

Swimming champion Kyle Chalmers almost made it at the Tokyo Olympics. He came second place to Caeleb Dressel in the 100m freestyle – finishing just 0.06 seconds behind the American winner.

But *almost* making it doesn’t make it! If you miss by a millimetre you miss by a mile. To miss by a millisecond is to miss by a minute. Those who *almost* make it don’t!

In 1911 Australian geologist Sir Douglas Mawson led a three-man expedition in Antarctica. His two companions died and over 30 days and 160km, Mawson made his way back to base. He *almost* made it back in time but not quite! When he arrived back at base, he saw the expedition’s ship leaving for Australia – leaving



“Almost” isn’t quite the same as a hole in one! Stock photo.

him another year in the freezing Antarctica.

Almost got him

An assassin’s attempt on the life of Adolf Hitler *almost* succeeded. He had carefully studied Hitler’s routine and set up a bomb in a wooden pillar near to where the dictator made regular speeches.

Hitler’s address, however, was shorter than usual and he left

before the bomb went off.

The would-be assassin *almost* made it to freedom but was intercepted by a curious border guard. How different the world would be if the assassin succeeded!

Almost certain

I was intrigued by the word “almost” in the chapter headings of *The God Delusion* – a book written by atheist Richard Dawkins. The heading in chapter four said, *Why there almost certainly is no God.*

What an admission!

● Turn to page 3

My Easter discovery

● From page 1

“At that point I realised I was a sinner and that I needed a Saviour. And I said, ‘If You died for me, I will live for You.’”

Her initial reluctance disappeared, to be replaced by a lifelong commitment.

“I knew I was signing up my whole life to Jesus to give every day to Him.

“I had that feeling that my life wasn’t my own anymore, like I had been bought with a price. I was giving my life back to the One who bought it.

“It was powerful and I’ve never been the same since.

“He was no longer a distant person; He was real and right in front of me. I still can’t get over it.

“In 24 hours I went from, ‘Yeah thanks but no thanks’ to being totally in love with Jesus.”

Today Katy and her husband Daniel, who live in Alice Springs, devote their lives to spreading the gospel (the good news that Jesus died for our sins).

They are volunteers with Iris Global, an international missionary organisation that provides humanitarian aid in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

Katy holds a special place in her heart for that Easter camp so many years ago.

“God uses anything and anyone and my encouragement to anyone with a dream to spread the gospel is that God will use your humble offering.

“He’s not asking you to give what you don’t have.”

Quoting the miracle of the loaves and fish from Matthew 14:13-21, she says: “Just give what you have and let Jesus make it into something miraculous and beautiful.” ●



Katy and her husband Daniel. Photo: Facebook/spakmank

I FOUND PEACE AND PURPOSE

Ah, love. Sometimes it hits you like a thunderbolt between the eyes, sometimes it hits you while you’re sitting on a tram minding your own business.

This is what happened to Charles Rockefeller, who was on his way to somewhere in central Melbourne when three young women stepped onto his tram.

“I thought one of them in particular was absolutely beautiful and this thought went through my mind ‘one day you’re going to marry that beautiful lady,’” says the retired dentist.

That was in 1980. Up to that point in his life the university student was a hard-drinking party animal.

“I enjoyed the freedom of university life,” he says.

“There were plenty of parties and drunken pranks.

“Drinking heavily on weekends to relax and feel socially comfortable became routine for me.

“In my drunken state I would wander back to my university room all alone and then have this empty, unsatisfied and uncertain feeling in my heart. I thought to myself ‘surely there must be more to life than drinking, girls and parties.’”

Charles was nine when his family left his hometown of Ohio in the United States and moved to Australia.

They felt life was getting too dangerous after the assassinations of John F Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. The Vietnam War was raging.

That violence hit far too close for comfort when his grandmother was shot during an armed robbery and their family bakery was burned to the ground. That triggered the family’s move.

They settled well in Melbourne. The future looked bright for the young dentistry student – except for that nagging emptiness he felt following every booze binge.

It was on one of those sleepless nights that he read a *Full Gospel Businessmen’s Association* magazine about men whose hopeless lives had been transformed by Jesus Christ.

“One night I thought ‘Charles, you should follow Jesus Christ and become like these men who have true peace and purpose.’”

He decided he would go to church. To get there he needed to take a tram.

And on that tram he saw Leanne. Leanne got off at the same stop, turned right just like him and walked into the same church.

Now with even more incentive to attend church, Charles joined a Bible study group with her and one day while the group was singing he became “extremely emotional as I realised God loved me and had willingly sent His only Son Jesus to die for my sins so that I might have eternal life.

“Those words from John 3:16 became so real to me that one night in my dorm room I got onto my knees and confessed that Jesus Christ was the only Son of God and that He died and shed His precious blood on the at cross for my sins and that He rose from the dead.

“I asked Jesus into my life. Suddenly I had the confidence to face the future with His strength. I knew He had a plan for me.”

“What a relief I felt. I no longer



Charles Rockefeller

He has faced several life-threatening illnesses: severe liver disease, non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma when he was 38, followed by oesophageal cancer.

While he has outlived all predictions of an early death, he admits treatment, which included a bone marrow transplant from his brother, has been long, difficult and painful.

Cat scans have revealed he no longer suffers from lymphoma, but the remaining blockage in his oesophagus requires regular visits to a surgeon to open it up so that he can continue to swallow his food.

Still through these immense challenges, Charles says “Jesus has been with me.

“All of us will face various difficulties in life. My advice is not to go through life alone; go through it with Jesus.

“The best decision I ever made was to invite Him into my life. He’s my best friend; He has never left me.

“I can testify that God is good and faithful and that He has a good plan and purpose for your life.

“Just trust Him.” ●

“**Suddenly I had the confidence to face the future.**”

feared death as I had eternal life. I also felt clean, freed from the burden of wrongdoing and selfishness. My life had been all about myself.”

Charles married Leanne three years later.

“I know now that thought I had when I first saw her was from God,” he says with a grin.

Charles would need the strength of his personal faith in later years.

From no direction to finding her way

Linet tells *Challenge* that her childhood was complicated, her family life was hard and she struggled with many personal issues.

“My family never had peace,” she says. “My childhood was without direction and was full of struggles. I was a prisoner to jealousy, anger, unbelief and unforgiveness.”

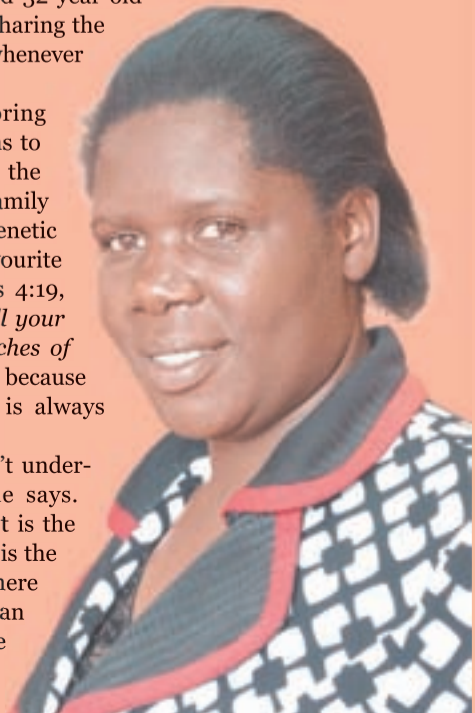
During primary school, Linet heard about God for the first time. “I attended a youth conference and I heard about Jesus Christ. As I listened to the gospel [the good news about Jesus saving us] throughout the week of the conference, I got interested in knowing Christ and I decided to become a Christian.” Linet was led in a prayer of repentance [turning away from her old life] by a pastor.

“I gave my life to God,” she says with a smile. “I had never known Christ as my provider but now I experience peace.” Linet speaks of the miraculous change in her life. “I started forgiving people, something I never used to do before. My prayers have been answered and I have experienced blessings from God and from His people. I enjoy the Lord’s kindness, joy, grace [undeserved love] and protection.”

Her decision to follow Jesus may have happened well over 20 years ago but Linet is as dedicated and passionate about living for Him today as she was then. Now the married 32-year-old works as a prison officer, sharing the good news about her Lord whenever she can.

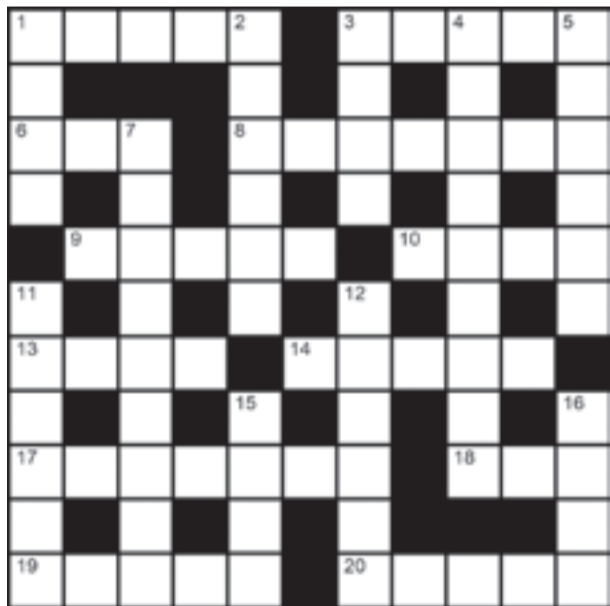
Linet has learned to bring all her worries and burdens to Jesus in prayer, including the concern she has that her family has a history of terminal genetic diseases. One of Linet’s favourite Bible verses is Philippians 4:19, “*And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus,*” because it reminds her that God is always with her.

“Sometimes, people don’t understand why I believe,” she says. “It’s hard. But Jesus Christ is the answer to our prayers and is the key to our life. In Christ, there is a peace that exceeds human understanding. In Him, we are able to win all battles!” ●



Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

- ACROSS**
- 1 Fly-fisher’s target
 - 3 Careless hurrying
 - 6 Wrinkly faced dog
 - 8 Woolly critters
 - 9 Vegetable bulb
 - 10 Wharf, pier
 - 13 Chess piece or bird
 - 14 Military trainee
 - 17 Past middle age
 - 18 Pool-testing digit!
 - 19 Walk like you own the place
 - 20 Darkest hours
- DOWN**
- 1 Oopsy on the keys
 - 2 Receptacle for infusions
 - 3 Cape of Good
 - 4 Fleshy plant
 - 5 School writings
 - 7 Early explosive
 - 11 Athens residents
 - 12 Gorge, ravine
 - 15 Horse’s slow run
 - 16 Thaw, dissolve



SOLUTIONS PAGE 11



“I know my instruments are sterilised every day, but I have no idea who does it!”

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Body image was my obsession

An unhappy childhood. A string of broken relationships. Life-threatening bulimia. Former US Marine Justin Macaluso had every reason to hate his life.

"I had a really unstable childhood," says Justin in a video on his YouTube channel.

"I moved around a lot. Between kindergarten and 12th grade I went to 10 or 11 different schools so I couldn't put down roots. At home I felt like I was constantly walking on eggshells."

He says his environment got worse as he got older and he lived with the pain of rejection, sadness and fear.

"I tried to fill that emptiness with other things in life – I thought if I found the perfect girl the emptiness would go away," he sighs. Instead what he got was break-up after break-up. He went to church a handful of times with some friends but said services left him feeling "weirded out".

"I wasn't raised in a church-going home. I grew up as an atheist and believed there was no God. The few times I did go to church I just got creeped out especially when the name of Jesus was mentioned.

"I just didn't see any evidence for God. At school we were taught evolution and the Big Bang theory so I got to the point that I just knew God didn't exist. I thought people who believed in God were stupid. If anybody mentioned the Bible or church my brain would just switch off."

After he finished school Justin joined the US Marines. Feeling he was too scrawny he got into body building – and that opened up a whole new can of worms.

"I obsessed over my body image," he shares. "Everything revolved around how I looked." Friends told him to slow down because he was "huge already". But Justin didn't see that – all he saw was his scrawny former self. "I'd say 'what are you guys talking about? I'm not huge.'"

One day, out of the blue, he saw his reflection and jerked to a stop. "I thought 'who is this person who looks like The Hulk'? And then I knew I had really gone too far." Wanting to reduce his bulk, Justin immediately went gung-ho in the other direction. He cut down on his calories and tried to stop eating junk food – but that just gave rise to a craving for the stuff. Bulimia set in. "Every time I went to a restaurant I made sure I knew where the bathroom was so I could go after the meal. I felt



Justin Macaluso

shame every time I ate something bad but I couldn't stop myself because there was always this voice in my head telling me 'It's okay. You can just throw up after.'

"My condition got out of hand very quickly. I had lost complete control. This thing had me in total bondage. I joined Overeaters Anonymous but nothing helped."

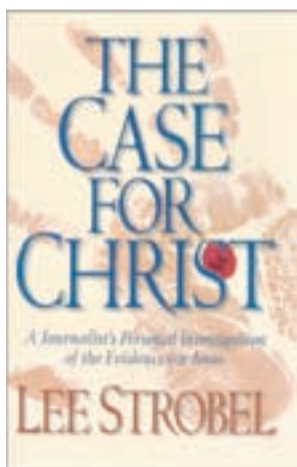
Then he met a girl. Their relationship developed quickly but being a Christian, she broke it off because of Justin's staunch atheism. As she put the phone down she said: "For what it's worth Justin, read Lee Strobel's book *A Case for Christ*."

"Okay," said Justin, but in his heart he thought: "Yeah right. I was devastated she was breaking up with me...and for what? How could she let God dictate her life?"

Yet his curiosity was piqued. He bought the book, smugly convinced it would do nothing to challenge his atheism.

He opened the book. Forty-eight hours later, he shut it, closed his eyes and committed his life to Jesus Christ.

"If you had told me that reading this book would change me I would have said absolutely no way. As an atheist I couldn't think of anything worse than being wrong about God because that would have



eternal consequences.

"But the evidence Lee Strobel presented was just overwhelming. I had mocked God my whole life and yet here He was, revealing himself to me in the pages of this book.

"All of a sudden I knew Him. Knew Him more than I knew anything or anyone else, more than I knew my own mother.

"I don't know how else to explain but I suddenly understood what it meant when people say that they've been born again. I felt like I had become a completely different person. I had been living in an upside-down world my whole life and then suddenly it got turned right side up.

"I had this deep sense of awe. It was as if I had a hidden file in the back of my mind that said 'open in case God is real'. I never thought I'd ever say this but yes, He is real."

Justin shares that there was no "lightning bolt" miracle that healed his bulimia. He still struggled with it. But one day after a particularly bad episode, he thought to himself: Hey, why don't I just pray to Jesus?

"You have to understand I was an atheist for so long I wasn't used to having a God I could pray to," he says with a chuckle. "I just said: 'Please help me Jesus.'"

Within weeks Justin was rid of those chains. "It was just through reading His Word and being renewed in my mind that He set me free."

To put it into perspective, he had tried for almost two years to get better. Nothing worked. "Now it's been 12 years since I prayed and I've never had the urge to throw up food again.

"I never thought that I would become a Christian but here I am and I owe everything to Him. I want to give hope and encouragement for fellow believers and for those that don't know Jesus. I want you to know that there's something so wonderful out there that is so much better than anything that this life and this world have to offer."

A story worth remembering

BY RUSTY WRIGHT

YOU'VE probably seen Santa Claus. But have you ever seen the Easter Bunny?

As a small child, I enjoyed visiting Santa at a local department store at Christmastime. My parents would take me downtown to the jolly bearded man in the red suit. I felt comfortable climbing into his lap, telling him my wish list and receiving a gift along with his encouraging words. He was friendly, predictable and safe.

Imagine my excitement when I learned that the Easter Bunny would be at the same department store. Neither I nor my family had ever seen the Easter Bunny. I had seen white rabbits. Those cute, cuddly little bunnies seemed so warm and innocent. I looked forward for some time to seeing the real Easter Bunny.

Yikes!

Finally, the big day came. My father took me to the store that afternoon. When we reached the Bunny's floor, I was shocked. Before me was a human-sized hare with big eyes and large, floppy ears. The creature walked on two legs like a human. He talked.

The more clearly I saw him as I approached him, the more slowly I walked. I would not get close to the furry beast. He wanted to give me a gift, but I was not cooperating. "Just throw it to me," I suggested. He tossed his present across the room, Frisbee-style.

Much as I was confused about the Easter Bunny, many folks are confused about the meaning of Easter itself. For some, it means new clothes and a chance to show them off. Others focus on eggs, candy and special meals.

Renewal

Easter is also billed as a time of renewal. It may be relatively easy to renew things outwardly – new clothes, a hairstyle, a fancy party. Renewal on the inside can be more difficult. Problems from the past can haunt one's memory. Broken relationships undermine self-esteem. Guilt over missed opportunities, pain from rejection, loneliness and anger from past hurts can sometimes create a swirling inner vortex, a psychological suction from which escape is difficult.

Where does one find inner renewal? Some look to friends or family. Counsellors and self-help books provide coping skills.

But maybe a look at the first Easter could also offer some clues. Nearly two millennia ago, a young Jewish leader fell into disfavour with established authorities. He was executed, declared dead, wrapped up like a mummy and placed in a tomb.

A large stone was rolled against the tomb's entrance and a crack unit of Roman soldiers guarded the tomb against grave robbers.

Risen?

Two days later, the stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty but the grave clothes were still in place. The Man's closest followers, most of whom had abandoned Him during his trials, reported seeing Him alive again. Many later died horrible deaths for telling people that their leader had risen from the dead.

They had been transformed from the inside and it affected every facet of their lives, giving them inner strength, freedom from guilt, love for their enemies and boldness to stand for what they believed was right. "Anyone who belongs to Christ," wrote one early believer, "has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Sometimes life's challenges can seem as scary as that huge hare seemed to me when I was a child. We don't want to get near them. Yet that first Easter still offers hope.

As Jesus really did come back from the dead, people today can find inner renewal by knowing Him personally.

As we enjoy eggs and rabbits this Easter, might that be a message worth pondering?

Rusty Wright is an author and lecturer who has spoken on six continents. He holds Bachelor of Science (psychology) and Master of Theology degrees from Duke and Oxford universities, respectively. www.RustyWright.com

Don't settle for *almost*

● From page 1

Dawkins couldn't say for certain that God doesn't exist. He would know, as many should know, the evidence tells us God does exist.

Believing in the existence of God is the most important step in coming to know God.

The Bible says in Hebrews 11:6: "...for those who come to God must believe that He is, and that He rewards those who diligently seek him."

Almost persuaded

I read a quotation in a secular magazine which said, "to be almost saved is to be totally lost."

It reminded me of King Agrippa in the New Testament before whom the imprisoned apostle Paul appeared. After hearing about Paul's faith Agrippa said, "You have almost

persuaded me to be a Christian." (Acts 26:28)

To which the prisoner replied, "I would to God, that not only you, but also all who hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except for these chains."

Paul had once been as anti-Christian as any man, but, having met the risen Christ on the Damascus Road, was so persuaded himself that all the opposition and persecution thrown at him couldn't shake him.

Jesus Christ gave His all to save you from your sins – even suffering on a Roman cross. There was no *almost* with Jesus.

Don't settle for *almost* in the issue of faith – eternity is at stake!

See the box on page 11 for assistance in how to be fully committed to Christ and saved for all of eternity.



Are you committed or interested?

IT'S IMPORTANT in life to recognise the difference between being interested and being committed. We are interested in many areas of life but that does not make us committed.

For instance, I am interested in politics. I read political biographies and follow the Australian political scene with great interest.

But I have never joined a political party, have never run for office and never involved myself in a political campaign or given out how-to-vote cards for anyone. I may be interested in politics but I am not committed.

In the areas that really matter we need to make a commitment.

That means we need to commit our time, energy, resources and skills. It is not enough to show interest in areas of importance, we need to demonstrate commitment.

This is crucially important in faith and belief.

Jesus does not ask us to be interested in following Him. He actually asks us to put everything else aside and follow Him completely.

This is really asking you to be more than interested.

It's asking you to be committed.

A HAPPY EASTER FOR JORDAN

Jordan Wilson was a popular teenager who loved to throw parties with his friends. He loved the party lifestyle and everything that went with it from girls to alcohol, to marijuana and pain pills.

"I thought that I was Superman," he told CBN. "I thought that I was invincible." Before long, Jordan was addicted to drugs, spending \$100 a day on pills. Without 20 pills a day, he suffered extreme withdrawal symptoms.

Jordan also became addicted to methamphetamines. To fund his addictions, Jordan and a friend started manufacturing and selling synthetic cannabinoids (Spice).

Eventually an informant tipped off the police about Jordan's dealing.

"When I was busted and the police picked me up and threw me on the ground, I was so obliterated from the drugs that I really couldn't grasp just how hot the water was that I was in," Jordan says.

Over the next three years, Jordan was in jail 10 times and kicked out of rehab six times.

"I knew for sure that I was going to die a drug addict," Jordan admits.

"I started shooting up. I shot up crystal meth. I was addicted to pills again. And I had no desire to continue living." Jordan's dad, Roger, was at a loss for what to do about his son. A committed Christian, he prayed for a miracle. Roger recalled his son's strong faith as a teenager, before he became consumed with girls and drugs, and walked away from God.

He prayed for Jordan to find his faith again and for God to give him the strength he needed to become sober for good. With the support of his parents, Jordan tried to stop using and began detoxing.

On Easter Sunday in 2016, Roger asked Jordan to attend church with him.

"I said, 'No, Dad, I'm sick, I'm detoxing from drugs. I can't go,'" Jordan remembers. But it was also Roger's birthday, so he asked him again to go, as a birthday present to his father.

"I was 27 years old and I didn't have a birthday gift for my dad," Jordan explains. "I thought, this is the least I can do. And so I agreed to go to church with my dad for his birthday on Easter Sunday."

During that service Jordan recalls feeling the first spark of hope he had felt in years. When the pastor invited people to dedicate their lives to Jesus, Jordan jumped out of his seat.

"As I was at that altar, I felt like God was sweeping me off my feet," Jordan shares. "I realised that this is Resurrection Sunday. Jesus Christ has risen."

Roger was over the moon. "It was absolutely, other than the day I watched him be born, the greatest day watching him give his heart back to God," Jordan's dad told CBN.

"I've never been the same since," Jordan says. "I never drank another drop. I never used another drug since that day! So now I'm closer with the Lord than I've ever been, more so than when I was a teenager. But I walk with Him and talk with Him every single day.

"If I don't get that one-on-one time with Jesus every day, I'm just not right... This relationship with Christ has taught me to love people. He has enabled me to care about people. And I realised that my life is bigger than me. I'm not the lead role in my story. He is. And realising [that] gives me a life truly worth living."

Jordan is married with two children and has written a book called, *Jesus > Drugs: The Only War Won by Surrender*. He is also the development director of a rehab facility he was once kicked out of.

"If you surrender to Christ, He'll fight for you," Jordan says to those who are in the same place he once was. He'll do what you can't do.

"As someone who tried it without Jesus, there is a big difference. You may be able to get sober without Christ, but you'll never be free without Christ. And Christ is what sets people free."



Jordan is now married with two children.

“I had no desire to continue living.”



Jordan's mug shots.

Set free in a moment

BY JANICE TEO

Standing in an ashram in India with one of the world's most notorious Hindu gurus is not generally where you would expect to find a 15-year-old Australian boy.

Yet there was Marcus McDonnell deep in the dust and sand of the Andhra Pradesh desert in an Indian monastery with Sai Baba, the self-proclaimed Indian holy man who, before his death in 2011, had been widely discredited as a fraud amidst allegations of paedophilia and trickery.

Recalling his experience, Marcus, now 40, tells *Challenge News*: "We were all gathered in the ashram when Sai Baba pointed at me and called me for a one-on-one interview.

"I closed my eyes and I felt his hands on both my shoulders. Then I felt someone approach from behind and place their hand on my right shoulder.

"An incredible peace overwhelmed me and filled the room. Then he let go of my shoulders."

Marcus opened his eyes and was shocked at what he saw. Sai Baba was nowhere near him – he was in a far corner of the room.

"His mouth was wide open and he looked terrified," Marcus continues. "Then he turned and ran out of the room. As he ran I turned around to see nobody and nothing behind me. I was very confused; I didn't know what had happened."

The teenager was not in India alone; he had been brought there by his father, who had moved into New Age spirituality after being disillusioned with the traditional church. Marcus had had some exposure to Christianity but had not pursued it.

He was seven when his parents got divorced. He lived with his father, who was often busy and left his son unsupervised for long periods. When he was 12, he lived with his mother and stepfather, who, engrossed with the family business, also left Marcus to his own devices.

"My life was extremely lonely," he confesses. "I didn't know how to do relationships well due to my upbringing and I carried a lot of pain and resentment.

"This baggage led me to binge-drinking as a teen, drug use, and eventually, a stint of homelessness."

Perhaps that was why Marcus' father, seeing how lost his son was, brought him to India to experience what he called "alternate spiritual practices".

But four years after the trip that was supposed to answer all his questions, Marcus was as befuddled as ever.

"My life was a mess," he says. "The New Age teachings proved to be empty lies and false promises – a carrot dangled but never attained."

In 2000, the 19-year-old was homeless and on drugs.

His mother, an alcoholic, had burnt his possessions.

"It's a strange feeling to have everything taken from you," he says sadly. "You feel powerless, humiliated and very alone."



Marcus McDonnell with his wife, Racheal.

Every night Marcus would go to bed hoping to wake up feeling less forlorn. Then one night he suddenly remembered his encounter in India with the presence that changed the atmosphere in the room – and seemed to terrify Sai Baba.

"I remembered the hand on my shoulder and the peace that enveloped me, the peace I had been chasing but had not been able to find. Whoever that Presence was, its power had ousted the guru from his own room.

"I remember I felt 'owned' by that Presence and that was what I wanted. I asked myself 'what or who was that?'"

Almost immediately he saw a picture of Jesus in his mind.

"I was startled and I said out loud, 'THAT WAS JESUS?' "And at that very moment I said 'Jesus, if that was You, well then I've been wrong for a long time and I give myself to You.'

"Immediately, a feeling I can only describe as liquid gold ran through me like a waterfall, hit the bottom and came rushing back out of me. I was set free from that moment. No more drugs or life-controlling issues."

Marcus, who now pastors a church in New South Wales, says his life has

changed for the better in countless ways.

"My bitterness and rejection have fallen off. I had lived with this ball of pain for so long but in one moment it was removed. I can love and trust people once again and not feel undone when they let me down.

"As God healed me, the need to self-medicate and take drugs left. I also understood my parents were just hurting people like me, and the blame I held against them fell away."

“My bitterness and rejection have fallen off.”

"Many people say you should be open to God's plan for your life, but I say there should be no other plan than His!

"Since I've committed my life to Him I have seen miracle after miracle – lives, including my own,

have been transformed.

"For years I didn't share my story as I didn't think people would understand or believe it and it would reflect poorly on myself.

"Now I don't care. I am more than happy to look foolish if it means even only one person is reached. All glory to Jesus."

His life verse is, "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46: 10).

"The revelation of this word will feed you forever," he says with a smile.

"God undertook the most dramatic rescue operation in cosmic history. He determined to save the human race from self-destruction, and He sent His Son Jesus Christ to salvage and redeem them. The work of man's redemption was accomplished at the cross."

Billy Graham



Can all those scientists be wrong?

BY GORDON HOWARD
(CREATION.COM)

When creationists suggest to the average person that evolution is not scientifically viable, a common response is: “How can all those scientists be wrong?”

This is understandable. Most popular books, magazines, TV programs, movies and even ordinary conversation seem to constantly confirm the Big Bang theory.

The natural origin of life from primeval ooze and the evolution of all living things from some original organism are simply accepted by the scientists.

It is believed that the only people to question these things are religious fanatics or the scientifically illiterate. So, can “all those scientists” be wrong? History certainly says they can.

Without confirming data from experiments, or attempts at falsifying a scientific theory by antagonists’ observations and alternative theories, a scientist’s ideas can be strongly coloured by philosophical bias.¹

Like anyone else, they can hold a belief very strongly even in the face of strongly opposing evidence.²

Perhaps the best known scientists who went ‘against the trend’ were Galileo and Copernicus.

The ‘majority of scientists’, who were their contemporaries, believed the earth was the centre of the universe, and all the heavenly bodies revolved around it. As with modern scientists and evolution, their belief was based on a philosophical idea, not observation. And they were wrong.

Galileo’s famous ‘fight’ with the church was not with the Bible, but

with church leaders who followed what the scientists of their day, and thus the whole scientific community, held as scientific truth.³

They held this belief even though continuously improving observations and calculations showed that there must be a flaw in the universally-accepted idea.

It took a long time and much-published evidence from the newly-developed telescopes before the scientific community began to accept that the Earth was not the absolute rotational centre of the heavenly bodies.

Today, scientists tell us that our universe burst into existence from nothing for no reason with a big bang. Is it not possible that they could also be wrong?

‘Phlogiston’ was used in the late 17th and early 18th centuries to explain how substances burned or rusted. It was believed to be a substance contained in combustible materials which came out when the object burned.

It took the persistent work of several leading scientists of the day to demonstrate that burning was a chemical reaction. Again, the majority were wrong.⁴

Today most scientists believe that the basic chemicals of life (such as proteins) put themselves together in defiance of experimentally established chemical probabilities. Is it possible these scientists may also be wrong?

That wrong ideas can persist pervasively for hundreds of years is evident



Stock photo

In spite of mounting evidence to the contrary, it was common medical practice up to the late 19th century.

Again, they were wrong! Their whole view of the cause of disease was wrong, and all because they believed another scientist’s theories without question. This is like many scientists today who believe in evolution for no better reason than that other trusted scientists believe it.

And what about vermin? Where do they come from? Do cockroaches, rats, and maggots just

‘appear’ out of rotting vegetable matter and animal waste, or even from rocks?

For a long time it was believed that they did, even by famous thinkers such as Aristotle. The idea was called ‘spontaneous generation’ and regarded as a fact into the mid-19th century.⁶

It took a creationist scientist, Louis Pasteur, to prove that life comes only from life, a process called ‘biogenesis’. Those who believed in spontaneous generation were wrong.

Nevertheless many scientists today believe in evolution. Can so many be wrong? History says ‘yes’. Mounting evidence in genetics, molecular biology, information theory, cosmology and other areas say ‘yes’.

These scientists believe in naturalism in spite of the evidence against it.

They don’t wish to confront the idea of a Creator, but, as in the past, honest appraisal of the evidence of operational science will prove them wrong; the Creator will be vindicated (Romans 1:18-22).

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IS A ROSE ALWAYS A ROSE?

PETER’S CORNER WITH PETER MIKULA

RECENTLY I visited the National Rose Trial Garden of Australia, which is in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens. This garden exists for the local rose industry to work out which roses are best suited to our climate. Many roses are bred in the northern hemisphere and do not grow well in Australia.

We saw an amazing range of flowers, of so many beautiful colours, petals, shapes, patterns, and perfume. Sometimes bees zoomed by us, ignoring us as they buzzed from flower to flower, collecting nectar and pollinating the flowers as they passed by.

These roses are hybrids, meaning that a breeder has carefully cross-pollinated two different parent plants, and grown offspring plants from those seeds, to try to get a desirable feature in the offspring plant. Breeders may travel far and wide to buy a desired plant for their work. This takes years of patient effort, with foolproof control of pollination, growing many new plants, and keeping track of the results.

Sometimes the offspring plant can be disappointing – for example it could have fantastic perfume, but ugly flowers. But eventually, breeders may get a good mix of features. Some of the trial garden roses were labelled as gold medal winners, or received other awards, meaning that they scored very well for habit, hardiness and vigour, flowering qualities, and pest and disease tolerance. We learn from this that the breeding process artificially selects the genes that produce the desired features. These roses would be unlikely to develop naturally in the wild.

The rose label tags in the trial garden gave the name of the ‘cultivar’, the name of the breeder, the year produced,

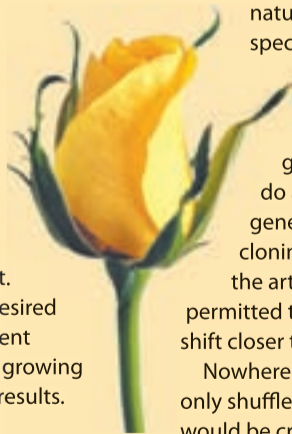
and in which country. A cultivar in this case is a rose plant grown from a stem cutting, a graft, or a tissue culture. It is not grown from seeds, but is cloned from an existing plant. The clone is a faithful copy of the original. Breeders know that trying to grow from cultivar seeds doesn’t work: the usual result is a plant that reverts to be like one of the parent plants, or is otherwise very different.

We learn from this that the desired features are preserved only by planned artificial cloning. If natural selection were allowed to occur, the special features would likely disappear, as the plant reverts towards the wild form. So the lesson from the trial rose garden is that a lot of intelligent, planned effort has gone into breeding and cloning. Breeders do artificial selection to filter the original rose genes to showcase the ones they desire, and use cloning so that other genes cannot contaminate the artificial selection. Natural selection, if it was permitted to occur, undoes that work, allowing plants to shift closer to the wild original gene pool.

Nowhere in all this are new genes created – genes are only shuffled. This is not evolution – if it was, novel genes would be created. We often hear or read that natural selection is a major driver of evolution, but the science of the trial garden shows us the truth is the opposite – that there is no evolution, and that natural selection reverts plants back nearer to their original form. This is exactly what we read in Genesis 1:11-12, that plants were created by God to reproduce according to their kinds. A rose is a rose is always a rose.

I hope these words help you, as they have me, in your journey to surely trust the Creator of the awesomely beautiful rose!

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



Believe it or not

BY CREATION MINISTRIES INTERNATIONAL

Ants’ pupae not so useless after all

IT HAS long been thought that the pupae of ants were the deadwood of the insect world but it turns out they are useful after all.

The pupa, an immobile stage in the development of ants (and many other insects), produces a protein-rich, sugary milk-like fluid.

Adult ants consume this fluid and will take larvae to the pupa so that they can drink it too. The fluid is likely produced from recycling some of the products of when a larva sheds its outer layer (moult) to become a pupa.

This shows that even as an immobile sack of flesh, an ant performs a role that benefits the colony by providing nutrients.

Feeding off this fluid, thus preventing its buildup, also benefits the pupa, which would otherwise be at risk of both drowning and fungal contamination.

This is another example of incredible design that optimises the efficiency of the system.

Naddaf, M., *Pupating ants make milk—and scientists only just noticed*, nature.com, 30 Nov 2022.



Could all the animals have fit on the ark?

At an average size of a sheep, Noah could have fit all the animals into 156 railway stock cars. The ark had the capacity, according to the dimensions given in the Bible, to hold 522 stock cars. So, yes, all the animals and the provisions for them would have easily fit on the ark.

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YOUTH TRUTH

I found something better than a rush

American singer and actor Carlos PenaVega is well-known for his role as Carlos Garcia in the Nickelodeon television series *Big Time Rush*.

However, he is becoming equally well-known for his role in an even bigger production – sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“I grew up Catholic,” Carlos told *Faithwire* in an interview. “I did like the whole first communion ... all that stuff, but it never meant anything. It was just ticking a box.”

“I knew of God, but I didn’t have a relationship with Him.”

He revealed that he had dated a Christian girl in college and would go to church with her occasionally, but still felt like all he was doing was ticking the right boxes and then “moving on”.

It wasn’t until Carlos, in his own words, “hit rock bottom” that he got serious about his faith.

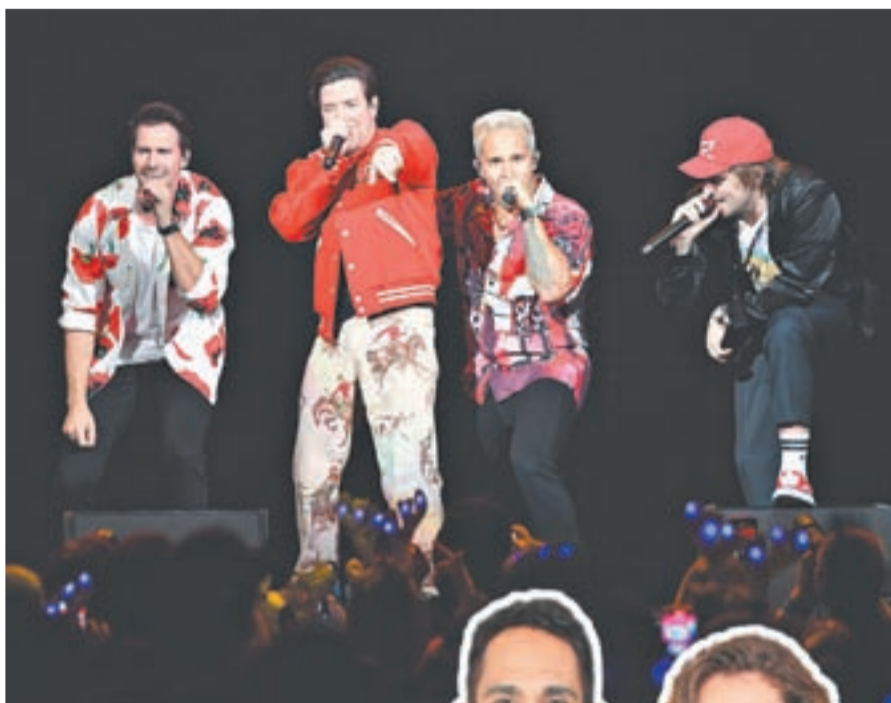
“I was smoking a lot of weed,” he recalled. “I was drinking, and I was sleeping around.”

“I locked myself in my house, and I was ordering food, and I was just miserable. I was in a really dark place. I had broken up with a girlfriend and done some things I wasn’t proud of. I knew that there was something more for me.”

In the midst of his doldrums, he reached out to a friend named Andrew and asked him why he was always so happy.

“He said to me ‘Oh, man, I got Jesus,’ and I immediately hung up the phone. I didn’t want Jesus to be the answer.”

Andrew did finally manage to convince Carlos to go to church with him one Sunday – and that’s when



TOP: Carlos PenaVega (second from right) performing with fellow *Big Time Rush* members James Maslow, Logan Henderson and Kendall Schmidt. (Photo by Gerardo Mora/Getty Images for iHeartRadio).

RIGHT: Carlos and Alexa PenaVega. (Photo by Paul Archuleta/Getty Images)



everything changed. The pastor told the congregation all about his life before he met God. He said: “I was smoking drugs; I was sleeping around.” Carlos was stunned – “that was me

too! He preaches his whole sermon, literally directly into my soul and after it finishes, I was just like ‘this is what I want.’”

As a result of what he heard, Carlos surrendered his life to Jesus and everything changed. His whole motivation for living was completely turned around.

“From then on it’s just like my heart was pierced and I was ready to go. Everything that I’ve done since then, my first instinct is ‘what would Jesus do?’ and ‘is what I’m doing for the kingdom of God?’”

It is not always an easy job. Carlos admits it’s a struggle to follow Christ in a world that hates God.

“I always tell people that Christianity is not convenient,” he says. “It’s the easiest decision but the hardest thing that I’ve ever had to do is walk this walk, because you are hit with so many obstacles.”

He and his wife, actress Alexa PenaVega, have penned their faith journey in a book titled *What if Love is the Point: Living for Jesus in a Self-Consumed World?*

Carlos told *Faithwire* that being successful in Hollywood is no longer his main focus – instead he wants to concentrate on sharing the Gospel.

“I always tell people that acting, singing all this stuff to me – producing, writing – it’s a hobby.”

“My job is to spread God’s love to everyone ... That’s my job. Everything else is a hobby.”



Josie Luke

I now know fatherly love

BY JOSIE LUKE

As a child, I was sexually abused by a number of different men. This abuse, alongside my biological father’s absence, led to me to seek out male affection the only way I knew how: sex. Of course, this was emotionally and spiritually destructive – and with time, I began to self-harm and self-sabotage. I also developed severe depression and anxiety, which left me feeling trapped, broken, and hopeless.

One day, I lost control of my thoughts. My mind was filled with thoughts of suicide, gore, panic, and fear. My family never went to church or talked about Jesus, but in my desperation, I started praying. I told God things I’d never told anyone and in return, the Spirit [the unseen presence of God] began to move in my life. In that moment, the Lord touched me and I felt His peace unlike anything I’d ever experienced. For the first time, I felt alive!

During this encounter, God awakened my desire to know Him. I suddenly found myself wanting to pray more and read the Bible. As I went deeper with Him, I began to see just how much He loved me. I realised that His presence had always been there and would always be there, contrary to the lies of the enemy. Not only did the Lord open my eyes to His truth, but He also sent a community of Jesus-loving people to help me walk with Him.

I never thought I’d experience fatherly love, but I’ve found that in Christ. Because of Christ’s death and resurrection, I now know my heavenly Father... my true Father, who loves me so much that He sent his Son to die for me! Despite my past! Don’t believe the lie that your past or present sins are too much for God. If you put your trust in Him, He will meet you where you are. He CAN and WILL wash you clean and free you from sin’s grip. And no matter your pain, He is with you; “*The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit*” (Psalm 34:18). He’s a good, good Father!

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

“
For the first time, I felt alive!
”

nudge WITH KARL FAASE

How to be happy

IN HIS book with the clever title *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart*, Gordon Livingstone reflects on happiness. He says that in his years as a professional therapist, many clients have wanted him to make them happy. Livingstone tells them:

“The good news is that we have effective treatments for the symptoms of depression. The bad news is that medication will not make you happy. Happiness is not simply the absence of despair.”

He says that all of us need three qualities in life to be happy. Firstly, someone to love, secondly something to do and thirdly something to look forward to. If we have these three traits we are well on the way to happiness.

Here is why Christian belief can make such a difference: God loves us and gives us the opportunity to love.

We are gifted by God with the opportunity to serve others, and to make a positive contribution to our world. And thirdly, Christians have eternal security promised in Jesus.

God doesn’t promise an easy life but God does give us what we need for a joyful life.

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lifestyle and entertainment



Easter hot cross buns

Ingredients

625g plain flour	80g caster sugar
20g fresh yeast (or 1½ tsp fast-action)	
275ml milk	1 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons ground mixed spice	
1 medium egg	85g mixed dried fruit

Preparation

1. First pour milk into two mugs. Take one mug and heat it up in the microwave for a few seconds (the milk can't be too cold or too hot – lukewarm is the right temperature). Add fresh yeast and a tablespoon of sugar. Mix. In the second mug, mix the milk with one egg until well combined. Set both mugs aside for later.
2. Sift the flour in a large bowl. Add caster sugar, salt, ground mixed spice and mix until well combined. Pour in the contents of both mugs (make sure the fresh yeast has formed a foam – if not, then wait a bit longer). Now using a wooden spoon combine all the ingredients. Transfer onto a floured surface and knead for 5 minutes to get elastic dough.
3. Grease the same bowl with some oil and place the dough inside. Cover with a clean kitchen towel and let it rise in a warm place for 1 hour.
4. Once the dough has risen, transfer it onto the floured surface and using your fist, knock it down. Now add dried fruit in the middle of the dough and start bringing the edges towards the middle (like if you wanted to cover the fruits). Start kneading slowly and knead until the fruits have moved around (you should be able to see or feel that the fruit is spread throughout the dough).
5. When ready, stretch and flatten the dough (use a rolling pin, if needed). Using a cookie cutter cut out about 15-18 pieces. Roll them into balls. If you end up with cut-offs simply form balls out of them.
6. Place on a baking tray lined with baking paper and cover with a kitchen towel. Let them rise for 1 hour.
7. Once risen, you can either make crosses with flour (and water) or wait until they are cooked and use icing sugar (and water) instead. In both cases the mixtures should be quite thick but still easy to pipe (always use less water than flour/sugar).
8. Bake them in a preheated oven at 200°C for 15 minutes or until baked through.
9. Serve cold, warm or toasted with butter and jam! Enjoy!

A LOVE LIKE NO OTHER

When David Oyelowo was a teenager, a girl he had a crush on asked him for a date to the theatre. David agreed and, while the relationship didn't work out, his love for acting blossomed from there. From humble beginnings in roles in that same theatre, the British actor's career has grown to starring in major motion pictures such as *Selma*, *Jack Reacher* and *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. He has also been nominated for Golden Globe and Emmy awards and was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his services to drama.

In 2020, David made his directorial debut with *The Water Man*. The film also starred his wife, Jessica, who also composed and performed several songs for the movie.

The couple met at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art when she was 17 and David was 19.

"We became friends for quite a while and it became clear that we were just kidding ourselves and we got married," David told *The Independent*. The pair bonded over their Christian faith and the fact that Jessica's grandparents had been Christian missionaries and David's grandparents were converted to Christianity by missionaries in Nigeria. David was raised attending a Baptist church with his family.

"At the age of 16 I realised that I was pretty much piggy-backing on my parents' faith," he says. "So I did this really naive, odd thing which was to say, 'Okay God, if You exist, I'm going to go to a different church because I find mine very boring, and if You don't turn up for me in three months I'm done.' And for me He turned up in a very palpable, undeniable way. I literally heard God speak to me about how much He loved me. That voice never abated. Like any relationship, it becomes deeper. It's a hard thing

to explain – it's like explaining love to someone who has never fallen in love."

David now prays to God for wisdom when choosing roles. "Sometimes I don't like the answer, but sometimes it's when He crosses my will that it is the most useful," he says.

In an interview with the *Christian Post*, Jessica explains what *The Water Man's* key theme of sacrificial love means for her and David: "What we believe personally is that we live once, we die once, we're judged once," she shares. "If we're with Jesus [then] heaven is the only place we can be. He is the key, He is the way, He is the truth, He is the life. There is no way to the Father except through him."

David and Jessica are now based in the United States. They have been married for more than 20 years and have four children. •



David and Jessica Oyelowo at the 91st Annual Academy Awards in 2019. (Photo by Steve Granitz/WireImage)



Surprised by Oxford movie: Remediating broken relationships

BY RUSTY WRIGHT

EVER feel awkward opening yourself emotionally in a relationship? Got any family issues that make trusting others difficult? Does that affect your social life, job, or home life? Do you ever use work, studies, or accomplishments to bolster your self-image when, inside, you're hiding from others? Perhaps you'll resonate with this film's protagonist.

Carolyn Drake, a brilliant student, receives a full scholarship to pursue her academic holy grail, an Oxford University doctorate. Headstrong, determined, and deeply wounded by family desertion, she struggles with fears, love needs and relationship complexities.

Surprised by Oxford, based on a true story, conveys Carolyn's journey to reconcile her troubled family experience with her desires for friendship, romance, and finding her life's purpose. The film's breathtaking Oxford scenery complements its focus on reason, skepticism, romance, humor, sorrow, and fulfillment.

Daddy's gone

"Caro," as Carolyn is nicknamed, announced as a young child that her life's desire was "a doctorate." Her childhood was difficult. In some ways, she loved her father, but a sheriff's arrest and domestic conflict removed him from her family. He was seldom home. Whenever he returned, so did trouble.

Caro mistrusted men, threw herself into her studies, and sought security in her accomplishments to hide herself from close relationships that might bring pain. Into her Oxford life comes a male student she calls "TDH" (tall, dark, and handsome).



TDH (Ruairi O'Connor) and Caro (Rose Reid). Photo Chris Cox.

Though initially guarded, Caro warms to his friendship but makes her independence clear, sometimes in humorous ways. She rejects his chivalrous courtesies. As they walk together on Oxford sidewalks, when he politely shifts positions to walk on the traffic side, she counters by maneuvering back to the traffic side.

Relative truth? Absolutely sure?

Caro enjoys Oxford's diverse social and cultural opportunities, and her precise logic and courage guide her interaction with her classmates, TDH, and professors. At a public lecture, a distinguished scholar asserts that truth is relative. Caro asks him

“**Something is missing in my life.**”

publicly, if all truth is relative, why should they believe him? By his own reasoning, his denial of absolutes cannot be absolutely true. As she and TDH grow closer, Caro finds herself opening up to him, in sometimes scary ways. You see, TDH's father is a pastor. In her memoir, which inspired the film, Caro notes similarities with the famous Dusty Springfield song, that the only one who could ever reach her was the *Son of a Preacher Man*. But she says, "I had no real

need of believing in men, God incarnate or otherwise."

TDH respects her faith-skepticism and sympathises with her psychological distress, while encouraging her to consider looking outside her humanity for ultimate security. Caro peppers TDH with important questions such as: Why do men treat women so poorly? How could a loving God allow evil and suffering? Why should I believe the Bible? How do we know Jesus is who he claimed to be?

Testing men

"Testing men," she says in her memoir, "was one of my little hobbies." But she feels "something is missing in my life," so she keeps searching. In the film, TDH recommends CS Lewis' *Surprised by Joy*. Caro found intriguing the argument that Jesus' claim to deity logically allowed just three possibilities for his true nature: he was either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord.

She decides to dig deeper. Along the way, she grapples with her emotional insecurities and family conflicts, reflecting that, "I would have traded every accomplishment for a close relationship with my father." She experiences a roller coaster relationship with TDH.

Reason? Romance? Reconciliation? I won't spoil these outcomes for you.

Surprised by Oxford had me reminiscing about my own time there, as well as my own psychological struggles, relationship rides, emotional intelligence development (still learning), and faith skepticism. An entertaining, thought-provoking, moving film.

This article first appeared on WashingtonExaminer.com

Rusty Wright is an author and lecturer who has spoken on six continents. He holds Bachelor of Science (psychology) and Master of Theology degrees from Duke and Oxford universities, respectively. www.RustyWright.com



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BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

Where does the question of suffering take you?

BY ROB FURLONG

THE story is told of an ancient holy man who sought to raise his child by shielding him from the influence of evil and suffering in the world. He determined that if he could obtain the ashes from the fire of a home that had not known suffering, he would bring them to his house as a protective charm for his son. He searched many months for such a home but found none, eventually returning home without the ashes, but certainly a wiser man.

No one is exempt from suffering, not even kings. Thousands of years ago, King David wrote a song of lament, crying out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

There is nothing from the life of David that explains what motivated him to write these words, but what is clear is his feeling that God had rejected him.

Consider how he described his emotions:

"Why have you abandoned me?"
It's a raw and honest cry of grief

which does not spring from David's bitterness, but from his confusion that he believed God had forsaken him. For David, it felt as if God's protective presence had been withdrawn and his enemies were closing in quickly.

"Where are you God?" he screams.

This column is about building better relationships, so this Easter I'm asking you:

"How is your relationship with God?"

Does it feel distant, as if He has abandoned you and is not listening to you?

It may surprise you to learn that a careful reading of the Bible reveals that people – the great and the small, rich, or poor, popular, or insignificant – asked God the same question on a regular basis, and they discovered it was ok to do this!

Equally surprising is the fact that the people who felt this way – abandoned by God – were regarded as being good people – why would

God allow this to happen to them?

The idea that God blesses good people and punishes those who are evil has had almost universal acceptance throughout history, but the problem is that our experience of life tells us otherwise.

Are you grappling with the feeling that you are being unfairly treated by God at this time – that He has abandoned you?

Then take heart with this: Jesus felt the same way.

One thousand years after David penned his complaint to God, Jesus uttered the same words as He hung on the cross, dying for the sins

of the world:

"My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?"

In that awful moment of suffering, Jesus felt in the depth of His being that He was alone, forsaken by His Father, but just a short time later, he cried, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" dying in peaceful and confident trust in God.

I said earlier it's okay to bring your complaint to

God, but the important thing to keep in mind is where the question takes you – to God or away from Him? Asking the question is one thing, resolving it is another.

Jesus shows us the way. We can bring our complaint to God, but having done that, we can rest and trust in His goodness, love, and grace toward us.

We can be confident He does hear us, and although the situation may not immediately turn in our favour, we can know that our Father is with us, just as He was with Jesus.

This is why Jesus died – to bring each one of us to His Father – to restore our broken relationship with Him.

"How is your relationship with God?" Distant, feeling like He has abandoned you?

Pour out your complaint to Him today and allow Him to lead you to the place of peace and trust in Him.

Have you asked God to heal your relationship with Him by seeking His forgiveness through Jesus? Nothing is more important! •



Stock photo

HOW DO I BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

Anyone can gain the eternal life offered through Jesus Christ

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

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

ADMIT

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

BELIEVE

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

COMMIT

Here is an example of how you can pray.

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

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

What now?

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

AS A NEXT STEP : Please send me: Bible Some 'starting off' literature Information on a helpful church

I have prayed the prayer [ABOVE]

* Please tick and write clearly *

Name _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Email address _____

Challenge Literature Fellowship, PO Box 978, Cloverdale WA 6985
info@challengenews.org

All overseas enquiries are referred onto someone in their own country

Scan here to donate to the work of Challenge around the world.

Want to explore more?

Here are some **free**, helpful, Christian online resources:

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

Question and Answer

Q: Are there contradictions in the Bible?

A: While some claim that the Bible is full of contradictions, this simply isn't true. The number of apparent contradictions is actually remarkably small for a book of the Bible's size and scope. What apparent discrepancies do exist are more of a curiosity than a calamity. They do not touch on any major event or article of faith.

Here is an example of a so-called contradiction. Pilate ordered that a sign be posted on the cross where Jesus hung. Three of the gospels record what was written on that sign:

In Matthew: "This is Jesus, the king of the Jews." In Mark: "The king of the Jews." In John: "Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews."

The wording is different, hence the apparent contradiction. The remarkable thing, though, is that all three writers describe the same event in such detail – Jesus was crucified. On this, they all agree. They even record that a sign was posted on the cross, and the meaning of the sign is the same in all three accounts!

What about the exact wording? The gospels were originally written in the Greek language, which didn't use a quotation symbol as we do today to indicate a direct quote. The gospel writers were making an indirect quote, which would account for the subtle differences in the passages.

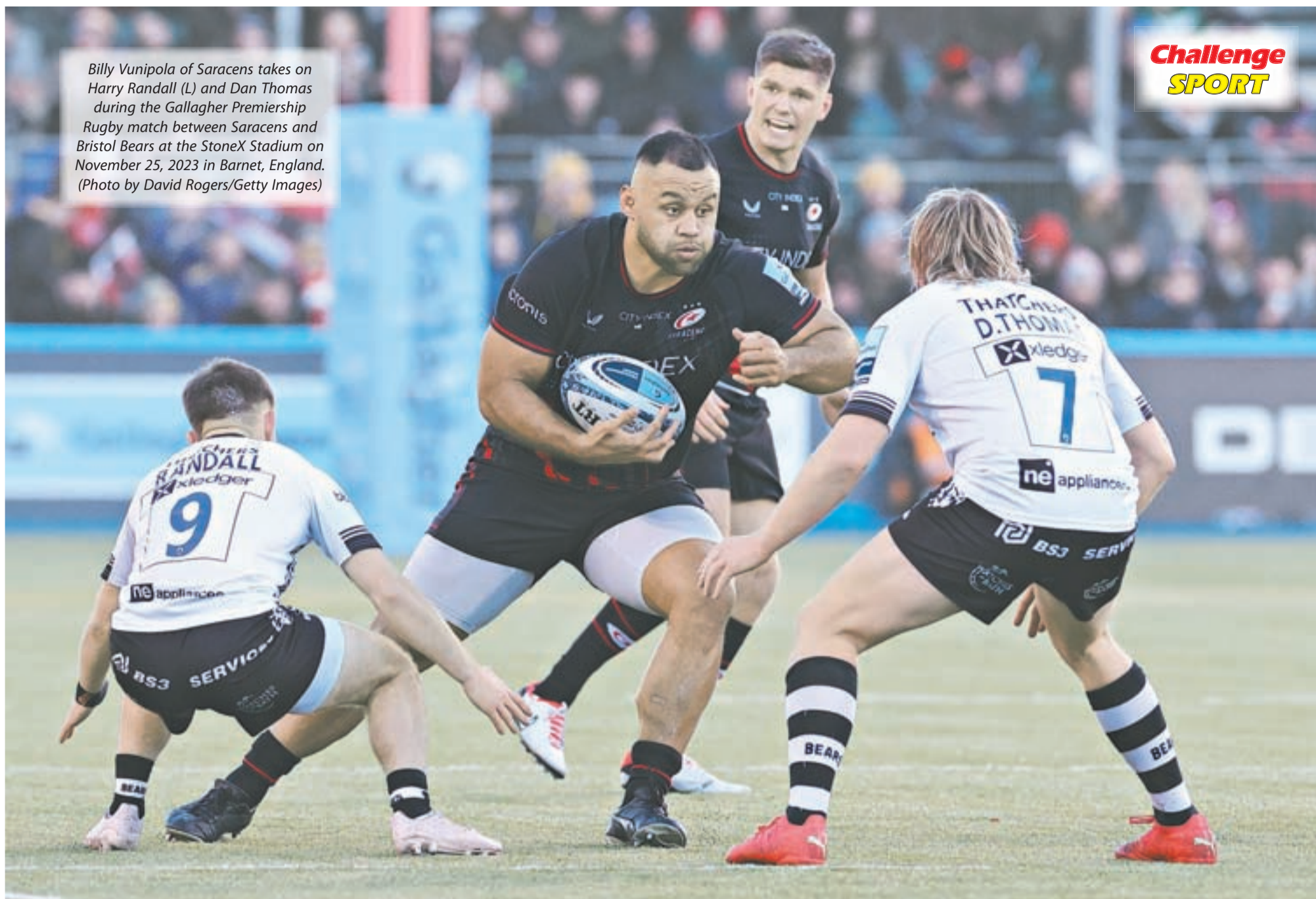
Here is another example of an apparent contradiction. Was Jesus in the tomb for two or three nights before His resurrection? Jesus said, prior to his crucifixion, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). Mark records another statement that Jesus made, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn Him to death and will hand Him over to the Gentiles, who will mock Him and spit on Him, flog Him and kill Him. Three days later He will rise" (Mark 10:33,34).

Jesus was killed on Friday and the resurrection was discovered on Sunday. How can that be three days and nights in the tomb? It was a Jewish figure of speech in Jesus' time to count any part of a day or night as a full day and night. So Friday, Saturday, and Sunday would be called three days and three nights in Jesus' culture. We speak in similar ways today – if a person were to say, "I spent all day shopping," we understand that the person didn't mean 24 hours.

This is typical of apparent contradictions in the New Testament. Most are resolved by a closer examination of the text itself or through studying the historical background. •

This article was first published on EveryStudent.com and is used with kind permission

Billy Vunipola of Saracens takes on Harry Randall (L) and Dan Thomas during the Gallagher Premiership Rugby match between Saracens and Bristol Bears at the StoneX Stadium on November 25, 2023 in Barnet, England. (Photo by David Rogers/Getty Images)



UNSTOPPABLE FAITH

Tongan rugby player Billy Vunipola is 1.88 metres tall and weighs 127 kilograms. His nickname, not surprisingly, is “Big Billy” and he’s known as “the unstoppable force” of rugby.

A big man with a big reputation, Billy has not only been in the spotlight for his sterling rugby skills – having played more than 50 times for England – but also for his Christian faith.

When fellow Christian rugby player Israel Folau became embroiled in a raging controversy and was sacked over a post on social

media about sin and hell, Billy stood up for him by “liking” his post.

He then added this comment: “There just comes a point when you insult what I grew up believing in that you just say enough is enough.”

When he went further and wrote about sin and God’s forgiveness, he was disciplined by his club and booed during a game.

He took the criticism on the chin, saying: “My Christian faith has sustained me through the ups and many downs of my life.”

He wasn’t always so fervent in his faith, admitting that it was something that was pushed on to him as a child. His mother was a church minister so he didn’t have much wiggle room to get out of church.

“To start off, we didn’t enjoy going to church,” he says.

“As kids we were made to go, but the older I’ve got and the more responsibilities – like your house, your wife, your kids – you find that the only person that can help you carry those burdens or ease those stresses in life is God.

“I know that sounds a bit shallow but that’s kind of why I started searching for God because the more I went looking for God in the Bible, the more peace He gave me with things in my life, especially my injuries.”

Speaking to Premier Christian News after his World Cup defeat, Billy said: “I guess God’s trying to

test my faith – not just when everything’s going well.

“When we lost the final, in my head, I was asking what lessons do I need to learn from this and the answer was to be grateful for the position that I was in and have that contentment that I was very lucky to be one of the 30 that was on the pitch.

“That’s what I took away from it because of the foundations that Jesus has put in my heart.”

In 2020, when the UK was in Covid-19 lockdown, Billy shared more about his faith with Creation Fest UK’s YouTube channel.

He told interviewer Emma Leed that he struggled for some time with the fact that no sooner did he achieve one milestone when another popped up and he struggled under the weight of expectations.

He responded by putting rugby at the top of his priority list, but while that brought him success it never brought him happiness.

“God gave me this talent to use on His behalf not on mine. I was being selfish; I got all this success and then I got seduced by it.

“That should never be the way. So I put God back on top again and that’s when I was most at peace. I

was ungrateful but now I’m back and hopefully I’ll never leave again. I feel at my most content because of God.

“When your priorities are right and God is at the centre you feel happiest. I have to make sure that God is always first in my life.”

His advice to others who may be searching for meaning in life is this:

“If you’ve tried the alcohol, the drugs, the sleeping around... tried whatever you wanted to do to give yourself self-gratification and you’re still asking yourself those questions, something or someone

is pushing you towards God. What have you got to lose [by going to God]?”

Billy, who is also an ambassador for Christian charity Tearfund, says that he wants to spread the good news about the hope and peace that comes with faith in Jesus Christ.

“God put me in a position to spread His Word, and I didn’t do that, which is what I’m trying to do now.

“I’ve definitely had more people asking me questions as to why I have such a strong faith and why I’m willing to stand on my own in certain situations, because of my faith.

“It’s nice to share it with other people and for them to ask questions.”

“**I got all this success and then I got seduced by it.**”



Billy Vunipola. (Photo by Karl Bridgeman - World Rugby/World Rugby via Getty Images)

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