

# Ah! Sweet mystery of life – Michael Cassidy



A monthly column by Michael Cassidy, evangelist, author, Christian leader and founder of African Enterprise whose ministry in Africa and the world has spanned more than 50 years.

Life is a funny thing. So poignant. So pleasurable. So painful. So full of promise. So made of mystery.

I wonder how you look at it. I know I often stop myself and wonder at it all. How odd it is to be a human! To think. To reflect. To feel. To laugh. To weep. To worship. What strange and extraordinary creatures we are! Amphibians between nature and super-nature. Curious combinations of mortality and immortality. Souls. And bodies.

And what a breath-taking and bewildering reality is this in which we find ourselves! We never arranged it. We never set the stage. We didn't organise the sun or stars. We didn't supply and endow the earth. We didn't arrange the composition of the atmosphere. We didn't create ourselves. We didn't put ourselves here. But we are here. That's for sure. You and I. And the planet we inhabit. And a vast universe around us. All very odd.



People rushing by in a blur in Santiago, Chile. (PHOTO: [mauro mora](#))

### **Stand back**

This leads me at times to stand back and look at the headlong rush of people – hither and yon – on foot, in cars, in planes. All very busy. All very pre-occupied. And all very fixated on this temporal reality, as if that is all there is. No apparent awareness of the shortness of it all. Or the futility of it all – unless God is there.

Then one opens the paper and reads of man's inhumanity to man. Our heads reel with this trauma and that tragedy. Our minds marvel at the power struggles of little humans who see their advent to power over their fellows as something of momentous and ultimate consequence. But tomorrow the wind has blown them from the scene and from the memory and life goes on. They were not so important after all.

### **Questions**

Finally our hearts and emotions are kept on a switch-back of undulating emotions – now joyful over a baby's birth, now mournful over an old man's death – now borne on the wings of romantic love – now shattered by the cruel consequences of divorce – now striving fervently for some self-appointed goal – now slumping with a secret sigh and asking: "What does it all matter, anyway?"

Perhaps it was this sort of reflection and realisation which led one of the world's leading actors to say to a friend of mine who met him on a plane: "Life for me is all questions with no answers."

And I suspect that is true for so many. Especially if they find the time or inclination to stand and stare.



A man looking up at the night sky.  
(PHOTO: [Greg Rakozy](#))

### **Thankful**

For myself, I know that when I stand and stare I am thankful, just so very thankful for Jesus Christ and the meaning He gives to life. Because I just can't imagine living without meaning. That must be the ultimate nightmare. To see life as a cosmic farce. As a gigantic chemical and physiological accident happening in an empty, random, chaotic, godless and inexplicable universe. That would be more than I for one could live with.

### **Centre**

So I rejoice that Jesus makes the centre clear. There are blurs at the edges. But the centre is clear. That's the thing – getting the centre clear by finding it in Him and by grasping deep down that *He is the image of the invisible God ... all things were created through HIM and for HIM ... and in HIM*

*all things hold together ... (Colossians 1:16-17). For in HIM the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily (Colossians 2:9).*

And the ultimate wonder of wonders, midst all the mysteries, is to realise that each of us can *come to fullness of life – IN HIM (Colossians 2:10).*

Ah! Sweet mystery of life.

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## **The greatness of gratitude – Michael Cassidy**



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The words “thank you” are so simple, yet without them life would be immediately saddened and impoverished. For to receive favours, blessings, or kindnesses and not to say “thank you” is to reveal that we are totally introverted, and selfish. It also shows that we place all other people as under some sort of special obligation to us, while we are excused of any obligation to them.

Actually the word of thanks is so simple, so easy to accord and so positively beneficial in effect that it is astounding

that we are so slow and negligent to extend it.

The opportunities to generate in others the blessings of our expressed gratitude come at every turn in life.

On the way to work you stop to have your car filled with petrol. The attendant has a tedious, monotonous and largely unappreciated task. Yet his own dignity and value cannot but be lifted in his own heart as you say a genuine 'thank you' for the service rendered. The same principle can apply to the waiter who serves you in a restaurant, the domestic who cooks for you, the attendant who serves you in a shop.

How about in your office? When did you last really thank a colleague or secretary or partner for what they mean to you in the accomplishment of your daily business?

Perhaps the home is where most sacrificial services are taken most easily for granted. Thus, many a husband has the impression his wife spends all day twiddling thumbs, and he takes her meals, tidying of the house and garden and care of the children entirely for granted. Likewise wives can become matter of fact about what it costs the husband in more ways than one to keep the bills paid and the family fed and clothed. How wonderfully the wheels of many a marriage would be oiled by regular expressions of gratitude for services rendered, both small and large, and blessings received thereby.

Likewise there is many a young person who has never paused to express gratitude to a mother and father for all they have done. I heard recently of an entire family relationship transformed by a daughter writing to her father and saying how much she loved him and appreciated his sacrifices on her behalf.

Perhaps more ingratitude is manifested in our relationship to God than anywhere else. Food, clothing, shelter, health and life itself are grabbed as rights without any reference to

Him. The beauties of nature are overlooked or assumed. Eyes are turned away from the wonders of scripture. Ears remain deaf to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Hearts are hardened to resist the redemptive call of Calvary. In short we are utterly ungrateful.

Yet if we do in fact pause to say 'thank you' to God, fresh blessings become ours. Says Paul: "In nothing be anxious. But in everything by prayer and supplication WITH THANKSGIVING let your requests be made known unto God. And the PEACE of God which passeth all understanding will keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Philippians 4:6-7).

The Psalmist exhorts this way: "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness and come before His presence with singing. Know ye that the Lord He is God: it is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves: we are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise: be thankful until Him and bless His name. For the Lord is good: His mercy is everlasting: and His truth endureth to all generations" (Psalm 100).

I am sure that if you find the greatness of gratitude you will be eternally grateful.

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## **Are you listening in? – Michael Cassidy**



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Have you ever bellowed at your child: “Didn’t you hear me?” erupting “Why don’t you listen? I told you not to go outside without a jersey, but you didn’t listen, and now you have a streaming cold.”

Of course it is possible your little brat heard and then deliberately disobeyed. But it is equally likely that he just didn’t listen to your old fog-horn and therefore couldn’t obey because he hadn’t heard. The parental voice was simply screened out. Faulty action followed faulty listening.



(PHOTO: [Ben White](#) on [Unsplash](#))

### **Adults**

Nor is this failing confined to children. We adults do the same sort of thing. For example, we often do all the talking with our friends and none of the listening. Or think of the phone caller who won’t let you get a word in edgewise in half an hour. No wonder a bore is defined as someone who talks about himself all the time when you want to talk about yourself!

Of course this kind of experience, when confined to casual social exchange, is more tiresome than anything else, but in say a military affair it becomes positively hazardous. If there is no listening from the army when the general says "OK chaps, flee for your lives", then they advance into catastrophic defeat. How serious then is that failure of listening!

### **Spiritual life**

So too in our spiritual experience. It is positively hazardous to fail to listen to God. He has spoken in His Word, and by His Holy Spirit He still speaks, usually by a still small voice, a quiet conviction as it were, which registers in the hearing apparatus of the soul. But if we plunge through life without ever listening for His voice or His guidance, how truly foolish we become.

I have been reading the book of Jeremiah recently and have been struck by God's awesome judgement on Israel as a nation simply because: *"When I spoke to you persistently," said the Lord, "you did not listen" (Jeremiah 7:13)*. Their fate, in the divine words, was sealed because *they did not obey or incline their ear but walked in their own counsels and in the stubbornness of their evil hearts ... they did not listen to me or incline their ear but stiffened their neck (7:24, 26)*.

### **Nations and individuals**

And what of us as a nation? Are we listening to God, or are we "walking in our own counsels"?

Likewise in our individual experience. Do we say: "Listen, Lord, your servant speaks" – or "speak, Lord, your servant listens."

Bishop Fulton Sheen has written: "God has things to tell us which will enlighten us. We must wait for Him to speak. No one would rush into a physician's office, rattle off all his symptoms, and then dash away again without waiting for a



diagnosis: no one would tune into a radio and immediately leave the room. It is every bit as stupid to ring God's doorbell and then run away."

### **How?**

If we do listen, how does God speak and how do we hear? We hear through the Bible, through the counsel of Christian friends, through a deepening conviction related to something we have prayed over, through the still small voice and occasionally through some very direct form of spiritual illumination.

It all sounds a bit airy-fairy, I know. But it isn't. Just really try listening to God. You may be surprised by what you hear.

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## **That trapped feeling – Michael Cassidy**



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Some time ago I saw a letter in a newspaper from a woman who said she felt trapped by life. There seemed to be "nowhere to go." She lamented that there was no "way out" which she could

see, though she felt there must be one.

While desirable and worth preserving, marriage for our friend was a primary trap. But so too was life generally. Boredom seemed to have become the order of the day and the prospect of growing as a person appeared to have vanished like the morning mist.

Quite rightly, this was recognised not only as a cry, from the heart, but as a typically 21st century cry from the heart. It was also recognised that the trap need not simply be marriage or the family, but equally obviously could be the job or neighbourhood or anything.

### **In search of freedom**

The idea of a trap is a vivid one. It conveys the sense of being bound, held captive, imprisoned. To be in a trap is the opposite of being free. Freedom is thus the answer to that trapped feeling. Yes, but where and how is freedom to be found?

The 21st century has many answers to this question, the most common being "throw off every yoke and do your own thing." But many either can't or won't cast off their job, or their marriage partner, and moving to another neighbourhood simply relocates the problem elsewhere. Likewise changing marriage partners or jobs solves little, because the bondages of the first partner and the original job soon reappear to bind us again, only with a different set of chains. And so we stop externalising the problem and conclude reluctantly that life itself is a trap. Somehow we just do not fit or feel at home in the universe.

If freedom is indeed the answer, then how in the world are we to find it? The Bible replies quite clearly: "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). Says the Apostle Paul: "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1). The basic thought here is that the trap is not outside

man, but in man. The chains are in us, not in our home, job or society. The problem is internal and spiritual, not external and physical. Guilt, dividedness, alienation from self and meaninglessness – these are the inner coils with which the trap is sprung.

### **True freedom**

Only, therefore, in conversion, new birth and spiritual discovery is true freedom found. Paradoxically, it is only as we exchange bondage to self with bondage to Christ that liberation comes. Paul described himself as “a bond slave” to Christ, but in that bondage he became a liberated man. Jesus was discovered as one “whose service is perfect freedom.” And did He not say: “Whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel’s will find it?” But whoever saves his life, by clutching it to himself, loses it. For to clutch one’s life to oneself, and to leave God out, is to spring the trap and then feel its bars snap closed upon one’s soul.

However, if Jesus is indeed the cosmic Lord of the universe, then to become a Christian is to become ‘universalised’ and to feel at home in the universe, and therefore to feel free. Our mysterious spiritual homesickness is ended. We feel at home – with God, with ourselves and with our fellows. No wonder Charles Wesley could exult: “My chains fell off, my heart was free. I rose, went forth and followed Thee.” He was out of the trap.

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**The comic in the taxi –  
Michael Cassidy**



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After a time of ministry in the US some years ago, I boarded an airport limousine, along with about 10 others, to be driven to Kennedy Airport.

We all clambered into the limousine and most of my fellow-travellers vanished behind the New York Times.

“Mornin’ everyone”, said the jovial driver as he climbed with a huge smile into the driver’s seat and surveyed the dismal offering of passengers which the early morning had presented to him. A few grunts of response were his only reward.

“Morning,” I said, somewhat bashfully.

“Well, at least A’am happy,” he chortled, thereby pronouncing his considered verdict on the state of the rest of us!

Feeling I ought to try and rise to the occasion on behalf of the rest of humanity I ventured a friendly comment.

“Got a long day ahead?” I asked.

“Well, man,” he drawled with that extra special inimitable accent of someone from Brooklyn, “I have been on from 1am and I got till 9am. That’s ma shift, you see. But it may be longer; they may call me for extra. You know, they pull dem tricks sometimes. But that’s ok. You see, it’s the service that counts. You gotta give that service good, man, real

good.”

### **Deep chuckles**

The sentence tailed off in some more deep chuckles rumbling up from his middle abdomen and then tumbling out like a tonic on the frosty world around him.

“Goodness,” I thought to myself, “this chap’s got it. He’s a demonstrator. He’s a preacher who practises what he preaches. He is a taxi-man who is concerned to render true service in the one way he knows how – driving his limousine the best and happiest way he can.”

“Yeah man,” he went on, as if reflecting on the triumph of his spirit over the nature of his job, “I guess I’s de only guy around here wot can make dis job a heck of a lot of fun!” More roars of semi-philosophical laughter.

I continued thinking. “It’s unbelievable. He’s been up since 1 am. He should be ready to spit in everybody’s eye, and here he is right on form, so full of fun and blessing the world.”

We then began arriving at different air terminals where various passengers would disembark.

“Anyone for Sunlight over Jordan?” he called out. “That’s Eastern Airlines!”

A couple of disgruntled commuters spilled out. We drove on.

“What about Alcoholics Anonymous? That’s AA. American Airlines.” Ok no-one for AA.

### **‘Fussy on the Ground’**

“Now,” said the tonic, warming to his game, “How about ‘Fussy on the Ground?’”

I looked suitably perplexed and rose to his bait like any good trout.

“That’s United. Friendly in the sky – fussy on the ground!” He beamed seraphically as we all clicked in recollection of the slogan, “Fly the friendly skies of United.”

“Oh, brother,” I mused to myself, “keep preaching. That’s us religious people. Friendly in the skies of church, fussy on the ground during the week!”

“Now Needle Nose,” he announced with finality. “That’s British Airways. You know there go dat plane with the long nose. Oh, man. To see dat baby land! Bootiful!”

I disembarked at Needle Nose. As my new friend got my bags out, I said to him round at the back of the limousine, “You’ve got an inner secret. You must be a Christian.”

Now his face just exploded in wrinkles of delight.

“Yessir,” he beamed, his eyes sparkling and popping even wider, “He’s made me da greatest lover in the world! He did something mighty for ma life 32 years ago and He also gave me a commandment, yessir, a commandment, ‘love everybody as Aah have love yew.’ Dat’s right. Everybody. Ma name’s Mitty, sir. Just call me Mitt.”

“Oh, Mitty,” I said, “Here’s my card. Let’s keep in touch. You’ve made my day.”

And he had.

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# Valentine and Don Juan on

# Love, marriage – Michael Cassidy



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(PHOTO: [Mayur Gala](#))

**Don:** Well, Valentine, you must be feeling pretty good this month – what with all these cards in your name doing the rounds and giving all the schoolgirls a flutter.

**Valentine:** Right, and quite a few schoolboys too, not to mention a myriad other young men and women, including some mums and dads, believe it or not. Even grannies and grandpas!

**Don:** Come, come. You mean to say some mums and dads still send those things. I thought romance flew out the window right

after the honeymoon. I must say, as far as I'm concerned, marriage is a romantic dead-end and a trap. All that involvement and responsibility – and then children and nappies and all that. Man, it's enough, Valentine, to put you out of business. Footloose and fancy-free – that's what I say. Live for the moment. Play the field. Why, I sent half a dozen cards today to different people, ranging from a divorcee in her thirties to a young nurse I met the other day. Give 'em all a thrill!

**Valentine:** I fear you flatter yourself. But let me ask you something. Do you love any of those women?

**Don:** Sure I do. I love them all. Every one is a darling. There's nothing I wouldn't do for any of them – you know, except hitch up permanently. That would kind of restrict one, wouldn't it?

**Valentine:** You mean, long term love and caring is restricting. For you or them?

**Don:** Well, for me mainly, I admit.

**Valentine:** Isn't that rather selfish? I thought love was concerned for others, and you seemed to be priding yourself on being the great lover. If you were, you could surely love and care for someone over the long haul. Or is the great lover act just a smokescreen to hide great failure. In fact I'd say right now you were a poor marriage risk. It's too demanding. You see marriage demands real life. The best you could handle would be serial monogamy.

**Don:** What's that?

**Valentine:** Having one wife at a time every four years. It's all the rage now, you know. Too bad about the kids and the broken lives left behind.

**Don:** Oh, kids are flexible. They get over it. Take me. My



folks bust up when I was 10. I was shuttled back and forth between two sets of parents and families and I've coped pretty well. What with the parties, the movies, the babes and the booze-ups, I get along fine. Sure, I loathe my job and most human beings get me down, but I keep my end up.

**Valentine:** Pardon my boldness, Don, but wouldn't you deep down really like to have something more – like say a really happy marriage? Aren't these detached, transitory, butterfly romances sort of fragmenting?

**Don:** Well, smart one, I agree they could be better. But what's the answer? You tell me.

**Valentine:** Well, let me try. First of all, I am not the key. I'm part of the picture, and an important part. I specialise in romance and try to keep it going. But the real key lies with the Master whose servant I am. He is the Author of love and marriage, and indeed of romance. Lovers who put their lives in His hands find He makes all the difference. He gives them loyalty, commitment, kindness, helps them forgive, and stirs their sense of responsibility for each other and for the kids. All of which helps me in my job of keeping romance going. You see, Don, I can't operate for long without Him, and nor, my dear friend, can you.

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## How to have a happy New Year – Michael Cassidy



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On January 1st this year, multiplied millions of kisses were planted on unlikely cheeks as we all wished one another a happy New Year. But in the other cheek, we had our tongue. To kiss someone with your tongue in your cheek and at the same time wish them a happy New Year would seem a feat more befitting a contortionist than ordinary folk like us. Yet I submit that this is a feat most of the world perform annually. For we know that happy new years are as elusive as clutching the morning mist. So we either wish people a happy New Year thoughtlessly and glibly, or else we try to be genuine about it but keep our tongues in our cheeks!

Take 2017 as an example. It opened with the traditional festivities, good wishes, hopes and resolutions. Most Presidents and Prime Ministers probably felt their countries were going to plod along happily and they probably said on television or radio, "This is going to be a better year". I wonder if they really did believe it.

Anyway, whether they believed it or not, events this year have taken their own unpredictable courses. Europe and Britain

looked reasonably ok but then Brexit came along. President Hollande thought he would win the election, but then Mr Macron came to town. Mrs Merkel thought she would walk the German elections but only just squeaked in. President Trump thought he would "make America great again" in two months but now the world wonders more than ever if America will ever be great again! Mr Mugabe was quite sure he would live his life out in the Presidency, and that's why he fired Mr Mnangagwa, but now Mr Mnangagwa is President and Mr Mugabe is Africa's biggest has-been. In South Africa we were sure that things couldn't get any worse, but Mr Zuma has insured that they did!

So much for the leaders. What of the led? Everywhere the man in the street was hit with considerable cost of living spirals, absurd, through the roof fuel costs, plus daily newspaper and radio reports bringing word of terrorists, violence, hi-jacking, unemployment, famine, racial antagonism and international confusion. Countries like our own increasingly have an apocalyptic feel about them and the whole thing adds up to a picture of almost unrelieved gloom about our planet and where it is headed.

In the light of all this, how can one possibly write on how to have a happy new year? The answer is that one can, provided the happiness one has is not based on the external circumstances of the world around us. Our happiness, our peace and our security must be within. And our true hope must be beyond the temporal and transient in the eternal. Our ultimate life and loyalty must be discovered in God Himself and in the Lord Jesus who is *the same yesterday and today and for ever (Hebrews 13:8)*. Says the hymn "Change and decay in all around I see, O Thou, who changest not, abide with me."

Beyond the internal peace Christians can know in Christ, there is also the objective, external fact which we hold onto that our God is sovereign over history. He is the one in charge. He is at the beginning of history and He will be at the end of history. Thus John the Apostle reports in the book of

Revelation, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega' (ie the beginning and the end), says the Lord, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty' (1:8). Beyond that, if our Jesus is in charge of the beginning and the end of history, it also means, and what a comfort this is, that He is in charge of everything in between. That means the times we are living in with all their tumultuous happenings. This means we can rest in peace, experience happiness and serve creatively to help make a difference in all the pain and sufferings of the world.

This is not to call for an 'other-worldly' escapism, but simply to insist that the ultimate meaning to life and history lies in that which transcends life and history. Indeed the Christian's hope is set on a God who is also sovereign over history. Not only did He invade history in Jesus Christ, but He will consummate history in Jesus' Second Advent. The struggles of people and nations, their rise and fall, their failures and follies will not defeat the purposes of our God. Indeed in the home-straight of history, when wars, violence, persecution, moral collapse, famine and natural convulsions will all contribute to human despair and confusion, Jesus' Word comes even then to the Christian: *See that you are not alarmed for this must take place (Matthew 24:6).*

With one's soul thus anchored in the peace, power, provision, and purposes of God, is it any wonder the Christian rejoices that he can still wish the world a happy New Year – but only in and through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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**God is Jesus' surname –**

# Michael Cassidy



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A good many years ago, my wife and I visited Israel. We were staying just outside Bethlehem. As we looked from our room down towards Bethlehem it was hard really to take in that this was indeed the place where Jesus was born. There it was. It was no fictitious tale, no dream, no fanciful thought. Here was the place. And one could look out on it in the evening and say, 'Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.'

But more important simply than the geographical location of the happening, was the significance of Bethlehem as the 'City of David'. In other words, the angelic testimony was that this birth was taking place according to the prophetic promises of the Old Testament. This one who was coming into the world was indeed the long awaited messianic figure promised, prophesied and foreshadowed at many places throughout the many centuries of Old Testament history.



(PHOTO: [Emmanuel Lutheran Church](#)).

### **Fulfilment**

It is thus part of the glad tidings of great joy that God is in charge of history and is in sovereign control as He moves our planet towards its consummation in the Second Advent of our Lord. This indeed will take place, according to prophetic fulfilment, as surely as His First Coming happened and was announced in Bethlehem, in the City of David, long ago.

Who is this One coming into the world? The angelic word assures us: *This is the Saviour and He is Christ the Lord*. The angel was affirming two things. This one is the Lord. This is God come in the flesh.

When my daughter, Debbie, was a little girl, she once said to one of her friends: "God is Jesus' surname". And this is true! Said Jesus of Himself: *All power in heaven and on earth is committed to me*. To His disciples when they were confused about the identity of God the Father He claimed: *He that has seen me has seen the Father*.

No wonder John can say in the prologue to his Gospel: *In the*

*beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*

What this says is that Jesus is not just one in a long line of religious leaders, not one amidst a great pantheon of religious prophets, not one choice amidst a mass of religious options, but He is indeed the supreme authority in the universe.

So Christmas is either very much more than a sentimental story or it is very much less. Jesus is either the centre and hinge of history or the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the human race.

### **Saviour**

The angel said that He was not only the Lord, but the Saviour. In other words, He is the one who saves. He saves us from many things. He saves us from meaninglessness, from emptiness, from loneliness, from fear of death, from guilt, and above all from the separation which sin has brought between us and God. He is the Saviour from sin. Indeed, the angel said to Joseph: *You will call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.* All of us have fallen short of our own standards, not to mention God's. Therefore, we need a Saviour.

All we have to do is to reach out and say: "Oh come to my heart Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for thee".

So my prayer at this time is that we should all allow the good tidings of great joy to break into the lives of those around us. Each of us must personally respond to the Good News that this Christ has indeed come in history to be our Saviour, our Lord, our Friend and our Contemporary.

This is what Christmas is all about. These are the good tidings of great joy. Why not accept them this very Christmas Day into your life and have a truly happy Christmas? God bless you all.

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# Seeing God afresh – Michael Cassidy



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I am often struck by that great passage in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah the prophet writes: *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon the throne high and lifted up (Isaiah 6:1)*. Isaiah then continues on to tell us that the Heavenly Hosts surrounded the throne and were singing out the words: *Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory (6:3)*.

Why should it be, I have wondered to myself, that Isaiah should see the Lord in the year that King Uzziah died? (Approximately 740 BC).





God's glory fills the whole earth.  
(PHOTO: [Pinterest](#))

### **The death of all our idols**

The answer may be tied up in everything that the King represented to Isaiah and his people. King Uzziah had reigned for some 52 years. It was a time of tremendous economic prosperity. It was also a time of great military might, to the point where King Uzziah's military stratagems, plans and weaponry were exported throughout the Middle East. It was a time when the arts and literature flourished. It was a time when agriculture was in abundance. Uzziah had done incredibly well, though he did mess up in the last few years of his life.

Anyway, because of all the great successes he had had, everybody's eyes during this 52 year reign had become fixated upon Uzziah. Uzziah was the saviour. Uzziah was the one who had made everything great. Because of this, Jehovah had had to take a kind of back seat and was no longer really much in purview.

Then, suddenly, the unthinkable happened. King Uzziah died. Now all of this military might was in threat. All of this

economic prosperity could not be counted upon. It was as if some of the props were kicked out from under people. It was as if some of their idols fell. It was as if King Economy, King Military Might and King Safety and Security suddenly died.

It was then that they saw the Lord.

When I was in the States in 2001, I pointed out to the Americans that what had happened at the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre and at the Pentagon was a moment in which King Money died, King Safety died, King Security died, King Military Might died, and King Technology died. Not one of these things had been able to prevent the terrible things that happened on September 11.

**When we see God on His throne we realise that nothing is going to happen to Him. Our God is in charge. He is high and lifted up. And He is not baffled by South Africa, as we are.**

So too in South Africa, when Mandela couldn't oversee how we could carry on. Our hopes were dashed. But we didn't then transfer our hopes onto the Lord. We transferred them to his successors. And we now know where that has got us. Into a right royal pickle and a full-blown socio-political and economic crisis.

All the more need then, and it is greater than ever, to turn our hearts back to the Lord in new repentance and in fervent prayer from the whole church of Christ for the whole nation of South Africa. And mercifully this is starting to happen as so may realise now the secular and political leadership has failed us.

### **Seeing God on the throne**

As with the Israelites, and post 9/11 for many Americans, and now for all of us in South Africa, our

**The Ten Commandments are not The Ten Suggestions,**

props have been kicked out from under us. Our idols of technology, money, military power and political freedom have fallen. That's why this is now a moment for us to see the Lord afresh. When these other things finally die in our lives, when we see the Lord afresh, we see Him as the prophet Isaiah saw Him – on a throne. We see Him as King and as Lord. We see Him as in charge of history. We are not caught up in a mad, runaway, chaotic political or economic situation. Nor do we have to pray like the little girl who prayed by her bed one night, saying: "Dear Lord Jesus, please look after yourself because if anything happens to you we'll be in a terrible mess." When we see God on His throne we realise that nothing is going to happen to Him. Our God is in charge. He is high and lifted up. And He is not baffled by South Africa, as we are.

**dear friends, and we are obliged to live the way this Holy God wants us to live, both as individuals, and as a nation.**

Seeing God afresh means we also will see Him, as Isaiah did, as Holy, Holy, Holy. We have a God who has standards of behaviour, principles and ethics not only for personal and social life, but for political life which we are meant to follow. The Ten Commandments are not The Ten Suggestions, dear friends, and we are obliged to live the way this Holy God wants us to live, both as individuals, and as a nation.

Then Isaiah saw this God as filling the whole earth with His glory (v 6b). King Uzziah had filled Palestine with his glory, that tiny, tiny corner of the world, but here was a God whose

glory filled the whole earth. This is a God of greatness! This is a God of power!

### **A call for self-examination**

It is at this time, when our former props and idols have fallen, when we see the Lord anew in His glory, power and might that we also need to see ourselves afresh. When Isaiah saw God he said: *Woe is me, I am lost. I am a person of unclean lips, and I dwell in the middle of people of unclean lips (6:5).* Isaiah experienced a time of self-scrutiny, a moment of seeing his own sin and his own lostness. Then he called on God and confessed his sins to the Lord. If we in South Africa are going to cope in these times of uncertainty, we also need to see ourselves afresh. As Isaiah did, may we then come in confession and ask God to forgive us. He will surely say, as He did to Isaiah: *Your guilt is taken away, your sin is forgiven (v 7).*

**King Uzziah had filled Palestine with his glory, that tiny, tiny corner of the world, but here was a God whose glory filled the whole earth. This is a God of greatness! This is a God of power!**

This can and must happen for us not only as individuals and families, but as a country. We are full of a lot of sin, wickedness and corruption. But if we see it, and confess it, there is hope for South Africa. There really is.

So may the Lord bless us as we go into next year with our consciences cleansed, our sins forgiven and a fresh vision of God always before us – a God on a throne high and lifted up, in charge of all of history, and of the Beloved Country.

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# Developing a habit of Christian reading – Michael Cassidy



A monthly column by Michael Cassidy, evangelist, author, Christian leader and founder of African Enterprise whose ministry in Africa and the world has spanned more than 50 years.

The great American evangelist, DL Moody, once wrote: “I never saw a useful Christian who was not a student of the Bible. If a person neglects the Bible there is not much for the Holy Spirit to work with. We must have the word.”

Daniel Webster, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American orator and senator, also said: “If Christian books are not widely circulated among the masses in this country and the people do not become spiritual, I do not know what is to become of us as a nation.

“If the truth be not diffused, error will be; if God and His Word are not known and received, the devil and his works will gain the ascendancy; if the evangelical volume does not reach every hamlet, the pages of corrupt and licentious literature will.”

As Christians seeking to take our faith seriously, we need to

be readers of the Bible and of other Christian books and literature, which are edifying, informative, educational, inspirational or instructive.

### **Our reading of the book of books**

One has to agree with Moody's statement that any Christian who is useful and active in service for his or her Lord will be a student of the Bible. The Bible is practical. It leads, guides, checks and inspires.

Observed Martin Luther": "The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me."

The Apostle Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

The Old Testament is almost as specific, saying: "This Book of the Law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success" (Joshua 1:8).

### **Getting started**

That's all very well, you say. I'd like to be reading the Bible seriously, but how and where do I start?

First, get a Bible for yourself if you don't have one. Probably the most widely used modern translation right now is the New International Version (NIV). You can't go wrong with that. If you want a more colloquial paraphrase translation, you might like to secure Eugene Peterson's *The Message*.

Then I would like to recommend securing Scripture Union or other Bible reading notes. They come in different levels of notes geared for different age groups.

Finally, make a resolution right now that you will read a portion of the Bible each day, preferably in the morning and evening. Know yourself. If you are a morning person, content yourself with something briefer in the evenings as one is usually too tired to absorb very much. If you are an evening person, content yourself with something briefer in the morning as you will not be awake enough to absorb very much.

### **Understanding the Bible**

Of course many would say that it is all very well to read the Bible, but can one actually understand it? In general terms, I believe the answer is yes. The Reformers believed in what they called "the clarity" of scripture. By this they meant that the Scriptures had a clearness such that the general thrust of the text, apart from certain difficult passages, could be understood by any reader coming to the text prayerfully, humbly and diligently.

Even so, it is worth seeking to keep in mind some practical principles of biblical interpretation, or what the theologians call "hermeneutics".

What hermeneutic principles should we then lay hold of in our practical efforts to read and comprehend the Scriptures?

### **Follow the grammatico-historical method**

This means that we allow the basic grammar and syntax of the passage to bring forth the meaning of the text and then we allow the historical context of the text to give the more specific meaning. In other words, we ask:

- What does the text say?
- What did the text mean when it was first heard in its original context?
- What does the text mean to me now in my present context?

Let's take an illustration. When St Paul tells the Christian Corinthian women that they should not cut their hair, that was presumably because the prostitutes of Corinth cut and braided

their hair in order to doll themselves up to attract male customers. So Paul at the literal level is speaking of women not cutting their hair. But the proper meaning of the text, when taken in its original historical context, is that women should not dress provocatively. And so this scripture and counsel in modern times speaks to women dressing with appropriate modesty.

### **Let the New Testament interpret the Old Testament**

St Augustine explained: "In the Old Testament the New lies hidden. In the New Testament the Old is laid open."

Certain laws laid down in the Old Testament, say for example relating to "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth", were later put aside in the New Testament. The New Testament instructs us not to retaliate against our enemy, but to pray for them.

Other principles and laws of the Old Testament, however, have not been replaced. For example, the Old Testament disapproval of homosexuality is left standing in the New Testament. Sometimes the New Testament will even strengthen something from the Old. The Old Testament condemns physical adultery, whereas in the New Testament Jesus condemns even mental adultery.

### **The Epistles interpret the Gospels**

Where Jesus and the Gospels hint at the principle of Justification by Faith, St Paul spells it out in detail, especially in Romans, Galatians, Ephesians and Titus.

When people asked Jesus in John 6, "What must we do to be doing the works of God?" (v28), Jesus replies: "This is the work of God that you believe in him whom he has sent". He shifts the emphasis from doing religious works to believing in him. This is what the Apostle Paul picks up on and expounds so profoundly in many sections of the Epistles.

Ephesians 2:8-9 has a good summary: "For by grace you have



been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest anyone should boast.”

Then comes verse 10, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” In other words, we are not saved by works, but for works. Our faith is the hands by which we reach out to receive the finished work of Christ on the cross, and then our attempts to live the Christian life are proof that we have genuinely received the saving work of the Saviour into our hearts.

Of course, once we have understood what the text is saying and not only what it meant in the original context but what it means for us today, then the challenge is to try and obey it and live it out. A Chinese student who had been converted in London once wrote back to his family in China telling of his conversion and adding: “I am reading the Bible and behaving it.” That of course is the biggest challenge of all.

### **What about other Christian books?**

This brings us into what I like to call the reader’s adventure. This begins when we discover, as one writer put it, that “no other agency can penetrate so deeply, abide so persistently, witness so daringly, and influence so irresistibly, as the printed page.” In a nutshell friends, we need to be diligent readers of Christian books.

However, as with the movies, where a high percentage are dreadful, so it is with some Christian books. Some are destructive in the way they break down confidence in the scriptures, while others are plain shallow or just sloppy and sentimental. This is why one needs to do a bit of asking around if one is going to invest in a good Christian book.

John Stott, Michael Green, Ravi Zacharias and Os Guinness would be good starters for Apologetics. Charles Colson is

excellent, especially his book *How Now Shall We Live?* There are great commentaries from the pen of William Barclay. Christian biographies by John Pollock, probably the best biographer of our time, are always thoroughly inspirational.

If you want books on Christian leadership, John Maxwell is flooding the market with good writing. For me the best of them all, an older book, is still Oswald Sanders' little classic, *Spiritual Leadership*.

If you want a very deep but slow read on the life and teachings of Jesus, I would recommend *The Divine Conspiracy* by Dallas Willard. If you want one classic on prayer, then get Richard Foster's volume *Prayer*. And if you want to be even more adventurous, then get into the world of CS Lewis. Children particularly should be introduced to his children's books, especially *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Out of our own AE family I could recommend Stephen Lungu's book *Out of the Black Shadows* as well as Festo Kivengere's *I Love Idi Amin*. Trevor Hudson is a marvellous South African devotional writer.

### **General reading**

As Christians, I believe we also need to be readers of our daily newspaper or a good news magazine. By doing this, we can learn to see new ways that our reading of the Bible and Christian books can interact with, and speak to, the events and happenings of the wider world.

Billy Graham always said that, in preparing to preach, he wanted to have the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. The Bible, and our Christian faith, have good answers for the daily goings-on in our world.

Short biographies, of both secular people and Christian leaders, even an occasional thriller or romance (maybe even a true love story) can add richness to our reading diet.

## **Conclusion**

By the way, don't forget that even if it is difficult or expensive to buy books, you can always borrow them, providing one promises to return them! To a friend who once visited Mark Twain, the great writer explained the clutter of books in his library by saying: "You see, I can't borrow shelves too!"