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FRIENDSHIP IS A VERB

(in a hurting world)

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Preface

As we live-out our faith each day we encounter joys and sorrows, trials and temptations, pleasure and pain. Sadly, some of our most traumatic life-experiences can come from within the Christian community.

Although it may come as a shock to some of us, church leaders are human and therefore, perfectly capable of making mistakes. Many of these mistakes are made as fellowships seek to work out their interpretation of what God says in Scripture (The Bible). They are important for growth, maturity and forward movement. However, it is when leaders try to claim infallibility and take over God's role that the mistakes become dangerous. Pride can all too easily replace humility, and spiritual fervour displaces common sense and discernment. "What would Jesus really do?" is replaced by "Let's sort this out!"

It is also possible for pastors and teachers to be placed in positions of responsibility which they cannot hope to fulfil. Young pastors, with no real life experience, are expected to perform miracles without adequately mature backup or support. Alternatively, and more sinister, the leadership may close their ranks to protect or even cover up mistakes from which lessons need to be learned. The end results can be disastrous leaving lives, or whole communities, irreparably damaged.

The material in this book is based on personal experiences, and those of close friends, over many years. I have used my favorite tools of poetry and verse to challenge attitudes which we often accept as normal. I have also tried to express some of the joys and rewards of knowing the Creator God, who loves us, cares for us and enjoys a relationship with us.

I pray that through the words of this book the hurting will find healing, the silent will find a voice, and the abusers will see the damage they can cause "in Jesus' Name." More than ever, I hope that all readers will find something which encourages them to keep going and to see that God IS at work in His church.

I would love to receive your feedback.

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“Life is about relationship”. This is so easy to say but very difficult to live out. I have learned that words are cheap unless they are backed-up by positive action. A few people who have been with me through the fair weather and the storms have earned the right to special mention: Lynne Throup, Martin and Rebekah Neil, Tanvi Muir, Mark and Gail Kennedy, Steve and Ruth Fletcher. Without your help I would not be here to write this book.

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Final thanks must go to my family for your patience, love and encouragement: Viv, Rebecca and Matthew.

I love you all.

Introduction

I have been asked on many occasions why I wanted to write this book. Well, I believe that we can only be truly effective and fulfilled in life when we have good relationships with other people, God, and are comfortable with who we are. This is vitally important in ensuring that the church demonstrates God's love to other people.

More recently, teaching within the church has focused on personal salvation and relationship with God. Although important, this is only part of a much bigger picture. We are not saved by God to remain individualized. The concept of community is written in to His recipe for a successful and productive life. The church is included in that mandate and is called to be the model community, demonstrating our love by how we treat other people.

The way in which we handle our relationships and friendships is crucial to both the positive and negative impact that we will have as individuals, and as the church. If we handle them with sensitivity and integrity, people will see and experience the love of God through us and be drawn in. If we handle them badly, we can end-up abusing others, damaging people and communities. From my personal experience, relationships and friendships are much easier to handle when everything is going well and God is on His throne in heaven! The real testing comes when we are called to develop or maintain relationships in the painful and difficult times. If sin is involved, there is a danger that we become so preoccupied with sorting out the sin that we destroy both the relationship and the other person in the process. We live in a hurting world where we will encounter problems, difficulties and sin. Since people from the world may occasionally populate our churches, we will almost certainly face these situations in our congregations. Hurt is not limited to those outside the church. Some of the most broken and hurting people are actually inside our churches. Sadly, many of these are broken further through the words and actions of people within our own fellowships.

We should remember that Jesus came to live in a hurting and broken world too. He made himself available to His friends and followers in the good times and in the bad. He was also there for the outcasts, those in society who had been wronged and for those who had committed wrong. There were many experts and religious leaders in Jesus' day who were quick to offer their advice and also to criticise Jesus and His followers. Jesus was criticised for healing or working on the Sabbath, mixing with sinners and tax collectors and spending time with gentiles (non-Jews). The strongest opposition to God's reconciliation and healing actually came from those who should have been most sympathetic to His work, the religious establishment.

Jesus was a man of integrity and therefore, His words were backed-up by His actions. This was unlike many of the religious elite who knew all the rules and applied them to the last letter of the law, but without compassion and true understanding. Therefore, Jesus exposed their insecurities and inconsistencies, which did not make Him a popular man! He accused them of being a bunch of hypocrites who demonstrated great piety at their worship services, but operated to different standards in their private lives.

Does this sound familiar? Nothing has changed over the years. We are still fallen people, each one of us capable of doing wrong. If we acknowledge this, we are a long way towards being real and being able to help others and ourselves. It is only when we try to cover up our own insecurities, doubts, failings and fears that we ask for trouble. We then enter the world of unreality and deceit. Jesus was real, sharing both His fears and successes with His disciples. The problem is that we have grown new church communities which are based on flawed theology, where we must live in the victory, overcome our wrongs, doubts and fears, or even worse and far more dangerous, deny that they exist! Since this comes downwards from the leadership, it is not surprising that there are many people who are bound-up with guilt just because they acknowledge that they haven't arrived yet. Even if we don't subscribe to these somewhat extreme views, we are all guilty of hiding what we are really like from others. We may even ensure that we are excessively busy, so that we don't have time to examine what we are really like inside. The result of these insecurities is that we are fine until something happens which is a bit too close to home or reminds us of past bad experiences. Then we either panic or recoil in self-defence because we can't handle the situation any more. As a result, we leave those who trusted us and

made themselves vulnerable to us, more broken than before. Although we can retire to our friends for help and support, they cannot. We leave them desolate and isolated.

In this busy, hectic, instant age, many of us would like easy answers and quick fixes to these tough and difficult situations. However, Jesus asks for our commitment, time, effort, love and sacrifice. He may even lead us into situations where we risk being misunderstood as we live out His love to those around us. Too often in today's society and within our churches we relegate friendship and relationship to nouns: objects. I believe that Jesus calls for a radical shift towards making them verbs: action or doing words.

This book is a collection of poems, prose and observations which are based on the experiences of my close friends and myself over the years. I have tried to avoid simple answers or trite words of comfort. I hope you will be stirred, challenged and moved, perhaps even to the point of discomfort! It is often in our uncomfortable and vulnerable times that God can speak to us most clearly.

Ask yourself, as I did, "Is there anything of me in here that God wants to change?" Then commit yourself and pray that He will. I will continue to pray that this will be an ongoing process so that, each day, we can all demonstrate more clearly that friendship is a verb in a hurting world.

CHAPTER 1 Friendship & Relationship

Understanding Our Relationships

The subject of relationships is complex. Relationships are two way and are vital in our everyday life and in the life of the church. Our successes, failures and sense of fulfilment are integral to the kind of relationships we build and maintain.

I'm reminded of a story about a priest who decided, one sunny Sunday morning, to play a round of golf rather than take the morning service. So, he rang the church office to explain that he was ill and then drove to the golf course. The angels saw this and told God, who said, "Don't worry, he'll be suitably punished." At the first tee the priest took out a wood and drove the ball straight down the fairway. Two bounces later it had cleared the bunkers and rolled onto the green. Then, forming a long, slow, right hand arc the ball eventually struck the flag and dropped in the hole. A hole-in-one! At the next hole the story was similar. A shorter hole, with the green beyond some nasty thickets, the priest decided to use a one iron. He played his tee shot and watched in amazement as the ball flew towards some trees, struck one, bounced over the thickets and a large bunker, onto the green, hit the flag pole and dropped straight in. Another hole-in-one! The angels were getting agitated and said to God, "Do something about this!" God said, "It's all in hand." Despite this, the priest continued to score a hole-in-one at each of the successive sixteen holes to give him a round of 18, an all time record. At this, the chief angel lost his temper. "You said you'd punish this priest and all he does is break the course record with a total score of 18!" "Yes!" said God, "But who can he tell?"

Communicating with others and having the opportunity to share our triumphs, failures, fears and ambitions is so important for fulfilment in life. If this was not so, why is solitary confinement used as a punishment? When we do not share with others, either through choice or through imposed circumstances, we can become frustrated and angry, or we may become depressed and reclusive. God designed us for relationship; otherwise He would only have made Adam!

Failures in relationships lead to great sorrow, stress, anger, and in some cases, loss of life through murder or suicide. Because God designed us to be in relationships, I believe that we can only really live out our faith and beliefs effectively when we make our relationships a priority. For the Christian it is our relationship with God that is of paramount importance. This is the anchor which should hold us steady in this world, the foundation on which all our other relationships are built. A good relationship with God is a great start, but it is not the whole story; the Bible calls us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Luke 10: 27b). Therefore, it follows that unless I learn to love myself I have little chance of ever loving my neighbor. I believe that loving myself begins when I begin to see myself as God really sees me; valued, unconditionally loved and cherished for who I am (warts and all). For some of us, taking this onboard may require considerable effort, even adjustment or a change of our culture.

If we are honest, many of us find it hard to love ourselves. Sadly, this is often the fruit of our upbringing, or of erroneous teaching. We have grown up meeting the expectations of others, having to respond to demands like, “Do this or you won’t get the reward” or “Aim for the top or you’ve failed.” Others may have been severely punished, either physically or psychologically (emotionally), by family, friends and/or church for attitudes or behavior which ‘doesn’t fit in to their expectations’. So, if someone says or does something that either consciously or subconsciously reminds us of these past events, we are likely to respond more negatively than when something is said that reminds us of happier experiences. Therefore, it is not surprising that a negative response can be triggered in us by what someone else says. In such a situation, we may feel uneasy or threatened because we no longer feel in control, or we are suddenly back in the classroom being made to look stupid in front of our friends. These types of response arise through insecurity and are more common in people who have grown up with a lot of discipline, but little love, support or encouragement. Since there is this inextricable link between our emotions and our actions, we should not be too surprised if we don’t always handle other people very well!

What Can Go Wrong?

In short, a great deal! Imagine two people interacting, both with past hurts which have not been dealt with. As we have seen already, it may only take one word to trigger a bad response in the other. If we now expand this to a community of

people, such as in a church, we can begin to see the potential for problems. The Bible describes God's church as 'living stones' (all different) and not 'living bricks' (all the same). God brings together people from all backgrounds and walks of life to form His church. This is rather like a craftsman who builds a dry stone wall. He does not use cement or mortar to hold it together. Instead, he chooses specific stones to fit together securely. Sometimes, he will chip a bit off here and there, or re-shape the stones so that they fit together as he wants. In the same way, God builds His church from an odd selection of people, some of whom actively dislike each other! The difference is that in the church the Holy Spirit binds us and holds us together.

However, because we all carry baggage and insecurities, there is opportunity for any of our relationships to go wrong. We find it easy to judge each other based on our own experiences. We also tend to hold grudges and rank people's importance based on their status, position, title, appearance; even how good we think they are. This is dangerous! God Himself tells us in the Bible that 'Everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence' (Romans 3: 23). We are all in the same position; we fall short of God's standards. We feel inadequate, insecure or the need to control a situation or person, and these often drive the decisions we make. Perhaps we exercise power in order to get what we want, rather than what is best for the other person. We may lose the ability to act in a way that is best for the other person, because the outcome may threaten us. What starts out as a well-meaning relationship becomes distorted as we subtly begin to work for our own advantage. In short, it becomes abusive. We not only damage others, but often ourselves as well.

We may try to hide these insecurities by 'wearing masks' to project an image of being in control, decisive, happy, without problems or some other pretence. Many of us would feel far more secure if we lived in a world without problems, especially those for which we have no easy solutions, or no solutions at all. For some reason we feel threatened if we have to admit that we've not succeeded or that we don't know an answer. Sadly, there are whole church communities that have grown on these foundations. God is always victorious, waging war against the enemy and marching on. There are never any real problems and even if there are, they are seen as 'trials sent by the enemy' to be overcome or simply denied. There is often a 'spiritual elite' in the community who somehow know some special secrets of God's Kingdom and His ways. God may be presented as so

high and mighty that he has neither the time nor the patience for anyone who is unable to maintain His standards. He is unwittingly presented as a perfectionist who condemns sin and by default, condemns us. This is a severely distorted picture of God! However, people like these are not new; they were around at the time of the first prophets and were called 'Gnostics'. They were also severely criticised for their elitist mentality and for the barriers they put in the way of 'non-members' trying to find God for themselves. Other people become very heavenly minded and spiritual, denying the reality of what is happening. They are of little earthly use. I personally find that the most worrying people are those who claim to be in a close relationship with God, yet continue to resent others and act in ways that betray their words. This too is a form of denial. The Bible tells us that it is impossible to love God and hate our neighbor.

Sometimes we end-up betraying a relationship that we have developed because we can no longer handle it. We 'dive in' and take on a problem which, all too quickly, is beyond what we can handle. Even then we may try to resolve the issues on our own, when we should be involving someone else who can handle them. When we 'fail' we drop the person and run! Rather than being as wise as serpents and gentle as doves, we end up dancing like a butterfly and stinging like a bee! Our victim invariably ends-up broken, betrayed and unable to trust again.

I think one of the saddest mistakes we make is when we feel obliged to take the 'moral high ground'; we pass judgment on the other person because they've fallen short of God's standards. We do well to remember that we've all fallen short of God's standards.

How Can We Put Things Right?

I believe it's time to present a true picture of God to people inside the church and to those outside. The Bible shows us that God loved us so much that He came to earth as a man. He is accessible to all and by all, not just a 'select few'. We don't need to earn our salvation; it is a free gift from God. But as with any gift, we need to receive it in order to gain the benefits. Once we have received this gift we can really begin to show, with God's help, what relationship is about. We need to pray for God's wisdom, discernment and humility so that we can make the right decisions, even if one of those decisions is to do nothing. Our ability to do this will increase as we take God seriously and allow Him to influence our thinking and attitudes more and more. However, it is a process and if we wait

until we've got everything right, we'll be dead! Here are a few practical suggestions for the 'here and now':

Be Rooted in Reality: Above all, be real! People, especially those from outside the church, quickly recognize deceit. Don't be afraid to admit your shortcomings. If you have grown up with a host of insecurities, seek professional help to enable you identify them, tackle them and move on. As you deal with these insecurities you will find it easier to be more open and to trust people. Always exercise discernment as you consider in whom you will confide; with reality comes vulnerability.

Be Fired by Forgiveness: Thankfully, God does not judge us in the same way that we judge other people. His view of us depends neither on us, nor how we feel about ourselves. It depends on what He has done for us through the death of Jesus. 'For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it' (Eph 2: 8 & 9). This is the starting point. We can only do what we do because of what God has already done. God's major work has been, and still is, forgiveness. The Bible tells us that God chooses to remember our sins no more (he does not 'forget them') and separates them from us 'as far as the east is from the west'. In my estimation you can't get much more complete than that! We, as Christ's followers, are called to do the same. So, our forgiveness is to be more than a few cheap words. We need to avoid hypocrisy. Our actions must support, not betray our words. We must learn to forgive all sins, even the 'bad' ones, so that the 'offenders' are released from bondage and allowed to move forward in their own life. Interestingly, forgiveness releases us to move forward too.

Sometimes our forward movement is blocked because we cannot forgive ourselves. If we don't grasp this fact we will find that it is impossible for us to forgive others. The action that we are unable to forgive will always be 'lingering in the background', ready to interfere with, or attack our relationships at their weakest points. Our relationships will be conditional at best and we will not be able to enjoy a good, true friendship with others. A friend of mine once said that forgiveness is difficult, yet a privilege because, in order to have something to forgive, we had to be close to the other person in the first place. If we had no relationship there would be no opportunity for forgiveness.

But, forgiveness is hard and it is not always a simple ‘one-off’ action. Sometimes we need to keep on forgiving through an act of will. I was told the story of a Christian lady who always shared the following with her friends: ‘Take forgiveness three-times-a-day; once with each meal’. She also practiced it.

Be Tempered with Humility: Arrogance is extremely destructive for relationships. One party is always in a ‘superior’ position, and there is danger that the relationship will turn into a dictatorship and become abusive. However, if I were humble, according to the main Greek word used in the New Testament, I would be someone who naturally acknowledged that all of my natural gifts, etc., come from God. At the same time, I would acknowledge that I am an object of His undeserved, redeeming love. I would no longer think of myself as ‘my own’, but God's in Christ. I would know that it is impossible to exalt myself, because I have nothing of myself. Therefore, the humble mind is at the root of all other graces and virtues. There can be no real love without humility. Humility is also described in the Bible as a ‘Fruit of the Spirit’. Fruit takes time to grow; it is not instant (unless it is synthetic or plastic!). So, we shouldn't be surprised if humility is hard to practice. However, these are not excuses to give us good reason to avoid trying. The Holy Spirit will change us as we allow Him. If we are not willing, He will not force change upon us. So, we should first ask whether this is a characteristic we want to display. If the answer is ‘yes’, we should ask God to change us, understanding that it may take some time. Imagine how different our relationships would be if we all exercised true humility!

Nurture in Love: Perhaps the most abused statements in Christendom are, “ I say this in love” and “ I do this in love.” If they end the phrase with ‘sister’ or ‘brother’ you know that you're really in trouble! All too often we use these phrases to justify hurtful words or attitudes, as if by saying the words we can justify what follows. If this is how we are thinking, we need to examine what the Bible really says: ‘I may be able to speak the languages of human beings and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains, but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned, but if I have no love, this does me no good. Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs;

love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail. Love is eternal.’ (1 Corinthians 13: 1-8a). When true love inspires and covers our words and our actions, we are able to see beyond the immediate problem to the hurting person behind it. We are no longer keen to judge, but begin to look for the best way forward towards reconciliation and healing, rather than punishment and division. In short, our relationships flourish. However, operating in love is not always easy, especially when the situation is difficult and emotions are involved. We must make sure that the love we try to practice is the love expressed in Scripture and not our own, corrupted and often conceited version in a thin disguise.

Protect Through Integrity: The dictionary defines integrity as ‘moral soundness’. This is much bigger than just ‘right’ or ‘wrong’; it seems to include a person’s character, trustworthiness and reliability. Trust and honesty are both keys to our integrity. As we also deal with our insecurities and allow our masks to drop, we will be more open in our relationships, and there will be a much greater sense of confidence and security by both parties. Relationships are an essential part of healing in people who have a poor self-image, or who have no one else to talk to. However, they can demand a lot of time and be costly, something which needs to be carefully weighed before we ‘get stuck in’. Integrity allows us to acknowledge that we can’t help; we are secure enough to refer them to someone who can. This is especially important in a ‘counseling’ type set-up. My personal view is that counseling is best left to professionally trained people rather than compassionate volunteers. The skills required are often beyond the scope of the layman although, in some cases, God can equip an untrained individual with supernatural gifts to release and restore. However, I also believe that this is the exception rather than the rule. Being an enthusiast does not us a good counselor make!

There have been many people through history that have said one thing and then done another. The story of ‘The Boy Who Cried Wolf’ bears testimony to this. A boy was sent to look after some sheep and told that if he got into trouble with wild animals, he was to shout, “Wolf!” at the top of his voice. The villagers would hear his cries, know that he was in danger and come to help. The problem was that the boy cried wolf twice when there was no danger. Each time, the village people came to help only to find that he’d been tricking them. When a wolf really did attack the sheep and the boy cried, “Wolf!” he was ignored

because he could not be trusted. There are many people today, even in our churches, who do the same. What they say or promise is not matched by their actions. In short, they lack integrity. Friendship and relationship are not nouns: objects; they are verbs: 'action' or 'doing' words. Our integrity is proven as our actions reflect our words; we do as we say.

As we demonstrate integrity and honesty in our relationships, there will be more trust in return. The increased consistency in our dealings with others will enable them to see that we care for 'who' they are, rather than what they can do. No longer will an individual's position in our church or community influence the quality of love and concern that we show.

In Summary

When we get our relationships right, we develop deep, lasting friendships in which there is both security and vulnerability. These attributes are mutually shared, without fear. Such relationships will last through the storms and disagreements which are bound to come our way. Nothing can surpass knowing that, when you need a friend, there is someone you can trust with your life story without finding it in the headlines or on the lips of other friends the next day. When we practice this type of relationship we will allow others to experience God in their lives and grow at their own pace. We will also start to present a more accurate picture of God to our church communities and beyond, through our actions and our words. We will demonstrate God's love practically and, I believe, powerfully. Those who come into our churches looking for the Almighty God will see Him at work and be drawn towards Him; they may even be drawn into our churches.

We would do well to remember and act upon the words of Saint Francis of Assisi: *"Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words."*

Insecurity

'If you wait until the wind and the weather are just right, you will never plant anything and never harvest anything' (Ecclesiastes 11: 4)

Through The Mask

Eyes burning bright, see through
The mask of happiness;
The mask of anger;
The mask of sadness;
The mask of confidence;
The mask of spirituality;
The mask of confusion;
The mask of ability;
The mask of incompetence;
The mask of knowledge;
The mask of ignorance;
To the real me, hiding deep inside.



Broken Record

Round and round and round I go!
Not a carousel, but a broken record.
Spinning endlessly on a deck.
My guilty memories, played back,
Repeatedly. Repeatedly. Repeatedly.

No way off! Round again, over the crack.
Over the crack. Over the crack.
Taunting me with its repetition.
No escape; no escape; only
Guilt trips; guilt trips; guilt trips.

My conscience feels like the stylus,
Cutting deep; playing the hidden feelings.
Making tangible those things
I'd rather leave hidden in the grooves;
Hidden in the grooves; hidden in the grooves.

Revisiting times long forgotten.
Schooldays filled with fear.
All part of a normal day; crying;
But only inside. I give nothing away;
Give nothing away; give nothing away.

But now you help me to shake off the chains
And unlock a hidden treasure chest
Of gems; shining and sparkling;
Colors and beauty I've never seen before;
Never seen before; never seen before.

At last! My record is playing good things.
A new tune. It's still broken,
But now it's good to listen to the music.
A symphony, getting louder and;
And; it doesn't stick any more.



Face In The Mirror

As I stare at the mirror
I'm frightened by what I see.
Some dim, distant shadow
That used to be me.

My face is drawn and weary,
My eyes seem dull today.
Both victims of my inner hurting,

That will not go away.

Armies fight against me!
My fears they overwhelm.
I'm a ship without direction;
No captain at the helm.

Justice is in short measure,
The accusations fly.
Even if most are in my head,
I feel like I could die.

And where is my God hiding?
I can't see Him anywhere!
Where's His love and compassion?
I doubt He's even there!

“Look closer my friend at the mirror,
And tell me what you see.
Why do you see your reflection?
Why do you see the ‘real me’?”

“I want you without pretences;
I want you as you are.
We're here on a journey together;
And together we'll travel far.



Strangers On A Train

We sit here, face to face;
A chance meeting dictated by vacant seats.
What secrets are we hiding from each other,
Behind our smile and “Good Morning”?

Flashing eyes and newspaper print
Stare at me as the fields and then towns glide by,
Shrouded in early morning mists; icing-coated silhouettes;
Momentarily exposed to our commuter world.

Lap top screen and manila file
Now hold your attention, as the frantic tones
Of a restless mobile phone cut through your concentration
And into the solitude of a crowded carriage.

We're slowing down, stopping at yet another station.
Squealing brakes and acrid smells betraying our intentions.
Suddenly sunlight floods our gloom; I'm blinded for a moment.
Then my eyes readjust and you've gone!

We never spoke; never communicated.
Trapped in our private worlds of thought and busyness.
But we kept our secrets safe for another day,
And we remained two strangers on a train.



Sometimes we consciously choose to be busy in an attempt to avoid issues which we know need to be faced.

Doing Is Seeing Is Believing

Time is hard to find,
I don't know where it goes!
So much is on my mind,
But I guess my hard work shows.
I've got no time for resting;
God won't be pleased with me.
Spare time! Are you jesting?
I'm working to be free.

*Prayer meeting, share meeting,
Off to the Christmas Fair meeting.
House group, spouse group,
Help with the 'Mickey Mouse' group.*

You see, by keeping busy,
My mind is occupied.
I chase around 'til I'm dizzy,
Such a righteous way to hide.
I'm sorry, there's no way
That I am going to stop.
What? And face myself today;
Allow my emotions to the top?

*Prayer meeting, share meeting,
Off to the Christmas Fair meeting.
House group, spouse group,
Help with the 'Mickey Mouse' group.*

I'm getting quite important;
I'm gaining much respect.
I'm getting exactly what I want,
Without having to reflect
On the real me trapped inside;
The real me, here today.
The real me, that I want to hide
In case you'll run away.

*Prayer meeting, share meeting,
Off to the Christmas Fair meeting.
House group, spouse group,
Help with the 'Mickey Mouse' group.*

I'm starting to feel good
About all the things I do.
Looking better than I should;
Deceiving even you!

I never ask what God wants
Unless my friends can hear!
I rely on many talents;
Fill my time to stay the fear.

*Prayer meeting, share meeting,
Off to the Christmas Fair meeting.
House group, spouse group,
Help with the 'Mickey Mouse' group.*

And so I'll keep on running,
To leave myself behind.
Hiding in my busyness,
I hope I will not find
That I cannot run forever;
That soon I'll reach the top
Of that mountain where, for the first time,
I'll hear God screaming "Stop!"



Sometimes our insecurities can make us so self-focused that we neglect those around us, even though we may acknowledge their need. We see ourselves as competitors for restricted resources and so become afraid to share our friends or even our church with others, just in case their benefit means our loss.

All I Need Is A Miracle

Finding help is never easy;
But now it's here, I'll keep it mine.
I dare not share it with another,
In case they steal my lifeline.

I'm sorry that you have no support;
I'm sorry that you're feeling so low.

But I'm sure you'll find what is needed.
When and where? I do not know.

Perhaps a friend who doesn't know you
Will, by chance, knock on your door.
And years of rejection will simply vanish,
As you open up; that's what friends are for.

Or perhaps God will reveal you, in a picture,
To a church whilst they're in prayer.
Perhaps He'll send you one of His angels
Out of the blue, to love and care.

I hope that you can find a fellowship
Which meets your needs in every way.
Filled with loving, gentle people
To comfort your grief, dry your tears away.

I feel so helpless standing here
When I've support but you have none.
I pray that God will find an answer;
Because when He does, then you'll be gone.

It's easy making such bland statements,
When we're the ones who aren't in need.
Why not demonstrate through our actions?
Not use empty words to mask our greed.



We may try to hide our insecurities behind different masks or personas, but be assured; the truth will come out in the end. It is much better to deal with insecurity rather than try to hide it. Fermentation leads to explosions if not handled correctly.

Camouflage

Into the background you blend so effortlessly!
Unseen. Unheard. Unnoticed.
Afraid to stand out from the crowd, yet
Desperate to be seen;
Desperate to be appreciated;
Desperate to be loved;
Desperate to be admired;
Desperate!

How quickly your colors change!
One minute black, the next white;
Then black again; but never grey,
Unless it's how you want to be treated.
So many contrasts, so many changes
That you can't keep up with yourself.
One moment agreeing with a point-of-view
You trashed,
Less than a minute ago!

Your coat of many colors fits well!
So does the veneer of composure that you wear;
Camouflage to hide that deep, inner driving.
How sad and how dangerous,
That a chameleon, perfectly hidden,
Becomes naked and exposed
When concealed anger burns so fiercely!
Changing color, from green to red.
Revealing its true position and identity.



Court Jester

Yo! Ho! Ho! Life is good;
I'm happy when I'm sad.
My painted smile hides the pain.

Which is really not that bad.

How great to do things my way,
It helps me to be free.
No need to worry about others;
My life revolves around me.

I love to be so popular,
The center of what goes on.
As long as I get what I need,
I'll milk it 'til I'm done.

I'm so much of a natural;
No effort is involved.
I simply wear my jester's smile
And that's the problem solved.

My actions are pernicious;
My words convince and sway
My audience, who are unaware
Of the dangerous games I play.

Today I'll play the jester;
Tomorrow I'll play the fool.
Perhaps next week I'll play the victim,
No problem when I'm so cool.

It's easy when those around me
Are taken on board my ride.
And thankfully, so few know me,
Or see the 'me' inside.

So I'll play my game of roulette,
Until I fall from grace.
Then I'll pack my bags and move out,
To find some other place.



Crashing Cymbal

More composed than a photograph,
You stand there.
A synthetic smile hiding the real, heart-torn you,
Who cowers like a frightened child in the corner.
Behind the closed doors of pride
And the bar-clad prison cell of your mind.

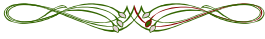
Denying the truth can only have
A finite span.
Then, the carefully papered cracks tear,
Exposing the frailty of flesh and blood.
Arrogance will give way to brokenness,
Confidence crumble to vulnerability.

You speak with man-made authority,
Raising your hands,
Stained with the foul stench of hypocrisy.
Playing to a gallery of fools.
Lying with empty words from an empty heart
Cloaked in the marble of denial.

So, play you crashing cymbal.
Reverberate resounding gong!
A unilateral display of deceit.
Empty of love or compassion; shout your empty praises,
Whilst you poison those closest to you,
Drawing them into your black hole.

You may speak with the tongues of men,
And of angels.
But without love, you are only a noise!
A sad reflection of the person you once were.

The image of God, marred by bitterness,
And failure to acknowledge how you really feel.



Friendship

'An ounce of action is worth a ton of theory' (Friedrich Engels)

'I am only one, but I am still one; I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; I will not refuse to do the something I can do' (Helen Keller)

Friendship Is A Verb In A Hurting World

If only life was as simple
As you'd like it to be.
Simple actions; simple answers.
The Bible, a recipe book;
An almanac to cure all ills.
Black and white; right and wrong.
Applying words out of context
So they say what you want them to say.

If only friendship and love
Were as simple and cheap
As you show them to be.
Disposable; use once then throw away
When they become tarnished
With the failings of others.
Nouns; objects, with no cost.
An outward show with an inner vacuum.

If only Jesus hadn't said
What he really said!
Challenging simple solutions;
Turning our natural inclinations
Upside down.
Encouraging us to swim against the flow.
Dirty words; commitment; trust; pain;
Dirty hands with a healing balm; for others.

If only you'd understand
How much you meant to me.
A rock; a hiding place.
If only you'd realize
The desolation you brought.
The raping of my trust.
If only you could see
That friendship is a verb, in a hurting world.

Above And Beyond

Is life all about
Taking the easy way out?
What about sweat and toil and cost,
Loving against the odds when all seems lost?

Is life all about
Taking the easy way out?
Should I trade wrong with wrong,
And make them pay, rather than get along?

Is life all about
Taking the easy way out?
Is it wrong to fight
For what others think wrong, when you know it's right?

Is life all about
Taking the easy way out?
Where's the cost and where's the pain,
If I don't forgive others, again and again?

Is life all about
Taking the easy way out?
Off-pat answers and easy solutions,
Rather than love, commitment and resolutions?

Life is all about
Not taking the easy way out!
Not running and hiding and lying low,
But facing-up and learning to grow.

Life is all about
Not taking the easy way out!
But loving the hating and seeing their beauty.
Forgiving at all times, it's our God given duty!



Friend@Alltimes.Com

Our times together haven't always been easy.
Do you remember the day of the big misunderstanding?
We fought like infantrymen with fixed bayonets!
And in the end we didn't kill each other,
We were friends

So many times we made a mess of things!
You defending your corner; me defending mine.
Both afraid to give ground in case the other won.
And in the end, we still didn't hate each other, because
We were friends.

Then came the time for you to leave.
Out of the blue! No warning or time for me to prepare.
No hurt; only a sadness that our intimacy would be lost
As the miles separated us. But still we didn't fail;
We remained friends.

Then I broke the news to you
Of how I'd fallen from grace.
I felt you'd never forgive me and be like so many others, melt away.

But you didn't! You stood firm, holding my hand.
And we remain friends.

How deep my love for you,
That in life's hardest hours
You remained faithful to your promise, to stand...
To stand with me. How privileged I am
That you're still my friend.

And as time rolls slowly on, bringing new fears,
Re-opening old wounds which have yet to heal.
What a comfort to have you by my side,
In body, or in spirit. What a blessing to know
That you're my friend...

At all times!



Telephone Lifeline

We hardly knew each other.
A few words shared over coffee.
A meal shared with mutual friends,
And a short musical interlude.

So why, do you extend a hand of friendship
When those I expected to stay,
Have deserted me, leaving this island in stormy seas?

Why, are you one of a minority who care for me
When life crumbles, the tempests break,
And days turn to weeks, turn to months?

Why, do you continue to visit
When there are so many miles between us?

Not offering your advice,
But a listening ear and an empathetic heart.

And when your life becomes too hectic
To make a visit in person,
You visit me on the telephone; leaving
Messages of hope;
Messages of comfort;
Messages of concern;
Messages of love.

When walls close in around me,
When snares trap me,
When poison arrows pierce my heart and soul,
The balm of your voice and your love
Is ever ready to greet me
On my mobile lifeline.

The difference is that you have lived!
Experienced deep joy and deep pain;
Rejection; uncertainty; fear; forgiveness.
Your love honed and kindled through knowing
What it is to be in the dust,
Then picked up and given a new start.

You offer no hollow words of superficial spirituality.
You don't eat away at the fibre of my being with guilt trips.
You don't take the moral high ground, justifying it with scriptures
Taken out of context!

Yes, you've known true forgiveness first-hand,
Even in the confusion of a hurting world.
And because of that, I can thank you,
For being my telephone lifeline.



When All Else Fails

As lifelines are slowly cut
And certainty disappears.
When Rock crumbles to dust;
You are there.

As those outside, stare in
With disapproving looks,
But offer no helping hand;
You are there.

When friends give their advice,
And judge and jury sit
To condemn me for my crime.
You are there.

As my spirit melts like butter
Cut by a red-hot knife.
When my heart cracks in the heat;
You are there.

When I'm left all alone
Outside the city wall.
No strength to carry on;
You are there.

I cannot understand;
The cost to you's so great.
But life can carry on, because
You're still there.



God sends us the most unexpected help and yet we miss it simply because it does not fit into our preconceived ideas of how it will or should happen.

Heaven Sent

You have been where I am,
Deserted and alone.
Escape routes blocked by fear,
Support from friends long gone.
No reason on this earth
Should cause our paths to cross.
But I'm so glad they did,
As you help me in my loss.

When those I hoped would be there
Have fled to higher ground.
Untainted by my failings;
Vanishing without a sound;
You, my friend, are here,
Our faiths so far apart.
God bless you, for you have
A special place in my heart.

Your arms enfold around me,
Your heart is filled with love.
Your lips, they speak compassion,
As if from heaven above.
I hope my 'friends' can hear,
And I hope my 'friends' can see,
God's love at work through you,
An angel sent to me.



Isla

You are my constant companion,
Faithful to the last.
Close by my side at all times,
Guarding me until trouble's passed.

You give me hope and courage,
If silence shouts too loud.
I feel you warm against me,
Protecting me from the crowd.

When absent, how I miss you.
When present, how I care.
When hurting, what a comfort
To know that you are there.

My Isla how I love you,
My words cannot express
The joy you bring me each new day,
The many ways you bless.

And now we're re-united,
No longer kept apart.
My eyes, my love, my guide dog;
Let's make a brand new start!



Friendships can be a delicate balance between commitment and abuse.

Snakes And Ladders

Climbing up the ladder,
Life is looking good.
I'd love to make things different,

If only I could.

Arising from the ashes
Has been no easy way.
It's been like snakes and ladders,
Up and down each day.

I've climbed so many ladders,
Then fallen down again.
So rarely on the level;
So rarely out of pain.

The snakes they lie in waiting.
Too often they're my friends.
Striking in their venom.
The torment never ends.

The poison lasts for ages.
It leaves me paralysed.
I think I need to miss a go,
Or wear some heavy disguise.

So I'll try and climb the ladders,
Avoid those snakes in the grass.
Hopefully, I'll move ever upward;
Until the finishing post I pass.



Take The Risk

I'd like to be your friend;
I'd like to help you out.
I'd like to share your pain;
Understand what it's all about.

I'd like to be your friend;
I'd like to get involved.
I'd like to do some good,
And see your problems solved.

I'd like to be your friend;
I'd like you to know I'm here.
I'd like to, but I can't,
Because my friends fill me with fear.

It's too risky to get involved;
It's too risky to show I care.
It's too risky being with you;
It's too risky for me to dare.

I'd risk my reputation,
If only I had the guts.
But I couldn't face the opposition,
From my blinkered friends in their ruts.

I'll try to stay in contact;
I hope you'll keep in touch.
I'll try to be here for you,
But I fear I'll risk too much.

I'd like to be your friend.
I'm sure it's best if I do.
I'd like to take the risk...
Well then! Why don't you?



Hindsight is a wonderful thing. It would be so much better if, once we had learned from our mistakes, we didn't keep repeating them.

Twenty-20

I'd never have done it that way
If I knew what I know now.
Or asked such stupid questions,
If you had shown me how.

We'd have arrived much sooner,
If I had known the way.
And we'd still be together
If I'd thrown my pride away.

Our lives would be so different,
If only I had seen,
The way that God was leading
Is not where we have been.

“What?” and “If” and “Maybe”
Are easy when it's done.
But they're decisions to be taken
When you're on the run.

With hindsight it's so easy,
You know where you went wrong;
You see the steps you've taken
As you have gone along.

But life is one long journey.
We need to count the cost.
Experience is learned from good and bad,
Without it you'd be lost.



Injustice & Abuse

'The time is always right to do what is right' (Martin Luther King Jr)

It is often when our unconditional love and friendship are most needed that we choose to make them most conditional. When we do, a healthy relationship can rapidly become abusive.

Then God Stepped In

My friends are my support
Whilst life is good they give me all I need.
We enjoy time together;
Share our deepest thoughts, our souls transparent,
Our lives laid bare to each other.
Silence is security; company and trust are hand in hand.
Smiles and tears weld our hearts.

Until I walk in the shadow of failure,
And confess my weakness and frailty.
Then, as I lie in the dust
You kick me harder.
My bared soul becomes a burning wound.
You remind me daily of my fall.
Will my mistakes haunt me all of my life?

I crave to feel God's touch and His love!
Yet you rape me of that privilege.
In your quest for justice
You are blind to the needs
Of the person within this egg shell.

God must weep
As another cross is raised in His name.
Empty of love, but full of shame;
I hang there, naked and exposed for all to see.
Will I ever be able to trust again

When it is my friends who hammer in the nails and thrust the spear,
Crown me with thorns and spit in my face?

Yes, friends were my support.
Whilst life was good
They gave me all I needed, until;

Until they left,
And then God stepped in.



This happened to a Christian friend mine at a time when they most needed help
and support. Although the abuser walked away, the abused could not.

Partial Impartiality

I am your confidant,
Your rock in times of need.
Make yourself vulnerable;
Freely open your heart to me, because
You are safe.

I am your confidant;
Listening to your deepest sorrows.
Hearing that voice from deep within you
Whispering your fears and uncertainties. But with me
You are safe.

I am your confidant;
Lay your soul bare on my altar;
Feel secure in my arms;
Rest easy in my presence, because
You are safe.

I am your confidant;
Your darkest secrets are safe with me;
Those thoughts you want hidden from others
Are secure in my trust.
You are safe.

I am your confidant.
Ever willing to give my time freely;
Holding your frail heart in my hands;
Making it easy for you to unburden, because you know
You are safe.

I am your confidant;
My love and friendship are unconditional;
My help and advice are impartial;
I'm here in the good times and in the bad, so
You are safe.

Sadly I cannot carry on.
You haven't lived-up to my expectations.
I guess my unconditional love and impartiality
Really did have conditions, so I must leave you;
Naked and exposed...

Good-bye!



There are always those people who get involved with helping others for the 'kick of it' and for recognition from their peers, rather than out of a real concern for their victim. The end-result is manipulation and abuse.

Mary Mary

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How do your guilt-trips grow?
You show me love, say it's from above;
But really it's part of the show.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How long will you be my friend?
Will you say 'Good-bye' and make me cry?
I'm sure you will win in the end.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How can you be so cruel?
Your words are hushed, they leave me crushed,
And cowering here, feeling like a fool.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How can you be so blind?
I'm here so ill, yet even still
You give me a piece of your mind.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How can you believe such lies?
Your advice is free, but you never ask me!
Then you ignore my pleas and my cries.

Scary Mary, quite contrary,
How do you feel today?
Have you done your good deeds and sown the seeds
Of doubt, and made your victim pay?

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How do you sleep at night?
Is your conscience clear? Do you feel God near?
Or does He weep at the battles that you fight?

Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
Why can't you please be real?

No more shallow pretence, climb down off the fence,
And start to admit how you feel.



There are times when our ability to move forward is hindered or prevented by people who insist on reminding us about sins for which we have already repented and for which God has already forgiven us.

Sin In A Box

Hiding quietly in the corner,
Well away from public view,
Sits a box; it's nothing special,
Really quite dull and bland in hue.

There is no key, there is no lock;
Joints and edges are hard to see.
The lid's shut tight and never opens
Unless you press the button in me.

Locked inside are life's cold secrets;
Though I can't remember what!
All, I thought, have been forgiven,
Though others clearly think they've not!

It seems church friends and church leaders,
'Forget me not' where sin's concerned.
Time is frozen at when I'm guilty;
Whatever I do I get my fingers burned.

They even seem to make decisions
On where I stand before Father God.
Decisions based on pure assumption,
A good excuse to use the rod.

This sin in a box is only opened
When my accusers their lies expound.
From pew to pulpit, they're all guilty
Of grinding me further into the ground.

Where is love and where's forgiveness?
I see a vacuum hanging there.
Once more your words betray your actions.
You press the button and leave me bare.



Have you ever felt like this after you've been 'helped' by so-called friends?

Football

Bounce! Bounce! Bounce!
Up and down I go.
One minute feeling happy,
The next I feel so low.

When life is smiling sweetly
And the sun dries up the rain;
The attackers' boots come kicking;
Down I go again.

Their timing is perfection;
I'm caught right off my guard.
My heart begins to crumble;
I hit the floor so hard.

I'm lying at the bottom,
Things surely can't get worse!
Then Boot! Boot! Boot! From nowhere.

This must be some dark curse.

I feel like some old football,
Kicked from pillar to post.
If friends are doing the kicking,
That's when it hurts the most.

Some day the game will finish
And I'll be left alone.
No longer bouncing wildly,
My fighting will be done.

How sad you're now my attacker,
When once you were my friend.
Oh God! Please blow the whistle
And bring this to an end.



Tin Can

You drank from me until I was empty.
Then, as refuse, you cast me aside.
I lie here, exposed; waiting for the next passer by
To kick me out of the way,
Or crush me and toss me into the bin.

Oh! No! They've seen me! A glinting eye;
A smiling face. Good news or bad news?
Holding me gently, exploring what was once
A reason to want me, my label.
They look inside. I see disappointment etched on their face.

Bounce! Ouch! I'm rejected; thrown away; again!
More knocks; more dents; more scratches.
What was once beautiful, desired by many;

Valuable and sought after.
Now no more than an object of derision.

Keep low! Here comes another, lifting me from the dirt.
Held gently in his hands, I see a deep, a deep, oh! I don't know!
Concern for my battered state? Compassion? I'm confused!
I'm being lovingly carried, lovingly cared for.
My dents; my scratches; my whole self; slowly being restored.

Dents do not just disappear; scratches do not smooth away by magic.
Pain and helplessness are part of my restoration.
But gradually, I feel new and I feel valued again.
My former beauty eclipsed by something much greater.
A knowledge that I am special and wanted; even needed!

I felt like an old tin can.
But I'm flesh and blood. And this flesh and blood
Has found, at last, purpose and a reason for being.



When a person is repeatedly on the receiving end of injustice or abuse, they find it very hard to trust anyone.

Suddenly

You had no time for me.
I was young; you were free
To do whatever you wanted,
Whilst I sat and listened.

You had no time for me.
As we grew older, separated by miles.
Cultures apart. But you never visited,

Whilst I sat and waited.

You had no time for me.
Different lives in different spheres.
Grown up, mature, responsible.
Whilst I was still a child inside.

You suddenly have time for me,
On your terms! Compensating for guilt
You've stored over the years,
When I was low on your list of priorities.

You suddenly have time for me.
I'm suspicious! Nurtured by neglect.
Matured by the experience
Of being abandoned.



The more sinister side of abuse is that it can be happening right under our noses
but we either cannot, or choose not to see it.

No Voice No Choice

Over the years we shared so much;
A special word, a tender touch.
How sad your attitude has always been
Arrogant, confident, with actions unseen
By friends around us, who never heard
The aggressive threat or selfish word.

Not a partnership; you played boss!
What was your gain was often my loss.
My money was never really my own,
As your response has now shown.

And still you press for more and more;
You've thrown me out and locked the door.

Poor health was just another chance
To play your tune, for me to dance.
You chose my weak times to be strong;
I had no chance to challenge your wrong.
You gave me lists of what you'd claim,
When I couldn't even remember my name.

You push things on at such high speed,
Afraid to stop and admit your need.
How sad, your friends support your case,
But cannot look me in the face.
I'm homeless now, running to hide.
A broken ruin, bleeding inside.

You've controlled my life for many years,
Neglected love, cultivated my fears.
You're so blind, you could not see
The way you were destroying me.
And now we're left disputing trivia,
Like who owns the toothpaste and who owns the Nivea.

So convince them all you're in control.
But running away will take its toll.
You cannot hide for all your life
From how you decimated me, your wife.
You left me dumb, without a voice,
As you gave me no chance, gave me no choice.



We need to examine our motives to make sure that we are not guilty of the thoughts, words or actions that we condemn in others.

Bread And Scorpions

“Please give me bread,” pleads the beggar.
“Why, what have you done to deserve it?”
“What right have you to ask me for bread?”
“Someone else will give you what you need.”

“Please give me bread,” pleads the beggar.
“I’m too busy at the moment, ask me later.”
“I can’t afford to give you any.”
“Shhh! Wait a minute; I’m doing something important!”

“Please give me bread,” pleads the beggar.
“Don’t sit outside our church.”
“Don’t clutter-up our doorway.”
“Go away! You’ll put people off!”

“Please give me bread,” pleads the beggar.
“Who invited you into our service?”
“Sorry, you’ll have to move; that’s my seat!”
“How long is it since you last washed?”

“Please give me bread,” pleads the beggar.
“How long have you been here?” asks Jesus.
“Here, have mine!” says Jesus;
“Only bread?” asks Jesus. “Let’s go for a meal.”

“Please give me bread,” asks Jesus.
“Of course Lord. This is freshly made.”
“It’s Jesus! Come in! Make yourself at home.”
“What a privilege! We’re blessed to have you with us.”

“Please give me bread,” pleads the beggar.
“Is this man with you Jesus?”
“He is? Bring him in. Your friend is our friend!”
“Is there anything else we can do for you both?”

Jesus wept.



Whose church is it anyway?

My Church

This is my church! Please stay away!
I need my space. Here. Today.
I got here first and staked my claim.
To protect us all, not to blame.

I may be new! But I was quick!
I knew exactly who to pick.
I shared my story, warts and all,
How it wasn't me that had the fall.

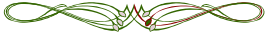
I ruled you out before you came.
Declared your history and your name.
I was safe, the wall built strong.
The innocent party and you were wrong.

I care for you, but that's easy when
I have support, and even then
Not quite enough for me to move,
To show my love, this 'care' to prove.

I'm happy to see you on my terms.
But I don't want to open a can of worms!
So it's any time, any place.
Just not in this church. I need my space.

This is my church! Please stay away!

I need my space, here, today.
Don't ask me how God's house can fall
To ticket holders only; not free for all



CHAPTER 2 God

Introduction

I always think that if you ask three different Christians for their ideas about God, you'll get four different answers. The subject is so big, and our backgrounds and experiences are so diverse, that we all have a different idea or expression of who we think God is, and what he is able to do. For some of us, God's powers and abilities are limitless; for others, God is scarcely bigger than our imagination. Why is this? I believe it can be summed up in the words 'teaching', 'expectation', 'experience' and 'relevance'. For example, if we have never been taught about God's power, never read books, heard present-day accounts or seen videos about His miraculous powers, then our perception and expectation of God will be very different from someone who has. If we are perfectly content in life, with no apparent 'needs', we are far less likely to acknowledge our need of God.

One fact which never ceases to amaze me is that the Almighty, Creator God who made me actually wants a day-to-day relationship with me, and was prepared to send His own son, Jesus, to die so that this could be possible.

I believe in a God who is so powerful that He only has to speak a word and universes are created, and yet, allows us to have free will to ignore Him and do our own thing. I also believe that He is a God who is so intimately involved with His Creation that if He was to withdraw His hand, everything would fall into chaos, yet He must watch as we, His created beings, mar and destroy His world. I believe He is a God of total love, but also a God of total judgment. But I also know that He is a God who knows me better than I know myself and accepts me for who I am, not what I do, in spite of all my failings. He made me a human being not a human doing! Let's investigate God a bit further.

How Big Is God?

When I look out into the vastness of space, realizing that there are galaxies upon galaxies out there, and that the distance to even the nearest star is vast each, I'm

overwhelmed. I'm told that the edge of space is continually extending at the speed of light (about 186000 miles per second) yet all of this is held within God's hands! The Bible uses three rather technical words to describe God: omnipresent (He is present everywhere), omniscient (He knows everything there is to know), omnipotent (He is all powerful). In my mind, this all makes God pretty big!

How Big Is Our God?

This is a different question. As we have already discussed, our perception of God depends on many factors including our background, what we have been taught and how relevant it all is to our situation. How often do we hear the latest theories for the non-existence of God, or receive teaching asking whether an Almighty God could possibly be interested in us? If these are not preached directly, they are often 'implied' from the way in which God and His power are diminished. We in the church also introduce standards, or ways of behaving ('expected conduct') that people must live up to, in order to make them acceptable. But to whom are we making them acceptable? In reality, it is to us, not God. In so doing, we completely undermine God's redeeming work which says that we can't actually do anything to make ourselves acceptable to God, because He has done it all for us through the death of Jesus on the cross. Yes! The same God who made everything, cared about and loved His Creation so much that he contracted himself to live on earth as a human for little over thirty years. Somehow we lose the significance of this historically proven event. Part of the problem is that as humans, we relate much more easily to the finite ('Jesus the man') than we do to the infinite ('Jesus the Eternal'). It seems that many of our great theological thinkers have experienced this same problem, so they have tried to reduce God to nothing bigger than their understanding or imagination. As a result, many of our churches have become almost embarrassed about expressing the hope that we have in Jesus. They have lost sight of who God really is; they have replaced the sun by a candle. How sad! When people come into our churches looking for direction and hope in their life, they are presented with an impotent God who is barely more powerful than they are. Some clergy and pastors go even further, presenting God as a 'good idea', important as something moral to hang on to in these days of uncertainty. Then there are those who would divide the church into 'true Christians' and the 'not true Christians',

distinguished not by how they live out their faith, but by which particular denomination they belong to!

I laugh when I hear some of our so-called ‘important’ church leaders and ‘celebrities’ telling us that they will have plenty to say to God about poverty, hunger, injustice, etc., when they see Him. They have made God so ‘human’ that they have no sense of His awesome power and authority. I think they are in for a surprise! The Bible gives us few accounts of people who actually encountered God person-to-person, but we know that those who did and were exposed to only part of His glory were completely overwhelmed and changed. The Bible also tells us that one day everyone will meet God face-to-face, when everyone will all bow the knee, whether they want to or not, and acknowledge that Jesus is Lord.

I believe that it’s time to return to the Bible and take seriously once again what it tells us about God. If we, as individuals and as the church, begin to grasp something of the God who is clearly presented in its pages, we would no longer offer a small, impotent, aloof and perfectionist God. We need to present, through our words and actions, a true and consistent picture of God to our church communities and to those outside. We don’t need to get hung-up about differences in practice or style or organization, as long as they are not heretical. God is a creative God who made us all different. That was His plan. So why should we believe that there is only one ‘correct’ way to worship and serve Him? He’s big enough to accept it all! All too often we base our theology, or understanding of God, on our experiences, rather than interpreting our experiences through our theology.

Fact and Fiction

I read one of those circulars on the internet recently which said something like, ‘How come, when someone tells us there are millions of stars and thousands of galaxies out there, we believe them without question, but when they tell us that the paint is wet, we have to touch it to see if they’re telling us the truth?’ We are often like this; on one hand, we accept without question, things that are huge and very difficult to understand, explain or even justify; on the other hand, we choose to doubt, even when we are presented with the evidence. I believe that Science and Medicine are two areas where this happens with alarming regularity. We are presented with ‘facts’ that in reality, are no more than ideas or a theory, and we

accept them without challenge. However, when we are presented with concrete evidence for God, we choose to challenge or ignore it.

Many of today's scientists would want me to believe that life and the universe have developed by chance, or through some cosmic accident. This I cannot accept. I have worked in science and medicine for more than twenty years and never cease to be amazed by the complexity, yet order of molecular interactions within the body. For example, the body's defence mechanisms against invasion by harmful organisms or viruses are incredibly complex, yet structured, as the individual cells communicate with each other through the release of specific chemicals. Whole armies of blood cells are mobilised in response to these chemical signals, resulting in non-specific and then highly specific killing actions. The invading organisms are exterminated, but the body's own cells are not. I see in this, evidence of loving care and design by a Creator God. Process and reactions don't just happen to fulfil some laws of science; those laws of science try to explain the way things happen. Many of history's greatest scientists and physicians were men and women whose knowledge of God spurred them on to look more closely at His Creation. They tried to understand something of what was in God's mind when He created light, the universe, animals, plants, trees, air, life, etc. Science was about discovering God, not a substitute for Him. We needn't be too worried by the latest scientific 'proofs' for this and that. All through the ages ideas have come and they have gone. They always will. However, we have a God who is constant and unchanging. What a comfort, and what a message to tell a hurting world.

God's Promises

The amazing thing in all of this is that the Almighty God not only controls the Universe, but also wants an intimate, loving relationship with the people He has created. That means us! Why else would He have died for those He made? Equally amazing is that He promises to be with us at all times.

“I will never leave you; I will never abandon you.” (Hebrews 13, verse 5b)
“I will be with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28, verse 20b)
These words from the Bible may be familiar to some of us, or perhaps new and strange to others. But when we read promises like these, how do we really interpret them? I think we 'hear' some of the following:

“I am with you some of the time.”

“I am with you in your Spirit-filled meetings when you call me down from heaven to be with you.”

“I am with you in the good in the nice places of life, but stop at the door of those bad places.”

“I am with you as long as you’re doing good and not doing wrong.”

“I am with you only when you can feel me.”

I’m certain that Jesus meant exactly what he said and therefore, ‘always’ means ‘always’.

Living in a material world means that we can become conditioned to accept that something only exists if we can see it or feel it. However, the Bible tells us that God is with us by His Holy Spirit. We have been made with a ‘spirit part’ in our life that touches God and through which God can touch us. It is through this spirit part of our life that we can feel or hear God. If our lives are filled with busyness and activity, we must make extra effort to set time aside to be still, listen and know that God is there. Otherwise, we will feel isolated and alone, particularly when difficult times come, and we will end up doubting God’s presence and promises. We will accept the lies that God is only with us when we can feel Him; when we’re doing good; some of the time; when we need Him; when we want Him, etc. In so doing, we receive a message of compromise where the God we serve is relegated to a god who serves us. We lose sight of the true God; often at the time we most need to know that He is close by. Some of you will have seen or read a work called ‘Footprints’ where the writer describes a walk with God along a beach. As the writer encounters hard times, they notice that the two sets of footprints side-by-side, representing the writer and Jesus, become only one. When the writer asks God where He was during that time of need, God gently explains that it was during those hard times that He carried the writer.

I have known some inspiring characters who have faced incredible hardship and loss, during which they not only managed to hold on to God’s promises, but also remained aware of His presence, even at the darkest, most crushing times. When asked about their ‘secret’, they all had a similar reply; “I spend time with God in the good times and know Him spending time with me in my bad times.”

Some of us actually choose to be busy, particularly in our church lives, as a way to escape from having to hear what God is really saying to us. It is a way of boosting our self-esteem and ego through the praise of others. Our busyness justifies our salvation. In reality, it is a good way to stop us from having enough time to face-up to our insecurities, fears and the truth. We don't have time to enjoy an intimate relationship with God; we miss-out on receiving the joy and benefits of His promises. However, even when we struggle in this way, Jesus' promises remain unchanged; He is always with us and will never leave us or forsake us.

Knowing God

'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.' (John 14: 9b)

Intimacy with God is the ultimate experience in life. For many of us it is an all-too-rare occurrence either because of our busyness or through choice. Being aware of God's presence gives us opportunity to sit and listen, to wait quietly and enjoy being with Him or simply to share with Him the joy of what He has given us. This poem is a tribute to a friend who enjoys intimacy with God as she shares with Him her gift of music.

Notes Of My Soul

When I share your presence
In the stillness of day or night.
When my heart cries to you
And words mean so little,
Or seem so empty.
I engage in speech and praise
Through the notes of my soul!

No symphony orchestra,
Or grand opera can compare
With the music that you play
Through your creation.
A concerto of beauty;
An opus of pure delight;
Far beyond words!

But what a joy and privilege
To share my notes with yours.
An anthem so intimate, yet powerful.
To use those gifts
With which you have blessed me,
To bless others and reach
Deep into the secret places.

Thank you for the times
When the notes of my soul
Blend with your own,
In harmony and melody.
When our keys, together
Unlock a treasure chest
Of beautiful jewels in others.



Knowing God is sometimes our only source of security in times of trial or personal distress.

Touching Darkness

A screaming silence;
A sense of gloom;
Oppressive thoughts
Fill the room.
It's only mid-day
But it feels like night.
Demons unknown
Join in the fight.

Tormented souls
Crowd my mind;
There's no escape
In front or behind.
A restless unease;
No peace; no joy;
No warmth; no love;
Hell bent to destroy.

Tangible darkness,
Iced with fear.

Even though
God is near.
Come Father, Son,
And Spirit too.
Bring release
As only you can do.

I need your power;
I need your hand
To guide and help
Me understand
That darkness, though real,
Has no hold over light.
Burn bright Spirit
Consume the night.

So wrap me around
With your strong arm.
And keep me safe
From any harm.
Come quickly Lord
And set me free.
I'm glad that I
Cannot see!



One Day Soon

One day soon I'll hear your voice.
One day soon I'll make the right choice.
One day soon the clouds will part;
One day soon I'll make a new start.

One day soon wars will end.
One day soon enemy becomes friend.

One day soon love will conquer hate.
One day soon won't be too late.

One day soon I'll know God near.
One day soon love will banish fear.
One day soon faith's drum will beat.
One day soon my jigsaw will be complete.

One day soon is spoken in hope.
One day soon gives me strength to cope.
One day soon is not too far away.
One day soon could be today



Many in our churches have come to understand 'Peace' as 'an absence of conflict'. However, this is only part of the truth.

Peace

P is for 'presence', I need it each day.
E is for 'every time', I get in the way.
A is for 'anger', which burns deep inside.
C is for 'conquer', to win and divide.
E is for 'evil', which we can't talk about.

Peace is a wholeness, in fear and in doubt.

P is for 'problems', we face them each day;
I is for 'interest', on the price that we pay.
E is for 'excellence', despised by so many.
C is for 'charity'; I'll give my last penny.
E is for 'empty', a vacuum, a space.
Piece is a part, not the whole of God's grace.

So aim for the peace

That is powerful and strong.
Not just a piece,
Or you'll see it all wrong.
It's peace that will last,
And peace that will heal.
Then when storms blow and toss you,
Security you'll feel.



Knowing God opens up many opportunities for surprises.

Who Would You Choose?

Would you choose...
A young girl,
Born in humble surroundings
In some backwater of the country?
A girl, poor, unmarried and unknown
To many but her chosen partner?
He, a craftsman, fashioning beauty from nature;
Building character with sweat and toil.

Would you choose...
A young girl,
With little more to her name
Than purity and the clothes she wore?
A young girl, not even a woman!
Insignificant in the mighty works
Of the occupying army.
Insignificant in the ranks of the local religious elite?

To bear the Son of God?

God did!



What If?

What If;

God said, "I love you!"
God said, "I care."
God says, "I'm with you;
Though you don't know I'm there?"

What If;
God said, "I love you!"
God said, "Love me."
God says, "I made you;
And I'll set you free?"

What If;
God says, "I love you."
God says, "I'm your friend."
God says, "I'll never leave you;
I'll be with you past the end?"

He does!



Sometimes knowing God is honed and refined through life's experiences.

Living By Numbers

One, two, what shall I do?
Three, four, find out more!
Five, six, I'm in a fix.
Seven, eight, I can't wait!

Nine, ten, begin again.

One, two, turn to you.
Three, four, start to explore.
Five, six, still in a fix!
Seven, eight, learn to wait.
Nine, ten, begin again.

One, two, I'm nearly through.
Three, four, I've found your door.
Five, six, still in a fix.
Seven, eight, I've learned to wait.
Nine, ten, beginning again.



If we knew God better we may be less surprised by His answers to our questions.

What Would Jesus Do?

I'm standing at the eighth tee,
A one iron in my hand.
I wonder, "What would Jesus do?"
I need to understand.
Would he drive straight down the fairway?
Would he swing in from the right?
These answers are so crucial;
I need to win tonight!

I'm shopping in the supermarket,
And looking for my tea.
I wonder, "What would Jesus do?"
Buy one, get one free?
Lord, guide me to the bargains,
Show me the cheapest price

For sausage, beans and fresh brown bread,
Chicken and long-grain rice.

I'm looking for a new car,
To stand out from the rest.
I wonder, "What would Jesus do?"
No doubt he'd choose the best.
A V-twelve pumping powerhouse,
Flash and easy to see.
After all, I am the pastor;
God wants the best for me!

I'm sat here judging others,
My brain's dropped out of gear.
I never ask, "What would Jesus do?"
In case I may just hear
His words demanding dignity,
Then I'd have to change my view!
And open up my blinded eyes
To see what Jesus would do.



Showing God

'Work to become, not to acquire.' (Elbert Hubbard)

What picture of God do we paint for those who look on from outside our churches?

In The Eyes Of The World

The world looks in from outside these four walls,
Seeing our posters and hearing our calls.
Encountering us, as we live day to day.
Are we attractive to them or do we scare them away?

Our lives are transparent to the people outside,
Who see straight through our pretence and our pride.
Don't think that it's easy to show them the way.
They've been fooled before and are not 'easy prey'.

They may not know God, His ways or His voice;
But they recognize falsehood and they can make a choice.
They don't want trite answers or simplistic rules.
Don't treat them like second-best and don't treat them like fools.

For these people have two eyes and two ears too.
They see and they hear all the things that we do.
Their minds are made up and they give honest views,
As we make a difference, living out the 'Good News'

But why are we 'we' and they 'they' when we talk?
Together we live and together we walk
Through this world, full of love, rejection and hate.
It's time to show God rules, not some nebulous 'fate'.

For the church is God's bride, a source of true light.
Is this what the world sees? For all have a right

To experience God's love through our lives day by day.
In the eyes of the world, are we leading the way?



Church

C is for community, the way we should be.
H is for heaven, where we're finally free.
U is for unity, not uniform; we're all different.
R is for reaching, whether called or sent.
C is for compassion, God's heart for us all.
H is for helping, whoever may call.

I is for integrity, the key to our witness.
S is for saving, God's work as we're selfless.

U is for unconditional, which means no strings attached.
S is for starting, God's power unlatched.



Our God

Our God's a God of incompetence,
Contracted to a span.
Infinite become finite,
In the mind of man.

No longer a God all-powerful,
Unless it suits our case.
We tie His hands in shackles,
Restrict His time and space.

We grow very uncomfortable;

When He doesn't fit in our box.
He's no bigger than our imagination,
Held captive in our stocks.

What happened to the God of mystery,
Who multiplies the bread;
Controls the forces of nature;
And resurrects the dead?

What about reconciliation,
Between a woman and a man;
Between peoples, tribes and nations?
Surely we've lost sight of His plan.

We swap God's grace for justice;
His love cannot be found.
No room for God's compassion,
As we take the moral high ground.

So wake-up church, get real!
Put Jesus on His throne.
Stop building empty empires,
And let God's Kingdom come.



Many of us have replaced dreaming with fatalistic acceptance. Dreams rarely materialize spontaneously. Sometimes we need to dream the impossible and work with God to see the dream realized. George Bernard Shaw wrote, *'You see things and say, 'Why?' but I dream things that never were and say, 'Why not?'*

Dare To Dream

What would happen if we dared to dream;
If we dared to take God at His word;

Dared to hear His inner voice,
Often talked about, but seldom heard?

What would happen if we dared to dream;
Re-visit the visions laid dormant so long;
Dared to give space for each other to grow,
Rather than worrying about what may go wrong?

What would happen if we dared to dream;
Gave God space in our world every day;
Dared to live-out our faith with our friends;
Got our hands dirty; showed them a new way?

What would happen if we dared to dream;
That the world could be different, not as it is now?
It can! But it must start with you and with me;
Dreams will become reality, as God's love we show.



Occasionally we meet a real gem; quiet, unassuming, filled with God's grace, yet unaware of the impact they have on others. Somehow they are eclipsed in our noisy, busy, activity-centered church communities. Perhaps it is time to re-evaluate our priorities and learn how to show God to people rather than throw God at people.

Starlight

Flickering faintly on an inky backdrop,
Starlight feebly fights to be seen
Against the gentle blaze of a silver moon.
Light so faint, whispering to be recognized.
Yet close up, a colossal fireball of vast dimensions,
With heat to consume and light to blind.

How strange that the moon outshines
With a light that is not her own,
But borrowed, reflected from the sun.
From here she looks so large.
In reality, a million moons would not dull
The blazing glory of a single star.

So, just because the starlight battles to be seen,
Do we consider the source to be any less significant?
Do we say that the moon is greater?
A star is an all-consuming fire;
A power infinitely greater than any moon,
Tempered only by distance, time and space.

How often do we miss the stars,
In favor of a moon or sun?
Drawn to those who shout loudest for our attention.
How often is the quietest voice,
The most powerful force to bring change,
Vision, hope and a sense of belonging?

We need more stars; powerhouses, tempered
With maturity, gentleness and the acceptance
That they might not appear to be the brightest,
But against the dark vastness of space,
Their light shines, dependable, constant, sure.
Bringing change in ways unseen, deep inside.

I'm privileged to have known a star.
Gentle; unassuming; timid; unseen.
Frail with doubts; a spider's web of fears.
Yet a tower of strength for those with eyes to see
Beyond the moons and suns,
And into the heart of someone who brings joy, love and hope.



Our ability to show God to others depends upon our own relationship with Him.
We show to others what we have ourselves.

All Things To All Men

God's love becomes a pillow
To catch us when we fall.
God's love becomes a ladder
To help us over the wall.
God's love spreads like a blanket,
Protecting; safe; secure.
God's love, like fresh white driven snow
Is even, deep and pure.

God's love is our anchor,
Firm when the tempests rage.
God's love is a strong and solid rock
Which never changes with age.
God's love is a prickly thorn bush;
Close encounters can cause us pain.
God's love is a mighty waterfall,
Washing us again and again.

God's love is God's love,
To which our love cannot compare.
We need to take the risk,
Make sure it's God's love that we share.
Yes, God's love is God's love,
To which nothing can compare.
Unending; unchanging; unconditional.
This is the love we must share.



Living By Example

Climbing up the ladder,
Really making waves.
Heading for high profile;
Shouting “Jesus Saves!”

No time for hangers on;
No time for those who feel
I’m living life too hard;
It’s my glory they try to steal.

No time for giving in.
No time for making space
For anyone, but myself.
No time for mercy or grace.

No time to wait for others;
No time to stand and stare.
We live in a competitive world;
No time to lend or share.

No time to look outside,
No time to see their needs.
I can only think about me.
No time to sow the seeds
To help others look for God,
Or find Him through how I live.
And I’ll leave it to my friends
To demonstrate how to forgive.



Trophies

Worship Leader; Homeless Feeder;
Pastor; preacher; politician.
Prayer Co-ordinator; Artistic Creator;
Sunday School Teacher; Director of Mission.

Legal protector; company director;
Surgeon; solicitor; scientist.
University professor; Property assessor;
Designer; doctor or dentist.

Position; status; it's how we rate us;
Our raison d'être; identity labels.
Doing not being; looking, ever seeing
Exactly where we rank in the tables.

Little distinction; some facing extinction.
We've lost our community spirit.
Image worth more than care for the poor.
Of the world, not just in it.

God raises His people above any steeple.
He's with us outside these four walls.
We've heard His command to spread through this land
And beyond, as His Spirit calls.

So friends, it's time for us to align
Our actions with words cheaply spoken.
We are who God made us and He doesn't grade us.
As we learn that, our spirit's awoken.

It's not the trophies we own, but how we have grown,
And how we apply what we are given.
As we give Jesus space, to direct our race,
We become led, not constantly driven.



Showing God's love to others comes with a cost. Are we prepared to pay the price?

If Only Love Was Spelled Easy

If love is easy,

Why does it hurt so often?
Why must it not be conditional on what others do?
Why does it demand forgiveness?
Why is it not enough only to say the words?
Why does it require us to change for others?
Why does it insist on reconciliation?
Why am I broken when it isn't reciprocated?
Why does it cost me so much?
Why did it cost you everything?



Why?

Why think about others?
Why offer help to the poor?
Why care for the needy?
Why open my door?

Why make the effort?
Why try to show love?
Why do it myself?
Why make the first move?

Why give up the time?
Why put self aside?
Why lend a helping hand?

Why lay down my pride?

Why dare to dream?
Why change what I do?
Why think outside the box?
Why be different to you?

Why enjoy my life?
Why celebrate fun?
Why be myself?
Why rejoice when I've won?

Why talk about God?
Why let Him work in me?
Why learn to give away?
Why learn to be free?



One Word

Why not think about others?
Why not offer help to the poor?
Why not care for the needy?
Why not open my door?

Why not make the effort?
Why not try to show love?
Why not do it myself?
Why not make the first move?

Why not give up the time?
Why not put self aside?
Why not lend a helping hand?
Why not lay down my pride?

Why not dare to dream?

Why not change what I do?
Why not think outside the box?
Why not be different to you?

Why not enjoy my life?
Why not celebrate fun?
Why not be myself?
Why not rejoice when I've won?

Why not talk about God?
Why not let Him work in me?
Why not learn to give away?
Why not learn to be free?



Seeing God

'They don't like him, but the fool on the hill sees the sun going down and the eyes in his head see the world spinning round' (Lennon & McCartney)

Thorns And Straw

A back street stable in a crowded town.
Anguished screams; an occasional moan
Go unheard in the noise of a night
Of hustle and bustle, and rooms packed tight
With people, so busy and unaware
That a virgin's sweat means God is here.

No warm, cosy glow; only candle-lit straw.
A manger and oxen and filth on the floor.
No sweet smelling incense or soft comfy chair,
But cold stone walls; acrid smells in the air;
And the breath of animals to supply the heat,
In this hole in the rock on an unnamed street.

But God's not ignored the place that He's chosen
To visit as a baby, when the night air's frozen.
He treats some shepherds, the lowest of the low,
To front seat tickets at the greatest light show;
And singing and music like they've never heard before,
Which leaves them face down, shaking on the floor.

“Get up! Rejoice! For your king is here!
Run to the town and worship Him there.
Not in the palace so lofty and tall,
But lying in a stable, accessible to all.
So go! Take gifts and sing and feast,
For the mightiest God, has come down for the least.”

And in palaces and castles hundreds of miles away,

A country's elite, at the end of the day
Study changes in the stars and heavens which bring
News, that on earth is born a king.
A king so great that creation bows down,
And brings its own offering, unseen in the town.

Their journey is long and filled with pain,
Across scorching deserts and rugged terrain.
As days turn to months and months to years.
Following the bright star whenever it appears.
Then rejoicing and thanks when at last they find
A small boy, just walking; the Lord of mankind.

With regal bows and language unknown,
They offer their gifts to Mary's son.
Gold, incense and myrrh; "What can I believe?"
His mother wonders as the visitors leave
To journey back east, their hearts on fire.
They've seen and worshipped the true Messiah.

And as years roll on by and the crowd's anger grows,
In reaction to this radical who constantly shows
That God has no favourites; our rules don't apply
To the values of heaven. "Crucify!" they now cry,
So He's crowned and beaten and then nailed to a tree;
This King, Priest and Sacrifice; thorns and straw set us free.



Heartbeat

God's heartbeat pulses through His creation.
Times; seasons; everything in its proper place.
Balance; order; so many surprises;
Reflect a mind so great, yet so unpredictable.

Gazing on the wonders of the heavens;
Exploring the mysteries of the deep;
We, created beings,
Attempt to confine the Master Craftsman
Within a box; restricting Him to dimensions
We can understand and explain.

Only God has the power to contract Himself
To the dimensions of His creation.
And when he did, love flowed out to those around.
Lives were changed; nature obeyed His command;
Great storms stilled; death retired.

Who would have believed it possible?
Who could have constructed so simple, yet so costly a plan?
Only God Himself!
But why?
Because His heartbeat pulses through His creation.
And He so desires intimacy with those He has made
That no price was too high to pay
Prisons smashed; a curtain torn in two;
The eternal touching the temporal;
Infinite kissing finite; omnipotence cradling frailty.
How strong is God's heartbeat and yet how gentle!
Mortal meets immortal without injury.
In His healing fire, lost, lonely, hurting souls
Find security.

Please beat heart of God, in this frail, failing soul.
Translate me from the margins of your community
To the center of your love.
Play Rhythm of Life,
Deep within my wounded and broken spirit,
So that I may once again dance with joy,
And sing with all my heart.
Lovingly interlock the jigsaw pieces of my shattered life,
To create a new picture;

A picture pulsing with your life, love and power;
In time with your own heartbeat.



True Science

From Molecule, to cell to organism;
Micro-organization on a vast scale,
Revealing the skill of a Master Craftsman.
Not some random assembly of atoms
Driven together by increasing probability.
But a canvas on which the mind of God
Is painted in glorious Technicolor.

The beauty of a flower;
The translucence of a butterfly's wings
Reflecting colors so numerous and diverse.
Light cascades into a thousand diamonds
As a raindrop, clinging to a shivering leaf,
Splits the sun's warming rays.
One million ants move in harmony,
Jealously guarding mysteries so deep
That the minds of men have not begun to understand.

In the nucleus of the smallest cell,
DNA, life's alphabet, unwinds to replicate;
Intimate interplay under nature's control;
The smallest governing and controlling the largest.

And in the vastness of space,
One million million shining stars
Are only the beginning!
Universe upon universe, galaxy upon galaxy.
Each course so finely defined
That one small change would signal the end.

Perimeters expanding so rapidly
That we cannot begin to comprehend its vastness.

Time; space; living organisms; single cells.
Contained within the Creator's hands;
Seen by the Creator's eye;
Loved and cherished;
Shouting the praises of God;
Set in place, given a purpose.
Singing a unique song.

So, my friends, discover true science;
And discover God!



God is always with us. The question is; would we recognize Him if we met Him?

The Stranger

What is your name?
God!
Who are you?
Your maker.
Have you been there long?
Forever!
Where did you come from?
I've been here all the time.
Why haven't I seen you before?
You haven't looked.
How can I trust you?
Try me!



Seeing God in a personal crisis is hard and often difficult to believe. However, whether we 'see' Him or not, it is a fact that He is there.

Always There

Where was your love when my world fell apart?
Where was your love that I felt at the start?
Where was your love when I cried out in despair?
But my child, my love was always there!

Where was your love as my friends let me down?
Where was your love, the verb, not the noun?
Where was your love when my family showed no care?
But my child, my love was always there!

Where was your love when they hated me for my race?
Where was your love when they spat in my face?
Where was your love when those I loved were so unfair?
But my child, my love was always there!

Where was your love when Christ hung on the cross?
Where was your love as He felt such bitter loss?
Where was your love as He died broken and bare?
But my child, my love was always there!

Where is your love when a bereaved partner cries?
Where is your love when a new born baby dies?
Where is your love when we can't even utter a prayer?
My child, my love is always there!



Dawn

My days bring nothing but trials.
I know you're there;
It's just that when I'm in the thick of it,
You seem so far away.

There's never just one problem!
One after another they assault me,
Fighting for my time and energy.
Draining me, turning me this way and that.

I feel like an ant in a rainstorm.
And yet, I know you're there.
This is the solid rock that keeps me sane;
That holds me steady.

Everything else may fall around me and on me,
But when I see your light
Flickering dimly at the end of the tunnel,
I know that dawn is close at hand.



Let's think about how those outside our church communities see God through us.
Or do they?

Formula 1

Lining up on the starting grid,
With engines revving loud.
Waiting for the chequered flag
To please a capacity crowd.
One hundred laps at frightening speeds;
A great day's racing in store.
This is a spectator's sport;
We hope you'll come back for more.

They're off! The roar is deafening,
As each one fights for their place.
There's jostling, smoke and shaking fists
As five competitors leave the race.
Out in front the battle's fierce;
As yet there are no surprises.
Excitement grips and colors flash,
As the adrenaline level rises.

There's fighting in the grandstands,
Crowds arguing who's the best.
Fierce loyalty fires a conflict,
Which spoils it for the rest.
A car spins off and hits a wall;
The driver looks in trouble,
Blue lights flash, red flags wave,
A marshal drags him from the rubble.

The field is spreading out now.
But the favorite's entering the pits!
Mechanics look confused,
As the driver shouts and spits.
They weren't expecting problems;
Their cars never go wrong!
At least that's what they've been telling each other,
At team headquarters for so long.

And now the middle field passes,
It seems they're enjoying the day!
Where is their sense of 'race to the death'?
Don't they know these loyal crowds pay?
Here come the tail-enders,
Who seem to have lost their desire
To fight on for much longer.
Resignation, where once burned fire.

Now smoke and flames! There's something wrong!
A pile-up by the chicane.
It's the cars who were in one, two and three!
I wonder who was to blame?
I don't understand what's happening!
Number twenty-two in fourth place
Has stopped to rescue his opponents,
When he could easily have won this race.

Passing competitors look on,
Some barely take any interest.
Some are concerned, but others sneer
At those who'd claimed to be best.
This is a day for the history books!
An outsider takes first position.
The favorites aren't on the rostrum,
Through problems or personal decision.

The crowds have enjoyed the excitement.
They've watched with great anticipation.
But this is not Donington Park;
It's between churches across our nation.
We're so concerned with our image.
Competing, not working together
In a world that's looking for answers.
Can we afford to ignore them forever?



CHAPTER 3 Sin

Introduction

Through the ages, the church has always had its own unique way of dealing with 'sin'. Take the Spanish Inquisition for example. What better way of removing sin than removing the offenders? Nowadays, we don't kill people physically, only emotionally and spiritually. We remove them from our fellowship, either physically or by simply excluding them from our conversations. We also feel justified in giving them burdens of guilt to bear that make purgatory seem like an attractive option.

Sin is a large, complex and emotive subject. There is no doubt that the way in which we deal with sin is the difference between reconciliation and forward movement, and condemnation. So exactly what is 'sin'? A simple definition I use is that sin is when we do anything that is 'what we want' rather than 'what God wants'. So in the broadest sense, it encompasses everything and anything from envy, pride, selfish thoughts, to murder. I hesitate to list these categories in some 'rank order', because in God's eyes there is no rank order; sin is sin! However, we humans (particularly Christians) have a problem with this concept!

Ranking Sin

How do we rank sin? Here are my suggested league tables:

PREMIER: 'Unmentionable and unforgivable' e.g., Sexual sin.

DIVISION 1: 'Definitely 'no no' e.g., Going to the pub or cinema

DIVISION 2: 'Slightly less acceptable' e.g., Discussing others behind their back

DIVISION 3: 'Normal and unavoidable' e.g., Speeding

You may accuse me of being cynical, but I never cease to be amazed and saddened that the way in which we deal with sin depends so much on where we think it ranks. Clearly, the implications of different sins may be wider in some

cases than in others and that must be addressed. However, I would suggest that way in which we handle sin 'in God's name' has much more to do how we can handle it personally, rather than how God handles it. This is most clearly seen with the area of sexual sin. If we were honest, we would rather run a marathon than start to tackle such a thorny issue. Is this because we genuinely don't know how to handle it (in which case we should involve someone who does) or has it more to do with knowing our own frailty and vulnerability in this area? I find that the most vociferous reactions usually come from those who are closest to doing the same thing themselves.

Of course sexual sin is wrong and it needs to be challenged, as does any other form of sin. Of course it has wider implications than only the people involved, but so, potentially, do these other sins. Speeding is somehow less significant because nine times out of ten, there is no consequence; the offender is not caught and nobody is injured. So, the argument goes, nobody else is affected, and after all, everyone speeds at some time or other. Does this make it right? What happens on that one occasion out of ten when a child is killed? A whole community is affected. Quite simply, our standards are not the same as God's! With Him, sin is sin. The Bible reinforces this view, telling us that God does not rank sins into lesser and greater. This is something we would do well to remember and take on board. I believe that if we could get this one area sorted out and be more consistent in our response to sin, then the church would be much healthier and trusted by communities on the outside. It is sobering to remember that the Bible also tells us that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's standards (Romans 3: 23). The issue of how far short is irrelevant! The issue is being forgiven and being allowed to move on. God does this; so often the people in our churches do not!

Judging and Injustice

Having ranked a 'sin' according to its severity, some people then think they have a God-given right to judge the offender. These judgments often seem to know few limits in their cruelty and inhumanity. A very good friend of mine who was unfaithful was brought to stand on the platform at the front of his church, whilst what had happened was announced to the whole congregation. His wife and young children were in that congregation. So much for love and sensitivity! Sadly, the people pointing the finger and making the pronouncement had their

own serious problems at the time, but since these were only schisms in relationships, they ranked much further down the list. Therefore, they did not count. This is wrong! What impression of God and His church do you think visitors to that service would have gleaned from these actions? Thankfully, my friend and his wife were mature for their age and had some 'hardcore' friends who supported them through their struggles and helped them to rebuild their shattered lives. Similarly, when Kevin Prosch was struggling, Christians were all for taking his records out of the shops and doubtless, a number of well-meaning individuals destroyed their Prosch CD collection in an attempt to disassociate themselves from his sin! But was everything God had done and said through this man nullified just because he had sinned? No! Of course not! But this is a classic case of ranking sin. If we saw a headline 'Graham Kendrick caught speeding' would we expect people to run out and burn Graham's CDs? I'll leave you to answer that question for yourself.

How much longer will we continue such un-Biblical approaches in our churches? Our response should be one that focuses on love, reconciliation, building-up and support. It really grieves and angers me when I see the so-called 'guilty parties' being shown more love and support by people from 'outside' the church, than by those 'within'. What a travesty and how God must weep! It seems that if Christians label someone as a 'guilty party', their voice is immediately silenced and they are defenceless; and the last thing anyone needs when they are trying to reconcile differences and rebuild broken lives is a bunch of zealots preventing these processes from happening 'in Jesus' name'. It is also very destructive to all parties concerned when a fellowship sides with the 'innocent' or 'wronged' party, listening only to their side of the story and never asking important questions as to why it happened in the first place.

Jesus had a lot to say about judgment and forgiveness. A woman caught in adultery was about to be stoned to death by the religious leaders, in accordance with the Law, but Jesus said, "Whichever one of you has committed no sin may throw the first stone at her" (John 8:7b). The Prodigal Son spent his money in debauchery and sexual sin, but was welcomed home by his father when he returned penniless (Luke 15: 11-24). Notice that it was the other son who had 'done everything right' that complained and was bitter (Luke 15: 25-32). In another parable, Jesus told of a servant whose large debt was cancelled by his master. However, that same servant would not cancel a small debt that he was

owed by another. When his master found out he severely punished the man guilty of being merciless. Jesus concluded by saying that we must forgive those who sin against us, or God will treat us in the same way as the master treated the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18: 21-35). Our capacity to forgive should be endless. Now there's a challenge! Through 'The Lord's Prayer' Jesus reminds us that our forgiveness by God is dependent on our own willingness to forgive ('Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us'; Matthew 6: 12). Our willingness to unjustly judge another's sin often reflects on our own fears and failings, and bears little resemblance to how God thinks or how He would act. In times like these we really need to get inside the question, 'What would Jesus do?' and take on board the answer.

As you may have gathered, this is a bit of a 'hobby horse' for me. I hate injustice with a capital 'H'! I have seen and experienced enough to conclude that we must learn to convert what we preach on Sundays into practical action, seven days each week.

I hope the following raise a few pertinent questions in your own mind about how you handle people and their sin.

Judging Others

'My brothers and sisters, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, you must never treat people in different ways according to their outward appearance. Suppose a rich man wearing a gold ring and fine clothes comes to your meeting, and a poor man in ragged clothes also comes. If you show more respect to the well-dressed man and say to him, "Have this best seat here," but say to the poor man, "Stand over there, or sit here on the floor by my feet," then you are guilty of creating distinctions among yourselves and of making judgments based on evil motives.' (James 2: 1-4)

We all subconsciously judge others according to their status or importance within the church or community. However, judgment is most destructive, divisive and painful when we rank the sins that are committed, which is often a method of directing the spotlight away from ourselves. Jesus never ranked sin. Perhaps the following best sums up His view, "Where are they that condemn you? Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again."

Premier League

We all love sharing our problems;
We all love ranking your sin.
You see, it's really important
To know which division you're in.

First come those lower divisions
Where sins aren't really that bad.
Like speeding and laughing at others;
If they can't take a joke, they're so sad.

We talk about Patrick's new neighbor
Who's strange (and he lives with a man!).
Then quietly dismantle more victims,
'In Love', whenever we can.

We offer advice without asking,

We trample on pride and self-worth.
After all, these are sins in the making,
There's no place for them in 'New Birth'.

As we move to the higher divisions
There's the sins that chill to our bones.
Like hate, lust and jealousy, anger.
We talk about these in hushed tones.

There's lying and swearing and murder,
And spending your time with bad friends.
There's going to the pictures and drinking,
It seems that the list never ends.

Then finally you're into the Premier league
Those sins with an 's' and an 'x'
And 'e' in between, yes you've guessed it,
We're talking about that evil word, 'sex'.

Lord help you if you've fallen this way!
Condemned to the fire for all time.
What a pity we've twisted God's real words;
What a pity we're so out of line.

For God sees no difference or ranking
It's either a sin; or it's not!
Whatever the crime, God still chooses
To erase every stain, every blot.



So Far Above

Thank you for those words,
They mean so much you know.
It's great you are concerned

Enough to let it show.
I'll add them to the list,
Of helpful words you share.
I cannot put it down;
Must carry it everywhere.

I can't cross anything off,
Been adding to it for ages.
It's growing ever longer.
I'm up to forty pages!
Although I say I'm sorry,
My words fall on deaf ears.
My sins are much too bad;
Forgiveness will take years.

And so I'm overwhelmed
By this crushing weight I bear.
There's not much of me left,
You'd hardly know I'm here.
I thank God for His love;
He is my faithful friend.
As you add to my list
He takes them off the end.

You see;
The list is in your head.
You record my deeds,
Because it justifies
Your anger, then it feeds
Revenge, disguised as care,
And hate dressed up as pain.
Whilst the spotlight is on me,
You can escape; again.

For whilst you rank my sin
So far above your own.
You never need to see

Your bitterness that's grown.
But when the interest moves,
And focuses elsewhere.
Beware my friend; look out!
It will be your own nightmare.



Doctor Dentist Dustman

Working downwards from the top,
When will this ranking ever stop.
We're no different from those outside,
Just different words and lots of pride.

Doctor, dentist, dustman, tramp.
Those inside and outside our camp.
Men, women, children, pets.
Horses, dogs, snakes, insects.

Artificial ranks, artificial rules.
Polishing bricks whilst missing the jewels.
Equity lost through polarised vision.
Distorted aims; distorted mission.

And once they're in, we rank their wrong;
Devising scales as we go along.
We don't feel justified or content
Unless we're the ones that pass judgment.

It's time to put our glasses on,
To see our faults and right our wrong.
Not use position to vent our fury;
God is the judge and God's the jury.

God sees us all as falling short,

That's why with Jesus' blood he bought
Our freedom from judgment; no longer condemned.
So how can we, our actions defend?

God forgive us, as we forgive those
Who sin against us. Our friends and our foes.
Help us to live and work with integrity.
Making everyone welcome, the 'clean' and the 'dirty'.



Gucci Shoes; Dirty Dress

Gucci shoes; Armani dress;
Strings of pearls; make-up a mess.
Mascara run and streaked with tears;
A broken heart, hidden for years.

Model mother; career wife;
Clever and witty; high flying life.
Executive grade; executive pay;
Important woman with much to say.

Scruffy shoes; dirty dress;
Unkempt hair; what a mess!
Mascara run and streaked with tears.
A broken heart, hidden for years.

Single mother; no career;
Husband dead; filled with fear.
Council house; income support.
A quiet woman, deep in thought.

Who would you help? Who would you choose?
Who would you keep? Who would you lose?
God sees no difference so why should we?

Do we leave them bound or set them free?

Rank and status are prison bars;
Denying worth, creating scars.
Do we act according to love and need?
Or on reward, image and greed?



Sin

Oh dear! What trouble I'm in;
All because of that little word 'sin'.
"Yes officer, I'll pay the fee;
But it was really that car in front of me."

Oh dear! What a muddle I'm in.
All because of that little word 'sin'.
When I thought 'wrong' was 'wrong', and that we all fail;
I discover we can rank wrong on a sliding scale.

Oh dear! What a corner I'm in.
All because of that little word 'sin'.
I challenged a leader who'd lied all along,
But the rest then closed ranks, and said, "Nothing's wrong!"

Oh dear! What a dilemma I'm in.
All because of that little word 'sin'.
I take out God's love to the pubs and the clubs,
Then at church I endure the sneers and the snubs.

Oh dear! What trouble I'm in.
All because of that little word 'sin'.
I was stupid enough to admit my mistake;
Now I see that their 'love' was no more than fake.

Oh Lord! What freedom I've found
Now I've discovered that when you're around,
You are the Judge and Jury for me;
Where others create bondage, you set me free.

So, whether it's muddle or trouble I'm in,
I thank you God, that there is no sin
Which is too big for you; they all rank the same.
Every one can be forgiven, in Jesus' Name.



Arrogance is still seen with alarming regularity in our churches. As Christians we are all a part of God's family on earth, the church, which has a rich diversity in the expression of our common faith. We do well to remember that we are called to unity ('oneness') not uniformity ('all the same'). Arrogance is a powerful catalyst for rebuilding walls and barriers within God's family that have already been destroyed through Christ's work on the cross.

Ring Out The Old!

We're living in the end times,
We're living for today.
A high tech game, with high tech rules;
God's shown us how to play.

No time for old traditions;
No time for hymns and psalms;
No time for peace and solitude;
We dance with outstretched arms.

Our praise is so spontaneous;
Our prayers said 'on the hoof'.
You'd think God needs a hearing aid
As we shout to raise the roof.

It's out with pews and kneeling mats;
It's out with all things old;
It's out with quiet humility,
And in with being bold!

Demanding God to action;
Demanding God to hear;
Casting out the demons of honest doubt,
Replacing them with fear.

We can't admit our weaknesses;
We can't admit our faults;
We can't admit we get it wrong;
We're driven by results.

No need for church in churches;
No need for church in schools;
We're a church in the community;
We work to different rules.

We're living in the victory;
We're living under the blood;
We're living in a different world;
Hallelujah! God is good!

One day you'll see it our way;
One day you'll see we're right;
Then we'll be on the same side,
And you'll join in our fight.

'Til then we'll do things our way;
'Til then we'll be so slick.
'Til then we'll work to isolate
And 'empire build' our clique.

Ring out the old, ring in the new!
Join us sisters and brothers
Before God we're all equal...
Though some are more equal than others!



Contrasts

He's a really loving, caring person,
Who makes you feel so special.

Yes, but does he speak in tongues?
He's so patient and kind.
You hardly ever see him lose his temper.
Okay! But does he prophesy?
She's so happy and contented.
You feel blessed to have been with her.
But does she give words of knowledge?

He'll be saving for years to buy that car.
Why not get a loan and buy it now?

They've just come from another church,
Where they were so instrumental in growth.
Ah! But do they perform acts of healing?
They both came from an abused childhood.
God has healed so much as they've been open to Him.
But where is their gift of faith?
That poor lady is still faithful after all she's been through.
I'm amazed she can keep going!
When did she last have a vision?

That apple tree grew for 6 years before I picked the first fruit.
I prefer ready meals myself.

A friend of mine trained for years to be a missionary.
She was murdered in her first week abroad.
Yes, but could she raise the dead?
I feel that I need to stay where I am at work;
My colleagues are really becoming interested.
Yes, but can you perform miracles?
My husband was made redundant this week.
He's still trusting God for a new job.
Does he dream dreams?

Fruit can take years to appear.
First the bud, then the flower; finally the fruit.
A process of growth and maturing.

Facing the changing seasons and changing weather.
Important for integrity, and visual evidence
Of what is happening within the bearer.

Gifts are here and now.
Beautifully wrapped, containing something precious,
Something spectacular or something challenging!
They come not from the bearer, but from God,
Who chooses whom He will use, and when.
They are part of the growth, not the end result.



Yes, the following display of arrogant judgment really did happen!
Unfortunately, the outcome was not what the accuser expected.

Only A Drummer

I really enjoyed your playing.
You put on quite a show.
My daughter's a musician;
She plays the flute, you know.

I'm sorry she couldn't be here.
She'd enjoy listening to you.
She's just completed her degree, you know.
BA in History; grade 2:2.

But I'm sure that being a drummer;
You'll know nothing about a degree!
Wrong! I have a first class honors;
Just gained my PhD.



Our impressions of others can be grossly inaccurate and potentially damaging if they are formed from presumption, hearsay or just good old-fashioned gossip.

'Don't listen to what they say - go see' (Chinese Proverb)

Signed Sealed And Settled

Hey! Have you seen him? Visiting again!
It's not right you know, that woman seeing men!
I wonder what goes on inside when she's shut that door?
I've seen this kind of thing, you know, many times before.

Hi! Thanks for coming. Sorry to ask you round,
But there's dripping from the ceiling and water on the ground.
I've no idea where to start, I hope that you don't mind,
But when John was here he did these jobs, he always was so kind.

He's been in there at least an hour; he can't be up to good!
She's even at our church, you know, I think that she should
Really sort her life out and act like Christians do;
Live a life of virtue, just like me and you!

I miss him terribly since he's gone, I still see him when I dream.
He would do what I could not; we were always such a great team.
But now I'm learning from the start, things I've never done before,
And I really was so grateful when I saw you at the door.

I think it's really disgusting that others have never seen
The goings on at thirty one, she seems so very keen
To lower the tone of this neighborhood and bring our street's name down.
Why can't she move and take her ways to the other side of town?

Thank you for mending that leaking pipe and cleaning up the mess.
The past few months have been so hard, I've been so full of stress.

There are some lovely neighbors who live at thirty-three;
They've often offered to help me, but somehow they're never free.

Oh! Here he comes! His hair's a mess. Thank goodness that he's gone!
I dare not think what they've been doing, but I need to tell someone.
Perhaps I'll tell the vicar, I'm sure he'll understand.
It's people like them, against which our church needs to take a stand.



No One Asks “Why?”

When a man leaves his wife, or a wife leaves her man,
We quickly jump in, give what answers we can.
If our mouth beats our brain and we forget to ask ““Why?””
There's trouble ahead! No matter how hard we try.

When friends fall away from their faith once held dear.
Our words and our reasoning they don't want to hear.
We're too quick to blame, as our God they deny.
But still we don't look for the real reasons why.

And when some heinous crime like sexual sin,
Raises its head, the judgments set in.
We're quick to accuse, but rarely to cry;
We put in the boot, without asking “Why?”

What about times when our ‘help’ is the wedge
That drives them apart, tips them over the edge.
No recovery or new starts, just division and pain,
Because we never ask “Why?” it's the same story again!

When pointing the finger we make clear our intent
To bring them in-line, as our anger we vent.
You'd think we were God! As we keep marching along,
Without asking “Why?” just in case we were wrong.

Wherever there's fire there's a spark at the heart.
It takes two to tango; it takes two to part.
But be careful my friends, in case your an ally,
To condemning the guilty, without asking "Why?"



Bigger Picture

Why, when our attention is focussed
On one small area of another's wrong,
Does our vision become blinkered?
Staring into a tunnel;
Oblivious of what is happening around us;
Shielded from the full impact of our blindness.

How often do we convince ourselves
That we are right and justified
In words and actions that hurt,
In attitudes which wound?
Carrying a cross with our victim nailed to it;
Holding them high for all to see.

Why must we shine a spotlight?
Its bright, narrow beam piercing the darkness
Of another's sin and shame.
Energy channelled into a pinprick;
Heating, burning, searing, melting
The delicate soul beneath its ray.

Why don't we switch on a floodlight?
Illuminating the whole area,
Making visible the events and consequences
Of our actions and words.
Bringing out of the shadows, pain and hurt;

Otherwise invisible to our preconceived conclusions.

How easy it is to miss the truth
In our quest for answers.
How easy to see the speck in another's eye,
But miss the log in our own!
God teach us to be real, working in your light;
That we may bring light and healing to others.



The impact of other people's (often presumptuous) judgments can be catastrophic on the recipient, who may be struggling simply to hold life together.

Fall From Grace

Words are so cheap and whispers hurt.
The knife cuts deep when friends desert.
An island in a stormy sea.
Embarrassed looks; "Please! Speak to me!"

It's not what we do, but who we are;
Until we fall, then we bear the scar.
Our past erased, reputation shot.
Not who we are; more, what we're not!

Then comes the help in Jesus' Name!
"Why do you hurt when you're to blame?"
It's not true repentance until we're found
Bleeding and crying, on the ground.

Love is patient; love is kind;
Love's slow to anger, yes, even blind,
Until the zealots are on our case!
They mock our love; spit in our face.

They twist our words and tear our heart;
They slice our soul, rip our spirit apart.
No oasis of calm, but a desert of fear.
We dare not believe that God is near.

“We’ll pray for you” the words seem stark.
A few cheap thoughts, an exclamation mark.
No helping hands, no words of hope.
No shoulder to cry on to help us cope.

The Gospel turned into a book of rules;
The King of kings relegated to the prince of fools.
His power reduced to the accuser’s whip;
His love replaced by one long guilt trip.

So where is our God in the eye of this storm,
Our anchor of hope, our oasis of calm?
He’s there all the time, though we don’t understand
That He’s holding us safe in the palm of his hand.

His words have not changed throughout the years.
His promises sure, despite our guilt and fears.
We’ll not let them rob us of all our self-worth.
Clinging on to His words we’ll fulfil our re-birth.



This poem is dedicated to a blind friend of mine who has lived independently for many years and experienced more than her fair share of being judged simply because of her disability. She recalls how many people have known her guide dog before they have known her, not to mention the number who think that because she is blind she needs a wheelchair! What many people don’t know, until they get to know her, is that she is a seriously gifted musician who makes you feel as if you are the most important person in the world when she talks to you. Judging others means that we lose-out too!

I May Be Blind

Although my eyes don't work too well;
I have two ears which surely do.
Plus a cerebrum and a conscience.
I may be blind, but I can speak to you.

I also hear those unspoken comments,
The pity and tension in your voice.
But I don't bite, so please, relax!
I may be blind, but it's not by choice.

I care for myself and my guide dog.
It's not as amazing as you make out.
I wash the pots and do the housework,
I may be blind, but I'm not down and out.

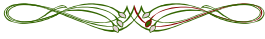
And when I'm walking with my guide dog,
I have a name as well as she.
My name is Amy; I am her owner.
I may be blind, but she listens to me!

Her name is Isla and I love her.
She is my eyes; I call her 'Lid'.
But I'm the one who gives the orders.
I may be blind, but I'm not stupid!

So don't dismiss me because I'm different;
Beneath the surface we're just the same.
I may view life from a different angle,
And I may be blind, but I have a name.

We're flesh and blood, emotions, people!
We're no different you and me!

We're both exactly as God has planned us.
I may be blind...so what!



Forgiveness

'Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us' (Matthew 6: 12)

Forgiveness is more often a process than a single occurrence at a point in time. We take a major step towards forgiveness when we are honest about how we feel. However, we must never forget that forgiveness carries a cost.

Encounter With Forgiveness

A crashing thunderbolt from heaven!
You spoke and shared with me,
How I'd not failed, just because I felt pain
When my friends were hurting;
Or when they hurt me.
Accusers point the finger,
Bloodstained hands draw ever closer
To drain me of dignity and confidence,
And leave an empty shell, broken.

How I'd love to tear them limb from limb!
How sweet would be my revenge as they begged for mercy;
Crying out to be saved from my wrath;
Pleading to be set-free from their pain.

But these thoughts cloud and mask
The rules which govern my life.
The guiding principle of forgiveness.
Not just a quick "I'm sorry!" or "It doesn't matter"
But a real encounter with pain
As I, the oppressed, make the conscious decision,
To draw close to my oppressors, and forgive.

Forgive those who show no mercy;
Forgive those whose words are bitter;

Forgive those who spit in my face;
Forgive those who mock my words;
Forgive...
Forgive...
Forgive...

What a privilege and yet how hard
To carry the mark of a God who asks,
No, commands me to forgive those who hate;
To forgive those who plot against me.

What a privilege and yet, how hard,
Allowing myself to become so close to others,
Enjoying a relationship which, if all falls apart,
Is the platform from which I can offer forgiveness;
Even if others choose not to forgive me.

Lord please teach me to forgive.
Lord please teach me how to forgive,
So that many may experience a personal encounter,
With you.



How Much?

How much does it cost to forgive?
An ounce of pride;
Harsh words left unspoken;
The past put behind us;
Hope for the future.

How much does it cost to be unforgiving?
A lifetime...



Two Worlds

Hi, how are you?
Fine thanks (I'm dying inside).
Have you spoken to Jane recently?
Yes, she's very well (What do I care?).
I thought you'd fallen out.
We did, but we're good friends again (I hate her!).
But didn't she let you down big time?
Yes, but I've forgiven her (Over my dead body!).
Isn't it amazing how God helps us like that?
Yes, as long as we rely on Him (Wish I could!).
You seem so calm and composed.
Well, I stay close to God (I take it out on her behind the scenes).
And you never seem angry.
No, I'm not (It's eating me away inside, but I can't show anyone).
So, how often do you see each other?
Not very (I never want to see her again!).
Does she ring you?
Look, can we change the subject please (Just given myself away!).



Do we ever avoid facing-up to our own problems and guilt by focusing on the shortcomings of others? In my experience, this is because I lack the ability to forgive myself for something I've said or done, either now or in the past.

Light And Dark

Do you know what news I heard in church yesterday?
My next door neighbor's husband upped and ran away
With that girl who lives across the street at number twenty-two;
The one who wears that little dress you can almost see straight through!

I think it's quite disgusting that this sort of thing takes place.
His wife is such a lovely woman who always makes the cakes
At 'Gossip and Crumbs,' at least that's our name for women's quiet hour!
We eat and talk and feed ourselves on others, sweet and sour.

I never really liked that man! He seemed too shy and quiet.
Yet when our summer parties came he was such a riot!
He never listened to my news when others had done wrong,
Or how I missed the chance, again, to sing at evensong.

And as for her, well, what can I say? She's brazen through and through.
She may be young but even then, there's better in the zoo!
With legs up to her arm pits and hair down below her waist;
Black patent shoes, stiletto heels and make-up like wallpaper paste.

I dare not mention my background and how I was the same.
My reputation spread like fire; everyone knew my name.
I had to leave one winter's night with a baby just conceived.
I did not know the father; my family was relieved.

But that's all put behind me as I'm focusing on the 'now'.
I freely pass my judgments on the 'when' and 'where' and 'how'
By painting another's background a darker shade of black
My own light shines much brighter and I avoid the flack!

But that's all put behind me as I'm focusing on the 'now'.
I freely pass my judgments on the 'when' and 'where' and 'how'
By painting another's background a darker shade of black
My own light shines much brighter and I avoid the flack!



Agape Or A Gape?

Love is patient and love is kind;
I want it now if you don't mind.

Don't give me excuses, don't make me mad;
Or you're the one who'll end up sad.

Love is not jealous, conceited or proud;
But I need to stand out from the crowd.
Beware! I'll go to any length
To get what I want, with God as my strength!

Love is not irritable, selfish or rude;
When my friends look at me, I know they conclude
That God is at work, though I don't know why;
I'm fooling us all by living this lie.

Love does not keep a record of wrongs;
I've written this down in so many songs.
But I won't forget what you did to me,
For as long as you live; just you see!

Love hates evil but is happy with what's true;
And so am I, unless it involves you.
Then truth's not the issue and love's not in sight.
More "you're always wrong" and "I'm always right."

Love never gives up; so why did I?
The first test came and I chose to fly.
Bitterness brewed, more twisted than twine.
Love and forgiveness? Revenge is mine!



How Long?

How long does it take to forgive and move on?
With God it is instant; with us it's too long!
Our memory's selective and we choose to forget,
Just what we want, unless we've not finished yet

With extracting the last drop of life from our prey.
And then have the cheek to say, "Have a nice day!"

How long does it take to forgive and move on?
With God it is instant; with us it's too long!
When we are the subject, the focus of need,
Our memories have barbs, digging deep, how we bleed.
And still we build barriers to stop moving on,
Like the hurt that we harbour against people long gone.

How long does it take to forgive and move on?
With God it is instant; with us it's too long!
We've wept for our actions, confessed 'til we're dry.
Yet we're still on the rack and get poked in the eye.
The days turn to weeks; turn to months; turn to years.
There seems no escape when you're bound by your fears.

How long does it take to forgive and move on?
With God it is instant; with us it's too long!
God's given us a choice; a door; a way out
From prolonging our pain, our misery and doubt.
That choice is forgiveness; to build on mistakes
That we've all made, no matter how much effort it takes.
This isn't an option; it's what God commands.
How long will it take? Well, that's in our hands!



Never Alone

I'm never on my own, no matter where I go.
With eyes at every corner I'm the star of the show.
"Don't be long if you're going out; make sure you're on your own."
I'm afraid to be seen in public just in case I'm known.

I wear a bright red nametag with 'Guilty' written large.

The chain is hardened steel, tempered in the forge
Of accusation's fire, clamped shut, by so-called friends,
With locks of unforgiveness, a penance that never ends.

In a crowded shop or deserted street, I feel I'm on TV.
And even in my own house, those eyes are following me.
At times I doubt my sanity and doubt those friends held dear.
Some call it paranoia; I say paralysing fear.

And so I am a prisoner for one mistake I made.
Blotted, tainted, not allowed to forget or let the memory fade.
Whilst those with squeaky clean, pure lives, who are thankful to be free,
Point the finger silently, at a sordid sinner, called 'me'!

So, where can I go from your presence and where can I hide from your gaze?
These should be words of comfort, but now they curse my days,
Because there's no escape from my taunters, there's no escape from my past.
Or from 'brothers and sisters' who are the ones that choose to make my hurt last.

How many times must we forgive? Seven? No seventy times seven!
Unless it's one of those 'bad sins', in which case you stay unforgiven!
God's commands stand true for all times, and are not only for the lost.
His forgiveness is unconditional, unlike ours, which carries a cost.

When can I put down my burden, be free and able to run?
When will laughter once more be my trademark, and my life be filled with fun?
It will be when hyenas and jackals, take a rest from hunting their prey;
It's in their hands to release me; but I doubt that will be today.



Then Time Stood Still

Why is there now a large hole inside
Where once there burned a fire?
An aching and longing where once there was joy.

Apathy where once lived desire.

Why have my feelings gone out for a walk,
And thrown away their key?
Locked beyond a door shut tight,
Never returning to me.

Why in this place where I should find your love,
Do I feel so ill at ease?
It's less of an anchor and more like a buoy;
I'm drifting on stormy seas.

How long does it take to forgive and move on?
I've asked that question before.
In God's time an instant; in man's time an age!
With no chance to rise from the floor.

No chance to move on; no chance to forget;
No chance to rebuild from the ashes.
Trapped in a limbo of living my life
According to other men's wishes.

A photograph taken from so long ago,
Is the basis for their decisions.
Although we've tried to mend broken lives,
Our accusers still look for divisions.

Second-hand lies make a fertile soil,
In which to grow mistrust.
Then if we snap through the burden of guilt,
Their eyes are filled with disgust.

What chance do we have when we live to the rules
Of blind with no sticks and no guide,
So consumed with their plans they forget about God's,
Leaving the broken, more broken inside.



Today

Today I learned that I'm not welcome;
Today I learned I'm on my own.
Today I learned it makes no difference
Whatever you try, your fate's cast in stone.

Today I learned it's all about timing;
Today I learned it's all about speed;
Today I learned that my direction
Can be dictated by another's greed.

Today I learned that labels matter;
Today I learned God's house is not free;
Today I learned God's help is available
To everyone; everyone that is, except me!

Today I learned that my past is important;
Today I learned my good counts for nought.
Today I learned life's outcomes are dictated
By others; it feels as if I've been bought.

Today I learned that trust is important;
Today I learned that my feelings were right;
Today I learned that no matter what happens,
I'm powerless to move; I think I'll give up the fight.

Today I learned how church and the Bible
May use the same words, but that's where it ends.
Today I learned that it's not what you need,
But who is your enemy, and who are your friends.



The most destructive effect of unforgiveness is when intimate relationships are driven apart. Unforgiveness can make us angry and vindictive, whilst at the same time, leading us to live in denial that there is anything wrong. The pain in such circumstances can become unbearable, eroding self-confidence and self-worth, eventually reducing both parties to emotional wrecks.

As We Forgive Those

One, two, three, four, five,
I'm lucky to be still alive!
Six, seven, eight, nine, ten,
Especially if you consider that when
I desperately needed you,
That's when you chose to say, "We're through!"
Gave me no chance to make amends,
You're convinced this is where our story ends.

One, two, three, four, five,
I'm lucky to be still alive!
Six, seven, eight, nine, ten,
Especially if you consider that when
I was so ill, in bed;
Friends stopped writing, the phone went dead.
You're in denial, living a pretence.
Whilst those I once respected sit upon the fence.

One, two, three, four, five,
I'm lucky to be still alive!
Six, seven, eight, nine, ten,
Especially if you consider that when
You've not stopped punishing me.
Well, if that's what makes you so happy,
I'll have to wait until your life crashes;
Then perhaps we can rebuild from the ashes.



Chameleon

Changing color, blending in.
Disguises unseen by those within
That inner circle, exempt from blame.
Who feed the fire and fan the flame.

A hundred opinions on the latest news;
Each one agrees with whoever you choose.
Does “no” mean, “yes”, or “yes” mean “no”?
Is it real or just a show?

A different color for a different side;
Each one transparent, no place to hide
Fierce anger trapped, lying in wait;
Devouring your senses, steering your fate.

But some time soon your cover will blow,
Then all your bitterness will show.
Your masks removed, true colors seen;
Friends will know where you’ve really been.

They’ll see the anger, sense the hate,
And know their errors far too late.
Will you still be a friend in need?
Or abandoned, left all alone to bleed?

Half the story’s twice the stress,
And twice the risk for you, unless
Forgiveness flows to heal the pain.
Trust me, my friend, the truth will reign!



'Every minute you are angry, you lose 60 seconds of happiness' (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Armchair Divorce

Locked safely in my room,
Sat here all alone.
With only my inner thoughts,
And anger that has grown
From one small seed I planted,
Then watered it with pride;
Shone on the sun of bitterness;
And kept it locked inside.

No need for further contact.
I'll sort it on my own.
Press a few small buttons,
And use the telephone
To justify my feelings,
And repay you for your wrong.
I cannot and will not forgive you!
I'll see this doesn't take long.

Words written down on paper,
To erase you from my life.
Soon to be a stranger,
When once you were my wife.
I will not change direction
Because I've made up my mind.
I'll use these friends around me
To put the past behind.

Please don't look too closely;
Keep well away from me.
Let me live on in denial,
And claim to be set free.

I'll pretend that I've forgiven,
Yet claim my wants by force.
I'll sit in my ivory tower,
And get my armchair divorce.



CHAPTER 4 Family

There is a saying which goes, ‘You can choose your friends but you can’t choose your family!’

I grew up in a family which, thank God, stayed together, even if we were not always very ‘close’. My brother and elder sister had both left home when I was not much bigger than knee high to a grasshopper. As a child I didn’t always enjoy the benefits of encouragement or confirmation from my parents, as it was not really the done thing at that time. Things seemed to be made hard so that I ‘developed backbone’ and ‘learned to stand on my own two feet’. However, I only seemed to develop insecurities and I was left with a big ‘hole’ in my life, plus many questions such as, “Why do I feel such a failure?” “Do people really like me?” and “Why do I never quite reach the required standard?”

Most of these questions were forged by experiences during my upbringing, compounded by some unhappy periods at school. One school I attended between the ages of eleven and fourteen had a ‘tradition’ of throwing newcomers into the ‘burners’, a thick hedge of *Pyrocanthus* bushes with long thorns; hence the burning sensation when you hit them! In my first week at school, I ended up throwing myself into these evil bushes to avoid giving others the pleasure. Why was I like this? Because I seemed to accept that I deserved what I got even though I couldn’t explain why. It was only thirty years later that the hole in my life was ‘filled’ by a gifted professional Christian Counselor whom I approached after a serious and unexpected illness. I discovered that the feelings I had about myself were distorted images of the truth. They were also severe distortions of how God sees me. I had made a commitment to Christ at around the age of 13 but didn’t really begin to let Him start to change me until I was around the age of 15. I completed school without a real aim or direction in life. I went through various periods of ‘success’ and ‘failure’. I went to university, dropped out, started work, studied at work, went back to university again and then got a job.

Why do I tell you all this? Well, God has been faithful and stuck with me through all of this self-perceived failure, distorted self-image and confusion. He has looked after me in some pretty grim times, especially during my illness, but even in these times he has actually used me to help and encourage others. Now that is amazing! Life has not always been easy and I've made some pretty big mistakes, but God has never run away and left me alone. Where my family and friends have failed me, God has not. Through my family experiences and His faithfulness I have learned a pattern which I try to apply with my own children, often unsuccessfully! This is to make them feel valued, loved, encouraged and special, and to allow them to be children. The latter is probably the most difficult for a mature adult like myself! I still mess-up big time, but I'm trying to learn and to keep learning.

Perhaps the most stunning piece of evidence I can present for God's faithfulness was His promise of children more than 10 years before they arrived. Unknown to me, Viv, my wife was getting distressed at seeing her friends marrying and reproducing, whilst nothing was happening for us. On New Year's Day, 1983, we were given a direct word from God, quite rare in our experience, through a lovely friend at church who told us that 'a late sun would rise'. We had to wait for more than 10 years and go through a miscarriage before Rebecca arrived safely in July 1993. Matthew followed 18 months later. It would have been so easy for us to give up and go to the doctor for help during that time. But God had proved himself faithful through my eight years as a student, providing income, food, a car and a fitted kitchen! So, we hung in there. But it was not easy!

We've also been through some really dark times, during which Viv has been faithful, supportive and understanding, even in the face of rejection and living with a husband who was a stranger. I don't think she expected so many 'for worses' when she took her wedding vows!

I am eternally grateful that I was present with my father and, more recently, my mother as they died. It is a privilege to share the passing from this life to Glory with someone whom you love, no matter how imperfect you may feel they've been. Both mom and dad made the best of what they had. Perhaps they have left me with some scars, but they've also left me with so much to be thankful about. One is a desire to serve God and another is how to respect and value each person, as an individual. This is very important with children. One lesson I'm learning is

that there is no rehearsing with parenthood and we all make mistakes, some of them big ones! However, we can either choose to punish ourselves because of these 'failings', or we can use them as 'stepping stones' and learn how to improve next time. I hope that when my own time comes to pass on, my children will remember me as fondly as I remember my own parents.

Two major influences on my life have been my parents. These are my epitaphs to ordinary people of God who made an extraordinary impact on the many people they knew or met. I had the privilege of being beside both as they passed from this life to be with God. All I can say is, "Thank you."

Dad

It can't have been easy!
Bringing up number two
After number one sailed so effortlessly
Through life.

But you gave me so much.
An eye for detail; an enthusiasm for life;
A faith to build on;
Security!
How hard not to be able to join in
With the games I wanted to play.
Your mobility cruelly impaired
At such a young age.

I remember times when we just lay there
In the morning. Side by side.
Talking about everything and nothing.
And at the end of the day,
Eagerly awaiting your return from work,
So that I could share the day's news.

And as I grew we shared much
That only now, have I realized was quality time.
Walking in the hills; exploring caves;
Watching rising trout in a glassy lake;

You cultivated in me so many interests and hobbies;
Expanding my love for God's creation.
Ageless minerals; majestic trees;

The kaleidoscope colors of autumn leaves;
Capturing life in the stillness of a photograph.
Giving to others, without expecting back.

And as death snatched you away,
I was thankful for what you had shared with me.
No opportunity to continue our walk together.
But I know you saw the fruits of your labors,
And was pleased!

And so in these few, inadequate words,
I pay tribute to you.
My guide; my model; my friend;
My dad.

She's Not There

Sleep quietly my friend.
The day's been long and failing health
Has taken its toll on a beautiful life.
How sweet your smile as you awaken.
How privileged I am to hear your voice;
Feel your touch.
We share some news, a joke;
Then you're gone.

My rock and comforter; protector and ally;
Gently taken as we're together.
Doing what you did best; sharing with others,
Chatting; talking; listening; laughing.
My flesh and blood; my inspiration and pattern.
Your lips silenced; finally.
How deep the love, the joy; the loss
For me, your son for forty-two years.

Memories dance through the empty corridors of my mind
Now quiet, yet thankful for being yours.

These tears that bathe my face,
Flow from that deep well of loss,
And yet at the same time, a deep well of gratitude.
There'll be many times when being apart will overwhelm.
But none of this can rob me of the knowledge
That I am yours and you were special.

Thank you for your undying love;
For raising me above the defeats of life;
For saving me when the ground beneath my feet had given way
And life was spinning out of control.
Thank you for your oil, stilling so many troubled waters.
Thank you for your deep faith, showing me the way.
A hole remains where you once were,
Yet your life, I hope, continues through me.

Enjoy eternity with our God and one day
We'll meet in His paradise, never again to be separated.
Feast on the treasures of heaven.
I, for a little longer, will strain
To catch a glimpse of the great party,
You now enjoy and which is ready to welcome me.

So dance, clap and sing.
Receive your reward and crown.
You may have left us but you'll not be forgotten.
You may not be here but you'll always be in my heart;
And in the hearts of those you touched
When you were here, blessing us all.



As we stand gooey eyed on our wedding day, we never know what lies ahead.
This is a tribute to my wife, Viv, who has stood by me when many would have
run. Thank you.

I Do

Do you remember when you made those promises;
For better, for worse;
For richer, for poorer;
In sickness and in health;
Forsaking all others?

Did you know the rocky path ahead?
More worse than better;
More poorer than richer;
More sickness than health;
Being forsaken for others?

It was all so sunny then!
Life's adventures lay ahead.
Paths uncharted; nothing that we couldn't face
Together!

And then the clouds came!
Blocking out the light,
Squeezing out the warmth;
Adventures fell as horror stories.
Bends and junctions were all hiding places
For the highwaymen of life
To ambush and rob you,
Until your treasury of joy had been emptied.

Did you remember that you had promised
For better, for worse;
For richer, for poorer;
In sickness and in health;
Forsaking all others?

Yes! You did!

And I do,
Because you have remained faithful to them,
Despite my mistakes and failings.

And at the very times you were justified
To walk away; put me to one side; start a new life;
You chose to remember, and carry the pain of saying,
“I do!”



We had to wait more than ten years for God to fulfil His promise of children to us. The reward was worth the wait as anyone who has been with Rebecca and Matthew will know. These are simple words to them, from me, with love.

Little Lady

Ten years of waiting. God's promise fulfilled.
This late sun has arisen.
I cradled you in my arms, your wrinkled smile
Melting my soul, warming my spirit.

The years have flown and your tiny person
Transformed into the shape of a young lady.
Nine years old, going on sixteen!
How your smile still warms me from within.
Your gentle nature; tender heart.
And sensitivity to the needs of those around you,
Are difficult for your friends to understand.
Enthusiasm and zest for life ooze from every pore;
Endless energy and laughter infect us all.

Carry on my contagious angel!
Drama; calm; smiles; tears; defiance; compliance;
All part of your day;

Effortlessly changing; a mood chameleon.
You defy our logic, rejuvenating us with joy.
Nine going on sixteen did I say?

Continue to challenge and change those you meet,
As you demonstrate Jesus
In the simplicity of a child's faith.
Bringing refreshing to our deepest, innermost parts.
Loving without prejudice; giving unconditionally;
Radiating the beauty that glows and burns within you.
Smiling away fear; laughing away tears;
Hugging away loneliness; kissing away pain.

Oh! That so many would learn from your book of life.
Don't let the advancing years erode your child-like heart.
Stay young and simple in your joy of life.
Continue to see beyond our adult politics.
Awaken us with your God-given simplicity and vision;
Strip away our masks and deceit.
Disarm our lying smiles with a simple question!
May we continue to learn from you.
May we never be a stumbling block,
Or a millstone around your neck.

Fly free little angel;
Savor our lives with the sweet perfume of your joy.
Keep on, Little Lady, God's promise fulfilled.
Keep on!



Little Man

How exciting to discover your presence
Deep within.

Growing, unseen, into the bundle of joy
That reluctantly came to join our world.

Smiles, laughs and so few complaints;
Trusting us with your life and soul.
Vulnerable, growing, changing, developing.
But never a burden.

As the years have passed,
How proud we are to be your parents.
You face challenges beyond our understanding,
Existing in a world where thirst for knowledge
Collides head-on with confusion!
Yet even this hasn't daunted you,
Or crushed your spirit.

How you shame us with your love for the poor!
Growing excited at the opportunity
To give of yourself and your possessions,
To lighten their load and brighten their world.
What a reward for us to enjoy your smile of delight,
To share in your sense of achievement;
To be allowed into your world.

Don't be afraid of that God-given desire,
Which burns within you, to love others
And share in their need.
Bringing hope; bringing joy; bringing comfort;
Showing the adult spectators how to live!
Enjoy the excitement of discovering Father;
Let him continue to lead you each day.

Smile your healing smile,
And sing your song of life,
As you live-out naturally, without effort,
The pattern of God; hidden to so many
By advancing years and rational indifference.

So keep on little man!
Make your difference in our lives,
And in the lives of others.
You are a blessing to us all.
Continue to grow.

We are so privileged that you are our son,
And God's!



This poem is dedicated to my brother Professor Graham Wood and to everyone who has had the unenviable task of following in the footsteps of a gifted family member.

Hard Act To Follow

You were always my idol, yet such a hard act to follow!
A generation older than me, but still my brother.
I remember the excitement of knowing that in only a few hours
We would be together; I would be with you!

I lacked the confidence to believe that I could compare
To your formidable academic record.
The wall to your 'superstardom' too high for me to scale.
And even if I reached the top, you'd have pressed further ahead.

Compared at school; compared at home.
A gold standard, driving back the frontiers of science and medicine.
A talented musician; artist; sportsman.
Yet a stranger and an enigma to me!

Those comparisons were so hard; driving in a wedge;
Raising doubts, fears and uncertainties that needed conquering.

But as the years passed, we succeeded in bridging that gap
Formed by others. We began to understand each other.

We became brothers, both capable of mistakes.
Both capable of being in trouble with our parents!
Our paths crossed as our careers converged;
We discovered that we spoke a common language.

Even though the miles have always separated us,
I have grown to love you and confide in you
My fallible, ordinary, human brother.
And I wouldn't replace you for the world!



APPENDIX Rebecca's Poems

These poems were written by my daughter, Rebecca Jane Wood, aged 9¾! I promised that if she wrote them in time they would be included in this book. She wrote them in time so here they are!

New Beginnings

S is for Songs that we sing in the sun.
P is for Praising God for what He has done.
R is for Rabbits, playing among the trees.
I is for Ivy, swaying in the breeze.
N is for New buds bursting with pride.
G is for Games we enjoy playing outside.

Newborn lambs in the fields, newborn calves on the farm.
Baby birds in their nests protected from harm.
New flowers in the hedgerows, new shoots from the earth.
Spring is about new life, new beginnings, new birth.



Summertime

S is for sunshine we enjoy by the sea,
U is for umbrella, its shade to protect me.
M is for making castles from sand, and
M is for music played by a band.
E is for eating ice-cream on the pier;
R is for ragged rocks, sailors of old grew to fear.

Sunshine and sand; ice-cream and fun.
Race to the waves; how fast can we run?
Holidays with family; holidays with friends.
When summer is here the fun never ends.



Christmas Day Celebrations

Christmas tree, such a lovely color green,
The pot that it sits in, colored a dark rich cream.
Your baubles shine oh! So bright;
Your glamor and lights fight the dark night.
Looking after presents until Christmas day,
Standing so tall in your own regal way.
The tinsel all different colors for decorations,
You enjoy every second of the Christmas celebrations.
Your tree trunk, the color of dark fields,
And your star shines with the light of bronze shields.
The fake snow, which is really cotton wool
Covers your branches, to stop you looking dull.
Then Christmas Day is clothed in snow,
And Jesus Christ was born; we know
He was laid in a manger, with no Christmas tree,
Born on this earth for you and for me.

