

# Manna



Issue 91:  
Building Altars  
The Church at Home  
Count It All Joy  
Building Altars in the Pandemic

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# Building Altars at Home

After Noah and his family came out of the ark, he built an altar and made burnt offerings to the Lord (Gen 8:20). This is the first example of altar building mentioned in the Bible. After these offerings, the Lord blessed Noah and his family (Gen 9:1).

The family altar is when family members dedicate time to worship God together at home. In this comfortable setting, the family regularly gathers to sing hymns, share testimonies, study the Scriptures, pray, and have fellowship with one another. Building a family altar is the fundamental work of a Christian family. As children grow up, it will help establish their faith foundation and mold a godly character.

*Hear, my children, the instruction of a father,  
And give attention to know understanding;  
For I give you good doctrine:  
Do not forsake my law.  
When I was my father's son,  
Tender and the only one in the sight of my mother,  
He also taught me, and said to me:  
"Let your heart retain my words;  
Keep my commands, and live.  
Get wisdom! Get understanding!  
Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth."  
(Prov 4:1-5)*

This passage has been a great inspiration and influence on me and my family over many years of altar building. As parents, what expectations do we have for our children? Outstanding academic achievements? Good career? High income? As King Solomon shares with us in the passage above, his father emphasized the importance of gaining wisdom and understanding from God. Through the family altar, we can impart these same teachings to our children.

While wisdom is not the only blessing we gain from the family altar, it is certainly crucial. Without it, we may end up making wrong decisions, deviate from God's teachings, and fall short in our faith. When our children come of age and leave home, we are no longer in the "passenger seat," monitoring and directing them. They must drive independently and make their own decisions. If they have been raised with the family altar from a young age, we can trust that they have attained the wisdom, through God's word, to stay on the correct path.

Building altars is not just a parental concern. As children of God, our worship and service to Him extend beyond the physical church building, permeating our whole lives. The pandemic has brought this to the fore since most of us have had to isolate under various forms of lockdown. Our homes have, for a time, become our sole places of worship. Hopefully, this has inspired us to continue building our altars at home, even when normal life resumes.

Building an altar in our household plays a central role in our journey of faith. Families that are willing to embrace it will, like Noah's family, be blessed. They will see a closer relationship with one another and with God. Let us endeavor to practice the teachings and practical advice contained within the following articles to establish altars for the glory and honor of God.

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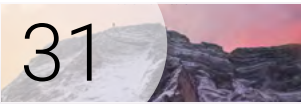


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# The Church at Home

## INTRODUCTION

Home is traditionally a place of rest and relaxation, a sanctuary from the stresses of the world. After all, a man's home is his castle; after a hard day's work and many hours navigating the minefield of societal expectations, we can close the door and truly be ourselves. Home represents a private bubble, hemmed off from the public sphere. In short, our home is central to our self-identity.

Home is also a place to be with the family. For many, it is epitomized by the patriarch or matriarch at the dinner table, bringing the family together. For others, it conjures images of rallying around the evening television, annual holidays, or festive seasons.

These days, the idea of home is no longer so simple. The internet has brought the entire world into our

homes, dissolving the barriers between work, family, and play. The current pandemic has only supercharged this trend—we are encouraged to spend more time at home to slow the spread of COVID-19, and some are even under lockdown restrictions that only allow them to leave their homes for a limited number of reasons.

This current pandemic landscape has cast our homes in a new context and made us reconsider what our homes mean to us. Many are working from home, homeschooling, caring for dependents. In contrast, those who live alone or keep social distance because of underlying health reasons may feel isolated and miss the human touch. Rather than a sanctuary, a home may variously feel like a prison, a menagerie, or a space that needs to fulfill all life functions.

What about a Christian household? Many churches have had to cancel or reduce their in-person worship service and fellowship schedules due to the pandemic. This has highlighted the need to build strong personal and family altars in our homes. But how can we construct this altar? And how can this become the central pivot around which we build our homes?

## THE ALTAR IN ABRAHAM'S HOUSEHOLD

When God called Abraham to depart from his country to go to a land that God would show him, Abraham obeyed by faith, not knowing where he was going (Gen 12:1-4; Heb 11:8). That was the watershed in Abraham's life when he established a new pivot for his family. Away from the comforts of his former family life, Abraham laid a new foundation for his household.



**“ We can certainly take a leaf out of Abraham’s book as we establish our Christian households. We can erect our family altar by instituting family worship as the galvanizing pivot for our homes. ”**

As he moved to Shechem, the Lord appeared to him and told him that his descendants would inherit this land. And there, Abraham built an altar to the Lord. When he moved to the mountain east of Bethel, he pitched his tent and again built an altar, calling on the name of the Lord (Gen 12:7–8). After returning from Egypt, where he went to escape from famine, Abraham came “to the place of the altar which he had made there at first. And there Abram called on the name of the LORD” (Gen 13:4). Later, Abraham moved his tent and dwelt by the terebinth trees of Mamre in Hebron. And he built an altar there to the Lord (Gen 13:18).

These actions signify Abraham’s resolve in laying the foundation of worship for his household. The altar was the center of Abraham’s family life, and it was evident in the life of his son, Isaac. When God tested Abraham and asked him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, both father and son traveled to the place of offering. As Abraham loaded the wood for the burnt offering on Isaac, the latter could see what was missing: “Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Gen 22:6–7). Such familiarity with the practice of sacrifice must have been due to his father’s training and frequent participation in his father’s offering at the family altar.

Subsequently, when Isaac established himself and settled in Beersheba, God appeared to him and reiterated the blessing He had promised to Abraham. Isaac continued his father’s practice and built an altar there to call on the name of the Lord (Gen 26:23–25).

In Peter’s first epistle, he wrote:

*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim*

*the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.*

*(1 Pet 2:9)*

Recognizing that we are God’s chosen people, we can certainly take a leaf out of Abraham’s book as we establish our Christian households. We can erect our family altar by instituting family worship as the galvanizing pivot for our homes.

Family altars can take several formats. The Bible describes prayers as offerings of incense to God (Ps 141:2; Rev 5:8). It also says we should “continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name” (Heb 13:15). Hence, our family altar can undoubtedly take the form of family prayer and hymnal worship. While we encourage one another to have personal prayer time with God, we should also set aside a regular time to gather as a family to pray. It could be for twenty minutes daily or half an hour weekly. There can be a common family prayer list that unites the family in their prayers. Pray for one another. Pray collectively for unbelieving family members and relatives or those who are weak in faith. Intercede for church matters. We can let this be an opportunity for each family member to share their challenges and to request for intercession. The list goes on. The key lies in having a central pivot around which the family can grow together in the Lord. Over time, the family will also draw closer to each other. Like

Abraham’s household, we can pass this heirloom to the next generation, as the young observe and participate in worship with their elders.

Indeed, Abraham passed his family heirloom of altar building to Isaac, who passed it to Jacob. When Jacob left his father’s household, he had yet to establish his own altar—he saw God as the God of his father and grandfather, but not as his own (Gen 28:13; 31:5, 29; 32:9). Later, after he had endured many hardships and wrestled with God, he finally surrendered his life to God. God also blessed him with a new name, Israel. When he erected his altar, he called it *El Elohe Israel*—literally, “God, the God of Israel” (Gen 33:18–20). He finally acknowledged that the faith of his fathers was his own.

Our youths should start building a personal altar and personal relationship with God while they still live in the family home. Then, when we fly the nest for studies, work, or the next step in life and have our first taste of independence, we must ensure we continue our personal altar to the Lord. Carve out a time for daily Bible reading and prayer, and not as an afterthought just before we fall asleep. Since we will have more control of our time, we should use it wisely and seek positive ways to strengthen our worship of God at home. Find ways of incorporating livestream services and online fellowships into our schedule, or set up a small Bible study with friends. If we live far away from a physical church building, it is even more critical to remain virtually connected to the church and fellow members.

### LEARNING FROM JEWISH HOUSEHOLDS

By the time the Israelites entered the land of Canaan after forty years in the wilderness, they were a nation of

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people with an established system of communal worship. They gathered as a congregation for Sabbath worship and for keeping the festivals. God also appointed the altar in the tabernacle of meeting to make offerings and sacrifices, which was later set up in Shiloh (Deut 12:5–6, 13–14; Josh 18:1). Despite this formalized worship, God reiterated the importance of weaving God’s word into every aspect of their family lives. As He instructed:

*“And the words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You should teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”* (Deut 6:6–9)

The above passage introduces another consideration for Christian households. The regular church services we attend and the religious education classes our children join do not replace the teaching of God’s word in our homes. The significance of “when you sit in the house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up” is to embed the word of God in our everyday life.

Following the example of Jewish households, Christian adults should seize every opportunity to discuss God’s word in our daily routine and activities. As we observe the sunshine or the rain, we can reflect on God’s creation and God’s providence. If we notice a rainbow, we can talk about the story of Noah. When our children quarrel and fight, we can remind them of Jesus’ teachings concerning forgiveness. We can use every encounter to weave in the word of God elegantly and positively into our family life.

To write God’s word “on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” signifies that Christian households must remember to apply the word of God as they leave their house for their daily activities and when they return home. Again, Christian parents can

**“ While the church is the household of God, the reverse should also apply—our family should also be the church of God. ”**

remind their children of being the light of the world, the salt of the earth, and practicing Christian virtues whenever they step outside of the home. Likewise, when the children return, adults can show concern by engaging in conversation about their encounters outside. It then becomes natural to weave the word of God into our conversations, to encourage, comfort, or counsel.

During the formal family altar time, be it daily or weekly, children can be encouraged to speak about lessons they learned in church or their reflections about the word of God in their daily lives. Adults should do likewise to lead by example. The key lies in having the word of God anchor the principles of conduct in the household.

For those who live alone, the home should still be a place where God’s word is ever-present. Research the online resources and content created by the church for members’ daily devotion. This can be hymnal recordings and choir presentations, sermon and seminar recordings, Bible study guides, blogs, and social media content. Access these throughout the day so that God’s word can act as a light to our feet on our daily walk. A daily routine could consist of reading the Five Loaves Two Fish blog (blog.tjc.org) with our breakfast, listening to a lecture series from the tjc.org archive on our lunchtime walk, and putting on hymns as we do the housework. These are not alternatives to spending time in prayer and Bible study but can all contribute to strengthening our personal altar.

### THE CHURCH IN OUR HOUSE

*Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.* (1 Cor 16:19b)

*Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that is in his house.* (Col 4:15)

Some believers in the early church offered their houses as places of worship. Even as the church grew to encompass many different families, the Christian concept of the church remained as the “house of God” or the “household of God” (1 Tim 3:15; Eph 2:19). If we consider how Timothy had known the Holy Scriptures from childhood (2 Tim 3:15), we could reasonably conclude that he was taught at home by his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice (2 Tim 1: 5). Hence, while the church is the household of God, the reverse should also apply—our family should also be the church of God.

When Joshua addressed the people for the final time, he urged them to discard the gods their fathers had served and to make a choice. They could choose the gods from the other side of the river or the gods of the Amorites; but Joshua and his household had decided that their family altar would be dedicated to the Lord (Josh 24:15).

What about us today? Have we instilled family worship and the constant reminder of God’s word in our homes? Will we dedicate time to pray and learn God’s word, whether by ourselves or with our household? Have we erected our altar to God, wherever we pitch our tents? If we can build our homes around this central pivot, then our homes can indeed be the church of God.

# The Family Altar

*“And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”*

*(Deut 6:6–9)*

Moses exhorted God’s people to put His words into their hearts and conscientiously teach them to their children. Binding His words as a sign on their hands and frontlets between their eyes was a reminder not to transgress God’s word in thought or deed. Writing the words of God on their doorposts and gates emphasized observance of God’s word both inside and outside the home.

Today, while there is no need to write the words of God on our doorposts literally, we must still teach them in our homes. The best way to do this is by building the family altar, establishing a time for all in the household to read the Bible, sing hymns, and pray together. During this time, everyone in the family should put aside non-faith-related matters and share God’s word to encourage one another. Such an altar will please God and be blessed by Him.

The Bible records four family altars we can learn from, as we build our own.

## 1. ADAM’S FAMILY ALTAR: PASSING DOWN THE FAITH

*By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks.*

*(Heb 11:4)*

Offering sacrifices was not something Abel invented. It had been taught to him by his parents. After Adam and Eve sinned, they became conscious and ashamed of their nakedness. In His mercy, God instructed them to kill

*“Today, while there is no need to write the words of God on our doorposts literally, we must still teach them in our homes. The best way to do this is by building the family altar.”*



a lamb and use its skin to cover their shame—the first sacrifice. Learning of this from his parents, Abel accepted this practice, which perhaps influenced his career choice of shepherding. Humankind did not begin to consume meat until after the flood (Gen 9:3). So Abel tended sheep, not for food, but likely as sacrifices to be offered to God. Today we believe that the Lord Jesus is the Lamb of Atonement. To avail ourselves and our household of God's salvation grace given through Jesus, we must build a family altar of faith.

*[W]hen I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also.*  
(2 Tim 1:5)

Paul commended Timothy's faith and nurtured its growth. But before Paul appeared in Timothy's life, how had Timothy's faith been established and built up? Paul testified that faith was passed down from Timothy's grandmother to his mother and subsequently to him. The passing on of faith from one generation to the next is fundamental. While the church plays a vital role in nurturing faith, the primary seedbed is within the family. Therefore, we should prioritize the cultivation of our personal faith and that of our family by building our family altar of faith.

Some people say, "My children are too young" or "My children have too much homework, and we're so tired from work. There's no time for a family altar." What is an altar? It is a place on which sacrifices are offered. If our faith is essential to us, we must firmly set aside time for it. We willingly expend our time on various things—some may be worth the sacrifice, but others turn out to be worthless, leaving us tired and empty. Time spent on the family altar may cause us to feel tired, but we would definitely not feel empty, for we are spending time in communion with eternity.

Time spent on eternity is never wasted because our eternal God will remember and reward us for the time we spend on and for Him. If we esteem our relationship with the Almighty God and



heavenly Father, He reciprocates. When God sees how we prioritize our family altar despite the busyness of our lives, the sacrifices we make will be pleasing and acceptable to Him. Blessings will follow (Mt 6:33). Conversely, time spent on other temporal matters will ultimately be futile, no matter how exciting they may be.

How much time do we spend connecting with eternity? How many of the things we do today will last till eternity? If we want to optimize our time on earth, then spend time establishing the family altar.

## 2. NOAH'S FAMILY ALTAR: THANKSGIVING

*Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in His heart, "I will never again*

*curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done."*

(Gen 8:20–21)

Noah's family was saved from the flood. Coming out of the ark, Noah led his family to set up an altar to give thanks for God's grace.

Today we have been redeemed by God, and our families are more blessed than in the past. But has our thanksgiving increased to match? Sometimes, people do not sincerely give thanks because they attribute their success to personal skill and diligence rather than God's grace. We can see this from history. Moses warned the Israelites against being lifted in their hearts when their riches multiplied in Canaan (Deut 8:11–18). He exhorted them to remember that their wealth was due not to their diligence but to God, who gave them life and the opportunity to gain wealth.

**“ Time spent on the family altar may cause us to feel tired, but we would definitely not feel empty, for we are spending time in communion with eternity. Time spent on eternity is never wasted because our eternal God will remember and reward us. ”**



“ Much of our children’s time is spent at home. Parents cannot rely on the two hours of RE lessons at church for their children’s religious upbringing. They must shoulder most of the responsibility. ”

Without health or life, diligence is meaningless. Hence, we ought to constantly give thanks to God for giving us life and the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of our labor.

Noah built an altar to thank God for providence and protection. The family altar serves to remind our families to give thanks to God for all we have. During family celebrations—birthdays, school achievements, work successes—or when we are delivered from harm, do we put aside time to give thanks to God wholeheartedly?

The family altar is also a valuable platform for us to show appreciation to our family members and acknowledge that their help and support were integral to our success. God sustains us by giving us parents who nurture us. When we are prospering, besides offering thanks for God’s grace, let us also recognize our family members’ quiet and unwavering efforts.

### 3. ABRAHAM’S FAMILY ALTAR: TRUST IN GOD’S GUIDANCE

*Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan. Abram passed through the land of Shechem, as far as the terebinth tree of Moreh. And the Canaanites were then in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” And there he built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.* (Gen 12:5–7)

Abraham believed in God, and heeded God’s call to lead his family out of the land of Ur. Leaving their home for a strange and unknown place, they

may have felt helpless, frightened, and alone. God knew what Abraham was experiencing and so appeared to him. He affirmed His promise that, even though Abraham was living in an unfamiliar place with no kinsmen, God was with him. Abraham was comforted and encouraged. But he realized that, besides being personally assured, he had to lead his family members to trust in God amid their respective weaknesses, worries, and loneliness. They, too, needed to know that God was with them. This was why he built the altar to the Lord. Today, we must build such a family altar to demonstrate that we need God’s abidance.

*Unless the LORD builds the house,  
They labour in vain who build it;  
Unless the LORD guards the city,  
The watchman stays awake in vain.*  
(Ps 127:1)

This verse clearly describes human limitations and God’s limitlessness. We may be able to construct our dream house but may not have a happy family, despite our efforts. Far too often, a big beautiful house is filled with an ocean of regret. Observers may envy the owners for the opulence of their possessions, but the beauty only serves to mask the pain and tears.

We strive to watch over every family member and worry over their spiritual setbacks, but we can do little to ensure the preservation of their well-being and faith. If our family members fall away in their faith, we can only pray for them. We cannot always watch over them, but our God watches all the time. Hence, we must appeal to God for His preservation, guidance, and help in our weakness—that we can still rejoice in our sorrow, and that our prodigal family members can return from their wanderings.

The present generation is a rebellious one. However, they may not see their actions as rebellion but as merely exercising their rights to self-expression and freedom. They are thus unaware that their acts of freedom and self-expression could hurt others. For example, when they backslide in faith or go astray, they still think they are on the right path, although they bring much grief to those who love them.

Some parents blame society for corrupting their children and blame the church for not teaching their children well. But Sabbath is only one day of the week. Where have these parents taken their children on the other six days? Attending service and religious education (RE) classes only takes a few hours. What are we encouraging our children to do for the rest of the hours left in the week?

In short, societal influence on our children is inevitable. Preachers and RE teachers play vital roles in mitigating adverse social trends on our children, and we ask God to imbue them with His wisdom. However, much of our children’s time is spent at home. Parents cannot rely on the two hours of RE lessons in church for their children’s religious upbringing. They must shoulder most of the responsibility.

Learn from Abraham in setting up an altar of trust in God’s guidance; lead our family to do the same. Seeing how parents give their faith the highest priority, even the most rebellious children would recognize this effort and understand how much their parents care for their faith. Knowing their parents’ concern would help these children restrain themselves from sin. Even if they do not repent immediately, they know they should. Eventually, the family altar will affect the restoration of their faith.

### 4. JOB’S FAMILY ALTAR: SEEKING GOD’S FORGIVENESS

*So it was, when the days of feasting had run their course, that Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, “It may be that my*

*“ Sometimes there is nothing we can do to help, especially regarding matters of the heart, which is why we need the word of God. If our family members face problems, this time can be used to encourage them not to keep things locked up in their hearts. ”*

*sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.” Thus Job did regularly.*

*(Job 1:5)*

Job set up the family altar for his children. He was well aware of their weaknesses. In fact, every parent knows what his or her child is like, having lived with and observed each child from birth. Parents know their children’s character, strengths, and weaknesses and how they may transgress the word of God. Job was worried that his fear might become a reality. He did not set up a family altar only when his children sinned—he set it up *lest* his children sin and curse God. Job did this regularly, and his children would have been well aware of his serious worry over the possibility of them sinning. They knew he was interceding for them, seeking forgiveness from God, even before any sin was committed. Even if they did not verbally express their gratitude, they would have been moved. We need to set up the family altar of Job because we and our children have weaknesses, and we need the word of God to guide us, lest we go astray.

When we advise our children, their immediate reaction may be to ignore us. Our advice and encouragement may appear to fall on deaf ears. But these words have been sown in their hearts. When they wander astray, these loving reminders will come to mind. At the very least, it would make them pause and consider if they should continue on this path or repent. If we, as parents, have not advised them, there would be nothing to make them stop and think. Children would interpret their parents’ silence as a lack of concern about their backsliding; they would conclude that faith is unimportant and continue to do as they wish. When we know our

children have sinned, we must find an opportune time to talk to them about it. The family altar can be such an opportunity—it is a time and place for all to encourage each other with God’s word.

The word of God is indeed a critical element in the family altar. If a family member has stumbled, we use God’s word to encourage them to repent. If a family member is feeling sad, we use God’s word to comfort them. Sometimes there is nothing we can do to help, especially regarding matters of the heart, which is why we need the word of God. If our family members face problems, this time can be used to encourage them not to keep things locked up in their hearts. Although we may not be able to solve the problem, at the very least, we can share the burden and pray about it together.

#### CONCLUSION: STAYING STRONG TOGETHER

Home is a place where we can experience great happiness but also much sadness. We love our family members dearly, but we may also argue with them. There are times we trust one another and times we do not. But if every family member exalts God as the center of his or her life, we will learn to forgive and accept one another just as He has forgiven us. Then the family will be able to love one another amid the inadvertent conflicts or inevitable storms of life. But if God is not the center of our lives, the home becomes a battlefield where we fight fiercely to protect our self-interests, or a hotel where we share a roof but stay separate in our rooms, not sharing with each other what we are going through.

The family altar is critical as it reminds us to keep God—the Source of love—

as the center of our homes. Let us learn from Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Job to set up the family altar of faith, thanksgiving, trust in God’s guidance and forgiveness, so that our entire family may be guided to receive God’s blessings.

Timothy Yeung  
Vancouver, Canada

# Growing Up with the Family Altar

**B**ehold, children are a heritage  
from the LORD,  
The fruit of the womb is a reward.  
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,  
So are the children of one's youth  
Happy is the man who has his quiver full  
of them;  
They shall not be ashamed,  
But shall speak with their enemies in the  
gate. (Ps 127:3–5)

Children are a spiritual heritage passed down to us by the Lord. Like any other inheritance, this blessing has to be cherished and preserved. Our children have been entrusted to us by the Lord so that we can raise them in the faith and continue this spiritual legacy. Now that the True Jesus Church has passed her first centennial, we need to pass on the faith to the next generation and prepare for the coming of our Lord Jesus. How can we effectively achieve this goal? The key is to know the role of

children in the family altar and lay the foundations for spiritual independence from an early age.

## BUILD AS THEY GROW

### Infancy Stage (0–3 years)

In 2019, the average Canadian two-parent household consisted of 3.99 individuals (around two children), and the average lone-parent household consisted of 2.56 (fewer than two children).<sup>1</sup> Since smaller families have become the norm, it is understandable that a newborn baby will become the center of his or her parents' focus. Once they have kids, many young families will stop attending evening services and resign from holy work to concentrate on child-rearing. However, once we

understand that children are a heritage from God and that the primary objective of having children is to maintain and pass on our spiritual legacy to the next generation, we will return our focus to God.

We should not allow our babies to become an excuse for forsaking church services and God's work. I have observed some young parents fully committed to attending services, including a full day of Sabbath worship and additional evening services. They simply pack everything they need—spare clothes, nappies, weaning accessories, toys—and bring their babies in a stroller. When I ask how they can show such devotion, they reply that putting Jesus rather than their babies at the center of the family is the right thing to do. After all, it is God who has blessed them with children.

<sup>1</sup> "User Guide for the Survey of Household Spending 2019," Statistics Canada, January 22, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/62f0026m/62f0026m2021001-eng.htm>.



God bestows the heritage of children on parents to teach them to have a stronger faith, to pass on this spiritual legacy. One day, they will have to give an account to God. If all parents remember this, they will become more proactive in their faith and build up a family altar as soon as their bundle of joy arrives. Having a newborn should remind us to seek God's word and pray more, not less.

### Preschool Stage (3–5 years)

Building up the family altar is central to maintaining the faith of the next generation. Nowadays, relying on church services and religious education classes is not enough to cultivate our children's faith. Therefore, each family should build their family altar according to their needs, to worship God, share, and have fellowship at home. This should begin in early childhood.

When a child is between three and five years old, parents should spend time every night reading a Bible story and praying with them. Many parents know the benefits of reading bedtime stories, but they stick to fairy tales and popular books. These precious moments with our children are wasted when we only read secular stories, which espouse worldly values and practices. Instead, parents should spend at least ten to fifteen minutes reading Bible stories to their children at bedtime. This could be a story from a children's picture Bible or a short passage from the Bible. Parents can follow their local church's Bible reading schedule or choose some more well-known biblical tales.

Bedtime is the ideal time for children to wind down, and naturally, their minds will open up and begin to wonder. So parents may find their children asking questions about the stories they have just heard. This is an excellent opportunity for parents to share their thoughts, and this also encourages parents to be more familiar with the Bible themselves. This way, both parent and child can grow spiritually.

The family altar can conclude by reciting the Lord's Prayer—bilingual families can recite this in their mother tongue and second language. This

*“ If we do not put God first when we raise our child, we will miss out on God's blessing and guidance. We do not simply have a family altar when we have time—we have to find time. ”*

process allows the children to focus on God and share precious time with their parents. Though young children have a very passive role in the family altar, this will prepare them for the next stage.

### Childhood Stage (5–10 years)

As the child's understanding and language skills grow, parents can expand the family altar by replacing one or two nights of bedtime Bible stories with family services. These family services can include hymn singing, prayers of understanding, and Bible reading. While parents lead the services, they should always encourage the whole family to participate. They can prompt the children to choose the hymns, read Bible verses aloud, and ask questions. If a child can play a musical instrument, they can accompany the hymn singing. When parents think they are ready, children can lead the prayer of understanding at the start of the service.

Family services should be short—no longer than thirty minutes—but held regularly. Children will gradually learn that they have a role in the spirituality of the family and the building up of the family altar. This consistency will allow their little minds to forge a connection with God. At the same time, family members sharing God's grace and their testimonies each week will also build up the family bond and keep everyone's spirits united despite their busy lives.

If children start enjoying the family services because they are more engaged, their hearts will grow close to God and their parents.

### Preteen and Adolescent Stage (10+ years)

If the family altar has been established during the previous stages of the children's development, there will be a smooth transition into their

teenage years. By now, regular family services will be a time of devotion and testimony sharing, but will also become a time of training for teenagers. Since the children are familiar with the routine, they can start to lead family services. This is also a safe and relaxed environment in which teens can practice leading hymns, interpreting, and playing the piano before the nerve-racking experience of serving in these ministries for the first time in front of a packed church hall.

When teenagers have developed their roles and responsibilities in this family setting, they will be equipped to serve God and put Him in the center of their life as they prepare to enter adulthood. Families who have established family altars have witnessed God's grace continually flowing into the lives of their children as they weather the emotional storms and spiritual ups and downs of adolescence.

The family altar also provides a platform for parents to understand their children's challenges during this period. Therefore, the family altar at this stage should involve discussion of faith-related issues such as drugs, dating, purity, marriage, and so on. Parents should avoid lecturing their teenage children but let them express their opinions, questions, and concerns. Sharing Bible verses for enlightenment and praying with them will reduce their stress and encourage them to entrust their cares to God, thus opening the opportunity to experience God's guidance in their lives. Giving them these tools is particularly important for when they enter high school or college, where temptations abound.

Once teenagers learn to put God first in their life, honoring Him above all else, they will have established their personal altar in their heart. Their faith

is now their own, not just the faith of their parents.

### ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

#### Finding Time for God as a Family

Nowadays, parents are overwhelmed by the never-ending task list of raising children and giving them a competitive edge from an early age. Some may complain that, with the time spent studying to get good grades and participating in extracurricular activities, there is no space in their children's schedule for a family altar.

However, let us remember the words of the Lord Jesus: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Mt 6:33). If we do not put God first when we raise our child, we will miss out on God's blessing and guidance. We do not simply have a family altar when we have time—we have to *find time*. Going forward, this is the most important thing for our children's spiritual cultivation and their relationship with God.

How do we find time? The answer is that we have to make sacrifices by reducing activities that take up our children's time and energy. Some parents, driven by the fear of their child's losing out, arrange a packed weekly roster of extracurricular activities for their children—learning piano, violin, dance, art, sports, languages, and so on—and even book them into classes on Sabbath mornings. But such an exhausting schedule means that neither child nor parent will have the energy or be in the mood for a conversation at the end of the day, never mind family altar. Therefore, parents need to make wise choices regarding their children's activities.

#### Screen Time

Another important consideration is

the family's use of digital devices and screens. It is a familiar scene in many families: after dinner, everyone goes to their rooms to play with their gadgets. In such a situation, it will be challenging to build the family altar as each person's mind is occupied by the world.

Sadly, time spent alone with screens often outweighs the time spent together as a family. If parents grant their children unlimited access to smartphones and tablets from a young age, they will become addicted. With such stimulating and time-sucking devices at hand, it is no wonder that children struggle to find the time and heart to read the Bible and pray at home.

Therefore, parents must be strict about the amount of screen time their child can have. Children under six should have minimal access to screens, and older children's screen usage should be limited and closely monitored. If this restriction is imposed early on, the family will find it easy to talk about God, share their thoughts, and have meaningful discussions during their precious family altar time.

#### Independent Bible Reading

Some families can hold family services every night. But even if this is the case, children must develop a habit of independent daily Bible reading and prayer to have their own personal time with God.

To train a child to read the Bible independently, the parent must set the example. If children grow up seeing their parents always using their smartphones, how will they behave when they have a smartphone of their own? Children model their behavior on what they observe. So the most impactful thing that parents can do is to cultivate their own Bible reading routine.

Babies start to pick up language from the day they are born, and research has shown that early parental reading leads to stronger vocabularies and literacy skills later on.<sup>2</sup> So, before their children reach the age of two, parents should start reading Bible stories to them to aid their spiritual development and help them know God as early as possible. There are plenty of children's picture Bibles on the market. If we promote Bible stories to them over secular and, at times, meaningless books, they will reap great spiritual benefits.

When children start reading independently, at around the age of six, the next step is for parents to give them their first Bible—again, there are many available versions aimed at children. The parents' main task is to encourage them to read it independently, in much the same way that parents must teach a child to practice their musical instrument. Both positive and negative enforcement—the carrot and the stick—can be used. We should not only ask, "Have you done your homework?" but also, "Have you read your daily passage?" One paragraph, passage, or page a day is good enough. As they progress in age, this should increase to a chapter or more. Once this daily Bible reading habit is firmed up, it will stay with them for the rest of their life.

### CONCLUSION

As children grow, their role in the family altar moves from passive to active. The key is to start early in their lives and establish a suitable routine as a family. Parents should adjust their lifestyle and daily schedule to free up time and energy for building the family altar. This will include cutting down on extracurricular activities, limiting screen time for the whole family, and having open and humble communication with our children. Much prayer, time, and effort are needed, but the reward will be great indeed, as the whole family draws closer to each other and to God, preserving the spiritual legacy of faith for the next generation.

**“ Before their children reach the age of two, parents should start reading Bible stories to them to aid their spiritual development and help them know God as early as possible. ”**

<sup>2</sup> Lydia Denworth, "The Magic of Reading Aloud to Babies," *Psychology Today*, May 5, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/brain-waves/201705/the-magic-reading-aloud-babies>.

# Ahaz's Blasphemous Altar

In the Bible, building altars to God is typically depicted as a positive act and something many ancient saints engaged in. Noah built an altar and offered it to the Lord (Gen 8:20). Wherever Abraham traveled, he built altars (Gen 12:7–8). We also often cite Isaac's example to illustrate how we ought to prioritize our life: to first build an altar (spiritual life), pitch our tent (family life), and finally, to dig a well (professional life) (Gen 26:25).

While altar-building, as individuals or as families, is encouraged, we need to be aware of the altar's design and for whom we are building it. In ancient Judah, the story of King Ahaz serves as a warning, as he copied the design of an idolatrous altar and installed it in Jerusalem. Although we may feel we would never do what Ahaz did, the reality could be quite different. For this reason, we must remain watchful.

## INFERIORITY COMPLEX

*Now King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria, and saw an altar that was at Damascus; and King Ahaz sent to Urijah the priest the design of the altar and its pattern, according to all its workmanship. Then Urijah the priest built an altar according to all that King Ahaz had sent from Damascus. So Urijah the priest made it before King Ahaz came back from Damascus. And when the king came back from Damascus, the king saw the altar; and the king approached the altar and made offerings on it. So he burned his burnt offering and his grain offering;*

*and he poured his drink offering and sprinkled the blood of his peace offerings on the altar.* (2 Kgs 16:10–13)

Let us first consider what we know of Ahaz's motive in building an altar inspired by an idol-worshipping nation. Ahaz had long venerated the surrounding Gentile nations, along with their gods and rituals. He "made his son pass through the fire," likely meaning he offered him to Molech, a foreign god (2Kgs 16:3). This was the practice of the Canaanites (Lev 20:2–5; 2 Kgs 23:10). Later, when Syria and Israel besieged Ahaz, he immediately turned

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“ Today, it is possible to find modern parallels to Ahaz’s behavior. It could happen when youths start comparing their lifestyle with that of non-Christians, leading to...feelings of low self-esteem and inferiority. ”

to Assyria, the world superpower at the time, for help. “And Ahaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord, and in the treasuries of the king’s house, and sent it as a present to the king of Assyria” (2 Kgs 16:8). It is pertinent to note that no one forced Ahaz to do this, and it would seem that the plan worked.

As Ahaz traveled to meet the king of Assyria, he passed through the land of Syria. In Damascus, he became enchanted by an altar that he saw and resolved to have a copy made for Jerusalem. At that time, it was common to associate a nation’s success with the gods they worshipped, and Syria was the nation that had earlier besieged Judah and taken some cities (2 Kgs 16:5-6). For this reason, Ahaz resolved to make an altar like the one in Damascus. Once completed, he deemed it “great” (2 Kgs 16:15).

It was not that Ahaz had not witnessed God’s power. Indeed, Isaiah had prophesied and encouraged him during the aforementioned Syro-Israelite siege, giving him God’s assurance of protection (Isa 7:3-17). God also sent the prophet Oded to convince Israel to release any Judean prisoners they had captured in battle (2 Chr 28:5-15). But after peace was attained, Ahaz either forgot or refused to recognize God’s protection. Ultimately, Ahaz was lured by the outward success of nations such as Syria, as evidenced by his avowal: “Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me” (2 Chr 28:23).

It was clear that Ahaz had forgotten he was the king of the chosen people of the one true God.

Today, it is possible to find modern parallels to Ahaz’s behavior. It could

happen when youths start comparing their lifestyle with that of non-Christians, leading to complaints of, “I can’t do this. I can’t do that. I don’t fit in.” It may result in, or amplify, feelings of low self-esteem and inferiority. Also, church members may start comparing the True Jesus Church to other denominations and conclude that we fall short in terms of congregation size, diversity of membership, perceived quality of activities, financial power, biblical scholarship, and the like. There may be others who are embarrassed because we pray in tongues and do not see it as something to be treasured. Such comparisons may lead them to question whether we are really the true church. In truth, when we appraise our lives and our church from a worldly perspective, we, like Ahaz, are in danger of erecting blasphemous altars. The solution is to cultivate a proper spiritual perspective about who we are. We must remember that we are members of the true church whom God has prepared before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:3-4).

### BRINGING IDOLATROUS WORSHIP INTO THE CHURCH AND HOME

*He also brought the bronze altar which was before the Lord, from the front of the temple—from between the new altar and the house of the Lord—and put it on the north side of the new altar. Then King Ahaz commanded Urijah the priest, saying, “On the great new altar burn the morning burnt offering, the evening*

*grain offering, the king’s burnt sacrifice, and his grain offering, with the burnt offering of all the people of the land, their grain offering, and their drink offerings; and sprinkle on it all the blood of the burnt offering and all the blood of the sacrifice.”* (2 Kgs 16:14-15a)

Initially, Ahaz installed the new altar behind the original bronze altar. When he returned from Damascus, he made some inaugural offerings (2 Kgs 16:13). However, with time, his backsliding worsened. Ahaz moved the bronze altar northward, relegating it to an inferior position, and began using the blasphemous altar for the daily sacrifices. Unbelievably, all this unfolded within the temple courts, the place that Solomon had built and dedicated to the true and living God.

When we consider that the altar of olden times symbolizes prayers and worship (Ps 141:2), we realize that building a blasphemous altar could happen even today.

Several years ago, when I was visiting one of our churches outside of the US, I was stunned to witness several of our members walking about in the chapel at night, repeatedly shouting, “Fire, fire!” I learned that they were imitating the neighboring Pentecostal churches and had adopted this practice in place of praying in the Holy Spirit. This unfortunate state of affairs was the outcome of the influence of wayward workers and our members being seduced by the theatre and excitement of the other denominations. In this way, they had strayed from the precious truth of the True Jesus Church. Eventually, the workers and members in that church fell away for good.

In recent years, some errant church workers and members have been

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promoting the idea that Satan is self-existent. This concept has a certain appeal on the surface since it would seemingly detach God from any connection with the devil, and with evil and suffering. But it has a fundamental problem. The concept is incongruent with the Bible’s teaching that no one, except the Almighty God, is self-existing. Those who uphold the erroneous belief are, in effect, gifting Satan with a status that he has long desired, which is to be like God. Thus, the very heart of the idea is blasphemous—how could we even entertain the notion that anyone or anything is comparable to the one true God? As church members, our natural inclination is to respect all workers. Nevertheless, we would do well to heed the Bible’s teaching: “Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess 5:21–22).

In wider society, there is a current trend for “mindfulness,” a practice that finds its roots in Buddhism and involves meditation to bring one’s attention to the present moment.<sup>1</sup> Many psychologists promote its benefits for mental well-being, so it is increasingly used in secular settings such as schools, hospitals, and prisons. Corporations are encouraging employees to use mindfulness apps. Hotel chains are advertising mindfulness amenities on their premises. There are a plethora of articles, videos, and social media posts on the subject. As the world gravitates toward this trend, we must take care to discern and understand that it is no substitute for prayer.

Moreover, it is not the type of meditation we should practice as Christians. Instead, we should be undertaking biblically-based meditation, which is

centered on the word and works of God (Ps 1:2; 77:12). Our goal should be to develop the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16).

Whether at church or in the home, we must be wary of bringing impure ideas and practices into our worship. We must honor and worship God in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23–24).

### BRINGING IDOLATROUS METHODS INTO SERVING

*“And the bronze altar shall be for me to inquire by.”* (2 Kgs 16:15b)

After moving the bronze altar, Ahaz repurposed it “for [him] to inquire by” (2 Kgs 16:15). Some Bible scholars think this is a reference to extispicy, a practice whereby occultists would inspect the condition and positioning of animal entrails in the act of divination.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the specifics, the bronze altar’s original purpose was certainly not for divination, but rather it was for making offerings to God, for atonement, thanksgiving, fellowship, and restitution (Lev 1–5).

Since the altar was the structure for making offerings, it can symbolize our service to God. Just as idolatrous worship can displace godly worship, so idolatrous methods can displace biblical service. As living sacrifices, we should not lose sight of God’s will and make the mistake of repurposing ourselves for things that we ought not to do. For example, in the True Jesus Church, it has long been understood that we should emphasize God and His word when we evangelize. However, this does not always happen. I saw promotional materials for an event that highlighted the speakers as the main attractions in

one local church. The same church also used a praise band whose music was amplified with deafening loudspeakers, a practice of other denominations. The result was that the congregation was roused by the emotive music but was disturbingly lethargic when it was time to pray in the Spirit. Thankfully, I have since learned that things have improved in that church, and matters are much more in order now.

When worldly values and the appealing but ungodly practices of other denominations influence the service we offer to God, we are no longer using our altar of sacrifice for its ordained purpose. We have debased our service to God.

### CONCLUSION

The story of Ahaz, as well as present-day iterations, serves to give us a warning. Altar-building ought to follow God’s specifications (Ex 20:24; Josh 8:30–31). Its associated worship and service should be genuine, holy, and pleasing in God’s sight. As we build our altars individually at home or collectively as a family and in the church, let us remain vigilant, lest our altars blaspheme against God.

<sup>1</sup> “Mindfulness,” Psychology Today, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/mindfulness>.

<sup>2</sup> JH Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (Vol. 3)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).



# A Faith-Building Moment: Crisis, Truth and Prayer

FF Chong  
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**W**e are living in an extremely uncertain time. The current pandemic rages on, and the havoc wrought by COVID-19 surging—and resurging—in many countries is horrifying. Each new wave brings more cases and deaths than the one before, grinding the world’s strongest economies to a veritable halt. Millions in the wealthiest countries struggle to put food on the table or keep a roof over their heads. In some of the most scientifically-advanced nations, the COVID-19 death toll has risen exponentially.

Science is integral to humanity’s survival but cannot eradicate every threat. The scientific community may be hailing the huge breakthrough of vaccine development in an exceptionally short time, but it will take a considerable period to inoculate the whole world. So, while there is light at the end of the

tunnel, it is an indisputably long tunnel.

Recent reports further overshadow celebrations over the vaccine development: more transmissible variants of the virus have been discovered in the United Kingdom, South Africa, Brazil, and, most recently, India; and more will undoubtedly appear before this pandemic is over. Medical science must now contend with these viral mutations. Frighteningly, new viruses are emerging from the largest forests in Africa and other continents. If one of these new contagions takes hold in the human population, no one can predict the devastation the next pandemic could cause. Indeed, this is a crisis that besets all humanity, Christians and non-Christians alike.

Besides the threat to health and livelihoods, the pandemic has also made daily living since 2020 more

challenging. Most, if not all, of us have had to cope with school closures, restriction of movement, and the banning of gathering for worship—the timings of which can be unpredictable. Nevertheless, when the going gets tough, the tough get going. Our Lord Jesus has long warned us that pestilences will increase (Mt 24:7). We must be prepared to face these, knowing that His second advent is closer than when we first believed.

## WE ARE GOD’S CHILDREN: PURIFY OURSELVES

*“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”*

*(Jn 16:33)*

These words of Christ to His disciples two millennia ago are also meant for



us. Tribulation is unavoidable (Jas 1:3; 1 Pet 4:12), but we shall have peace. Furthermore, this teaching from Christ tells us *where* we can truly experience this promised peace. While tribulations may emerge on an ever-increasing scale, we will experience tranquility if we are in Christ. The contrast between the two spheres—in the world and in Christ—is sharp. Today, we are privileged to be in Christ, having undergone the one water baptism that made us His children. This pandemic should stir us to realize that we must never depart from the safe embrace of our Father. So, *how* do we remain in Christ? Keeping ourselves in Christ requires constant purification (1 Jn 3:2–3). The peace of God will truly rule in our hearts when we are determined to be Spirit-sanctified. We can genuinely sense this divine peace safeguarding our hearts even as worldwide calamities rise and disrupt practically every aspect of life.

### WE ARE PRECIOUS IN GOD'S EYES: TREASURE OUR STATUS

The Bible tells us God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son into the world (Jn 3:16). His Son came to the world with the doctrine of the Father (Jn 7:16) to save those who respond positively to His calling by accepting baptism to become His children. By His grace, we have become His children, receiving His undivided love (Deut 7:6–7; 1 Jn 3:1). This love pertains to our salvation and excludes all who are not in Him. Now we are in Christ—we are part of His body, the church. This fact must perpetually prompt us to see ourselves as a people who are starkly different from the world. Our existence is in Christ (Jn 17:16), so we do not conform to the world even though we live in the world.

Amidst the present crisis and fear-inducing statistics on infection and death rates, one way to keep our eyes and heart firmly turned to Jesus is to renew our understanding of the basic beliefs, particularly the one true church.

The True Jesus Church has taken substantial criticism for her doctrine of the one true church. She has been accused of arrogance and of

*“ Establishing what truth is has become increasingly challenging in a world where fact, fake news, and false teaching are skillfully woven together and frequently mutate. A complete comprehension demands a complete trust that this truth is the only truth that saves. ”*

discrimination. While a more extended discussion is beyond the scope of this article,<sup>1</sup> it bears repeating that Christ established only one church (Mt 16:18) and gave her the authority to overpower the gates of Hades. The seven “ones” in Ephesians 4:5–6 and Paul’s stern warning of “another gospel” in Galatians 1:8–9 point to one church entrusted with the truth from the beginning, rather than a loose collection of denominations with varying sets of beliefs working towards a broad amalgamation.

A proper understanding of the doctrine of the one true church should not evoke a sense of superiority, but an overwhelming gratitude and reverence. The Spirit of God will then work within us effectively to deepen our understanding of God’s love towards us. We must not allow the passage of time to blunt our appreciation of being chosen to be in His church. We are His special treasure; together, we form and are called to build up the church of God. This calling is purely God’s initiative and has nothing to do with man’s merits. Since God’s choosing of us is such a miraculous and critical part of our lives, we must make time to understand God’s choice. Meditating on this with a prayerful heart is an essential part of faith-building in this uncertain time.

### WE ARE GOD'S SPECIAL PEOPLE: TREASURE THE TRUTH

There is another immediate benefit of such daily communion with God—we gain greater clarity on the interconnectivity of the true church’s doctrines. These basic beliefs are

so wonderfully consistent with the Scriptures and with each other that the church could only have received them from God. For example, many Christian denominations teach and practice water baptism. There are also several which baptize through full immersion. But the complete biblical mode—full immersion with face downwards and in Jesus’ name—is only practiced in the one true church. Only such a God-inspired mode makes the baptism efficacious in ushering us into the church, the one body of the Lord. Understanding how we gained our membership in the church can strengthen our faith.

The traditional beliefs of the True Jesus Church form the complete gospel of salvation. God deems us as having full trust in Him when we fully believe in the gospel of salvation (Eph 1:13). Those who have already received the Holy Spirit must continue to believe in the doctrines to remain sealed. This is how we become motivated to foster an even better relationship with God (2 Tim 1:13–14). This sealing produces two instant benefits. First, we know that we belong to God through His choosing, making us even more willing to draw closer to Him. Second, we are empowered to withstand satanic forces seeking to separate us from Christ. We are shielded from the attacks of the wicked one and his accomplices (Rev 9:4).

### PRAY UNCEASINGLY

Building up and maintaining a steadfast faith in God is part of a lifelong exercise that requires power from the Lord. Unceasing prayer is the only way for us to receive this power from above. The challenge is to build a prayer routine where prayer is not a mere routine; it must be a meaningful time through which we enter into the depth

<sup>1</sup> For more in-depth discussion on the doctrine of one true church, please refer to: *Gospel Series: Church*, <https://tjc.org/elib-single-item-display/?langid=1&itemid=915&type=pub>.

of God. Continual prayer in the Spirit is essential to establishing a true and firm relationship with God. The state of our relationship with God can be adduced from our willingness and determination to submit to God and His word. Do not deceive ourselves that a relaxed attitude towards God's word is acceptable. Idleness in spiritual nurture will hinder our achievement of spiritual higher ground.

COVID-19 has forced the whole world to dial back our previous frenetic pace of life. In the past year of lockdowns, many of us have had more precious time for ourselves. Of course, it is difficult to plan, given the present climate of fear and uncertainty. However, the kind intention that God has for us will surface (Jer 29:11) when we fervently pray to God for wisdom and direction to navigate through this plight.

We must pray about many things, but what do we pray for to build up and maintain our faith?

*But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit* (Jude 20)

First, we are to build ourselves on the most holy faith—our received set of common beliefs that are identical to the beliefs held by the apostolic church. These constitute the truth that the church received on the first day of her arrival on earth (Acts 2:42). It is on this foundation that the True Jesus Church is built. Establishing what truth is has become increasingly challenging in a world where fact, fake news, and false teaching are skillfully woven together and frequently mutate. A complete comprehension demands a complete trust that this truth is the only truth that saves. Understanding God's word is radically different from understanding worldly knowledge; understanding God's truth is only possible through the Holy Spirit's revelation.

*Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.* (2 Tim 1:13-14)

Second, we must hold steadfastly to the traditional beliefs, an endeavor multiple times harder than just knowing these beliefs. There are many reasons which lead believers to abandon or modify these traditional beliefs. One is the church's perceived inability to counter every challenge posed against the basic beliefs. Another reason for the desire to shift away from the church's beliefs is the innate appeal of being like other denominations (cf. 1 Sam 8:5ff), which have seemingly logical alternatives to our church's doctrines. So we must be vigilant in faith. Deepening our understanding of geographical and societal contexts, theological knowledge and so on will help us better explicate the Scriptures. But let us not muddy up the church's basic beliefs and eventually lose sight of God's salvation plan.

The church's traditional beliefs are not subject to change, for they are the foundation of the church, which God laid at the point of her inception. We will comprehend these beliefs when we allow the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth. It is imperative to pray in the Spirit for the faith to accept that these basic beliefs are divinely given to the church. Such faith will open up the window of wisdom to gain an even more profound understanding of the doctrines. Aided by the Holy Spirit, we will gain a holistic view of the basic beliefs, and see that these are consistent with the apostolic paradigm chronicled in the Bible (Jn 16:13).

Such Spirit-enabled understanding of the word of God will bolster our faith in the truth; our trust in our doctrinal position will not waver, despite facing the staunchest of tests. Simply, we would be given the foresight to realize that any theological knowledge contradicting the church's doctrinal stance is a typical tactic Satan employs to lure us away from building up our faith. Drifting away from traditional beliefs is risky. Thus, we would make a mockery of our status as the corrector of Christianity, as chosen by the Lord, and become just another church amongst the countless denominations. This is tantamount to belittling our faith.

Spiritual cultivation—which can be a tedious and painful spiritual exercise—is of utmost importance to our spiritual survival. It goes beyond praying, reading the Bible, and being self-disciplined. The foundation of our faith must be built upon the church's basic beliefs. When the foundation of our salvation is sure and firm, we would not be short of God's abiding presence, which makes cultivation effective and divinely guided. In turn, the cultivation generates the momentum needed to continue establishing our faith in the present truth (2 Pet 1:12).

### CONCLUSION: OUR SALVATION IS NEARER THAN BEFORE

The ultimate goal for every sincere Christian is the salvation of the soul. We do not know the exact date of Christ's second advent. But one thing for sure is that His coming is nearer than ever before. He shall come like a thief when everyone is asleep at night. If we are in spiritual slumber or depart this world suddenly, being spiritually unprepared would jeopardize our salvation.

The current pandemic has sounded an urgent warning to us: we can no longer afford to take our faith in Christ for granted. We must take serious steps to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12). One such step is to build on the present truth (our traditional beliefs). We must allow the Holy Spirit to lead us and help grow our faith in the beliefs of the church. Make spiritual cultivation—unceasing prayer and increasing in knowledge of the truth—the top priority of our life.

## Parables of the Heavenly Kingdom (Part 4):

KC Tsai  
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# The Parable of the Leaven

“The church ought to be an unleavened lump. Yet, there was leaven hidden within. Paul thus urged believers to “purge out the old leaven, that [they] may be a new lump.” ”

*Editor's note: The parables in Matthew 13 enable men to find the true church through knowledge of the kingdom of God. In the first parable—the parable of the sower—only seeds that fall on good soil will grow, be deeply rooted, flourish and bear fruit. Although everyone has a chance to find the kingdom of heaven, only a genuinely receptive heart will understand the gospel, come to the true church and continually walk in God's word. In the second parable—the parable of the tares—troublesome tares sown among the good seed will ultimately be weeded out and destroyed. The devil attempts to disrupt the true church through false brethren. True believers should not lose heart but trust*

*God to ultimately eradicate these sons of the wicked one. In the third parable—the parable of the mustard seed—the eponymous seed grows into a huge tree that attracts birds to nest in its branches. The apostolic church was infiltrated by heresies and outside influences, which transformed her nature and allowed Satan to nest within it. To continue to enjoy God's abidance, the true church must firmly uphold the truth at all times.*

*This installment continues with the fourth parable.*

*Another parable He spoke to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.” (Mt 13:33)*

This parable precedes the parable of the hidden treasure in which the Lord Jesus described the kingdom of heaven as “treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid” (Mt 13:44). Before the treasure was found, nobody knew the treasure existed.

Paul tells us that this treasure is the glorious gospel of Christ entrusted to him and his co-workers (earthen vessels) (2 Cor 4:1–7). The apostolic church received the truth from the Lord. However, this true and complete gospel was gradually lost with the corruption of the apostolic church, a process described in the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven. Since



the parable of the hidden treasure follows these parables, we understand that, before the emergence of the true church in the end time, no one had the full gospel of salvation.

Let us consider the parable of the leaven to see how the treasure of the gospel came to be hidden from man.

### A LEAVEN-FREE CHURCH

The church ought to be an unleavened lump. Yet, there was leaven hidden within. Paul thus urged believers to “purge out the old leaven, that [they] may be a new lump” (1 Cor 5:6–7).

There are various types of leaven that the church must guard against.

#### Old Leaven and Leaven of Malice and Wickedness

*Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.* (1 Cor 5:8)

Paul warns the church in Corinth against two types of leaven: old leaven and the leaven of malice and wickedness. Old leaven refers to the believers’ old thoughts, old practices, old values, and concepts—often including acts of immorality—from before their conversion. The leaven of malice and wickedness refers to the sins that the believers had not forsaken despite their conversion. In his epistle to the Colossians, Paul similarly divides the things believers ought to forsake into two categories:

*Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them [old leaven]. But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth [leaven of malice and wickedness]. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds [old leaven].* (Col 3:8–10)

To genuinely be unleavened bread, the church must not tolerate the presence

of either of these types of leaven. Unchecked, these foreign elements will affect the purity of the entire lump.

#### Leaven of False Teachings

*You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion does not come from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in you, in the Lord, that you will have no other mind; but he who troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is.* (Gal 5:7–10)

In the context of Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia, leaven refers to teachings that do not align with the truth. During the apostolic church era, some advocated and exhorted the non-Jewish Christians to receive circumcision in order to be saved. This teaching caused confusion regarding the sound doctrine that Paul had taught (Gal 5:11–12).

During His ministry, the Lord Jesus warned, “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees” (Mt 16:6). The disciples only realized later that their Rabbi was speaking of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mt 16:12), for some of their teachings were not in accordance with the truth.

#### Leaven of Hypocrisy

*In the meantime, when an innumerable multitude of people had gathered together, so that they trampled one another, He began to say to His disciples first of all, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”* (Lk 12:1)

“Hypocrisy” means to put on a front, to be false, so that your actions do not match your words. These Pharisees were not genuinely devout but put on an outward appearance of false devotion and compassion; they loved

to be greeted respectfully; they lacked understanding but loved to teach others; they were unable to practice what they preached, yet expected others to do what they taught (Mt 23:1–33).

#### A LEAVEN-FREE OFFERING

*“No grain offering which you bring to the LORD shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey in any offering to the LORD made by fire.”* (Lev 2:11)

Leavened bread is offered during the sacrifice of thanksgiving of the peace offering (Lev 7:13–14); and on the day of Pentecost, two leavened loaves are offered as wave offering (Lev 23:17). However, these leavened loaves shall be holy to the Lord for the priests, and not burnt on the altar. What is burnt as a sacrifice to God cannot contain leaven.

In the Bible, leaven does not have a single positive connotation. Instead, it represents immorality, malice, wickedness, hypocrisy, and teachings that are against the truth.

#### LEAVEN AND REFORMATION

The parables of the mustard tree and the leaven were fulfilled in church history when the apostolic church saw its nature change as a result of heretical teachings. The leaven of false teachings spread throughout the church, until the gospel was no longer pure—at this point, when the apostles were no longer alive to defend the truth, the Holy Spirit departed from the church. Although the church continued in the spiritual realm, it could no longer be found on earth as the truth became hidden. We can see the after-effects in how the human organization of the “church” developed throughout history—cycling through reformations and schisms—before the re-emergence of the true church.

**“ The leaven of false teachings spread throughout the church, until the gospel was no longer pure—at this point, when the apostles were no longer alive to defend the truth, the Holy Spirit departed from the church. ”**

### Religious Reformation

In the sixteenth century, amid the growing decadence of the Catholic Church, there were still people who loved the Lord deeply. Such love spurred them to make personal sacrifices and carry out a series of religious reforms to rid the church of corruption. Prominent reformers include Erasmus of Rotterdam, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli.<sup>1</sup>

In 1517, Martin Luther wrote his *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* (also known as the *Ninety-five Theses*). He proposed an academic discussion on several teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Specifically, Luther strongly opposed the indulgences sold by the Church of Rome, and refuted the idea that “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory [or ‘into heaven’] springs.” The granting of indulgences was based on the Roman Catholic belief that—for a person who had sinned—having one’s guilt of sin forgiven through absolution alone is not enough. The person had to undergo temporal punishment for having offended Almighty God. However, the transgressor could pay for an indulgence to absolve him or her from the full punishment. The sale of these indulgences was a serious breach of biblical truth (Acts 8:20–23).

In 1520, Pope Leo X requested Luther to recant his writings. Luther’s refusal led to his ex-communication by the Roman Catholic Church. In 1521, at the Diet of Worms, Luther rejected the request of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to withdraw all his written views. The Emperor then banned Luther’s writings, declaring him a heretic and an enemy of the state.

Luther also opposed sacerdotalism—the Roman Catholic Church’s belief that only officially appointed priests and clergy are meant to be mediators between God and humankind. Roman Catholic priests are, thus, like the Old Testament priests who carried out the work of atonement and proclaimed

“ Despite the good intention of Reformers, the absence of the Holy Spirit from the church and the various groups that formed meant that they were still unable to understand the complete truth of salvation. ”

God’s word to the people. Ordinary believers would have to make all their requests to God through these priests. In contrast, Luther considered all baptized Christians to be part of a holy priesthood. He taught that the Bible is the only basis through which God makes revelations to allow man to know Him; lay believers did not need the authority of the pope nor the endorsement of the clerical orders. In 1534, Luther completed the translation of the entire Bible into the German vernacular (instead of Latin). This made the words of God more accessible to ordinary believers, an event that had a tremendous impact on Christendom, as it precipitated the development of Protestantism.

All this seems positive, but in his later works, Luther advocated destroying Jewish synagogues and homes, confiscating their property and money, and depriving them of freedom. Such anti-Jewish rhetoric contributed to the fomentation of anti-Semitism in Germany and caused Luther to become a controversial figure.<sup>2</sup>

Luther’s anti-Semitic teachings reflected his incomplete understanding of the Lord’s compassion and forgiveness (Lk 9:51–56; 23:34), as well as ignoring the consistent theme of the Bible (Rom 11:28–29). The Lord Jesus did not teach His disciples to despise the Jews; on the contrary, He entrusted Peter with the commission of preaching the gospel to the Jews (the circumcised) (Gal 2:7–10). And Paul writes:

*For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the*

*adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises.* (Rom 9:3–4)

In the true church, the Lord sends forth His servants through the Holy Spirit (Jn 20:21–23). Such workers sent by the Holy Spirit will be impartial in their gospel work, eschewing any narrow-mindedness towards the recipients of the gospel. Therefore, Luther’s views on the Jews were against the principles of the Bible. This underlines the fact that without the Holy Spirit’s guidance, man will be unable to fully comprehend the things of God (1 Cor 2:11).

In 1519, Ulrich Zwingli of Switzerland was appointed the pastor of the *Grossmünster* (“the Great Minster”) in Zurich, where he began to preach ideas on the reformation of Roman Catholicism. He surprised his congregation by expounding on the gospel books in the vernacular (instead of Latin as was the practice of the Church of Rome).

In January 1523, Zwingli engaged in a public debate—the first Zurich Disputation—with the representatives of the Roman Catholic Church. Before its conclusion, Zwingli summarized his position in the *Schlussreden* (*Concluding Statements* or the *Sixty-seven Articles*). However, there was no conclusion to this debate, and a second disputation was convened in October. He and his supporters emphasized *sola scriptura*, i.e., that Scripture, not the Church in its clerical power, is the only authority for faith, and salvation is by faith in Christ. Zwingli opposed the papal system, sacerdotalism, purgatory, and clerical celibacy, among other things. He felt that all these human traditions and teachings did not accord with the Bible. To Zwingli, all believers are priests and do not need for clergy to be the

1 “Reformation,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Reformation>.

2 “Martin Luther,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Martin-Luther>.



mediator. In the end, the government of Zurich ruled him victorious, and his reformation plan was swiftly carried out.

### Denominationalism and Impure Teachings

In autumn 1529, the Lutherans and the Zwinglians convened the Marburg Colloquy—an important council in Marburg to establish a formal alliance. Although both camps found a consensus on fourteen articles of faith, they disagreed on the fifteenth point, which pertained to the Eucharist. Specifically, the debate concerned the nature of Christ's Presence in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Luther believed that the bread *is* the body of the Lord, but Zwingli maintained that the bread merely *symbolized* the body of Christ.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the alliance fell through, and two different Protestant

organizations (Protestant confessions) were formed instead. This was also the beginning of the ongoing chasm that separates Protestant branches.

Despite the good intentions of the Reformers, the absence of the Holy Spirit from the church and the various groups that formed meant that they were still unable to understand the complete truth of salvation (1 Cor 2:10–11). Therefore, they failed to fully depart from erroneous articles of faith, such as the Trinitarian views on God's Divine Nature and the observation of the Lord's Day in place of the Sabbath. For another, the church overlooked the redemptive aspects of the sacraments, namely, baptism for the remission of sins, foot washing to have a part with the Lord, and Holy Communion allowing partakers to have eternal life.

The absence of the Holy Spirit also meant that there was no unity of

faith. Christian theologians and leaders—using their own wisdom and personal understanding—carried out eisegesis (imposed their respective interpretations) of the Bible. New denominations sprouted up one after another. At present, there are more than 33,000 denominations, globally, known as Christian church organizations.<sup>4</sup>

Undeniably, it was the presence of leaven, in the form of teachings that were not according to the truth, that brought about the Protestant movement. Thereafter, disputes led to further division within the Protestant Church, such as the irreconcilable differences between Luther and Zwingli.

Believers must endeavor to uphold the unity of faith and spirit (Eph 4:3), and only the Holy Spirit can bestow this unity. It is certainly not God's will for His church to be in a perpetual state of dispute and disarray, for “God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints” (1 Cor 14:33).

In the true church, the Lord Jesus bestows different gifts and abilities to His servants. This is to equip all His believers for the work of the ministry,

<sup>3</sup> Lin Dayi, *Research on the New Testament Background* (Taichung: Palm Press), 353–354.

**“ The Lord Jesus bestows different gifts. ... to equip all His believers for the work of the ministry, and to establish the body of Christ—the church. The church needs to rely on the Holy Spirit's revelation and guidance to be united as one in the truth. ”**

<sup>4</sup> David B Barrett, George T Kurian and Todd M Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopaedia (Second ed.)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).



and to establish the body of Christ—the church. The church needs to rely on the Holy Spirit’s revelation and guidance to be united as one in the truth. In other words, only with the working of the Holy Spirit can the entire church have a unified will and one faith (Acts 15:28; 16:4–5).

### REVIVAL AND RE-EMERGENCE OF THE TRUE CHURCH

*Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.”*

*(Mt 13:36)*

When the disciples queried Him, the Lord Jesus explained the parable of the tares to them, to let them know that the sons of the wicked will appear in the church. Hence, true believers must learn to wait patiently and not fret when they see the wicked prosper (Ps 37:7). God will never disappoint those who wait and rely on Him; He will bestow love and compassion, as well as righteousness.

After expounding on the parable of the tares, the Lord Jesus spoke three more parables in the house. Since Jesus had sent the multitude away, His disciples were His only audience. So the parables of the hidden treasure, of the pearl, and of the dragnet were spoken to those who belonged to Him. These parables

reveal that the true church will emerge in the last days.

### CONCLUSION: GOD’S TIME AND MAN’S EFFORT

The parable of the leaven is a timely reminder of the marvelous planning and providence of our Almighty God for His church, even as the devil rains fiery darts of persecution and heresy on her. In particular, during the period that followed the leavening of the church, when the complete truth was buried as treasure in a field, God was already making preparations for His true church. For example, He enabled John Wycliffe and his helpers to risk their lives to complete the English translation of the Bible in 1384, and also enabled Martin Luther and his students to complete the German translation of the Bible in 1534. These endeavors were severely condemned by the authorities. But the Bible was subsequently translated into various languages, thus paving the way for the gospel of the true church to be preached to the ends of the earth.

The parable of the leaven is also an exhortation to the true church today, to vigorously contend for the truth. In the Bible, the church is often personified as a woman. She is “the bride of the Lamb” (Rev 21:9), sanctified and cleansed by the Lord Jesus “with the washing of water

by the word, that He might present her to Himself as a glorious church” (Eph 5:25–27). The church must be a pure and blameless woman (Rev 12:13–17; 21:2, 9–10) who is faithful to the Lord, and faithfully handles the pure words of the Lord.

Leaven hidden in just three measures of fine meal (the basic quantity for making bread) causes the entire lump to be leavened. To tolerate acts of immorality within the church is to add leaven, which will eventually affect the entire lump (1 Cor 5:1–8). Similarly, the church’s lack of fidelity to the truth, allowing erroneous teachings to creep into the church, is equivalent to adding a little leaven to the doctrines and Articles of Faith. We should be sure to remove any hidden leaven that may cause the entire lump to be leavened (Gal 5:7–10).



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# Count It All Joy

**I**n the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I share this testimony.

In September 2018, after my fortieth birthday, I was diagnosed with a very rare cancer: a thirty-centimeter-long liposarcoma tumor in my abdomen. Sarcoma tumors arise in the body's connective and soft tissues, such as bone, fat, or muscle. Mine likely stemmed from a lone fat cell that had gone rogue.

## FACING THE UNKNOWN

Before I received the actual diagnosis, the only symptom I experienced was a

bloated stomach. I thought that I was only putting on weight until my mother asked if I was pregnant. This made me realize that if it were merely stomach fat, it would feel soft and flabby. But instead, it was firm. After a negative pregnancy test, I consulted a doctor who referred me for an ultrasound scan, suspecting an ovarian cyst.

The first ultrasound scan showed my ovaries to be healthy. But the second scan found a large mass around my right kidney, pushing it to the front of my body. The news shocked me and, as I left the hospital with my husband, I

was in tears. Suddenly, I felt scared and uncertain of the future. But most of all, I worried for my two young children, only aged seven and ten at the time.

Thankfully, that weekend was the start of the annual spiritual convocation at the church in Edinburgh, and the theme was "Trust in the Lord with All Your Heart." I remember seeing the words on the banner as I entered the church hall and feeling a rush of comfort and thankfulness. It was as if God knew what I needed. As Christians, we know that we ought to trust God in all things. But in that moment, these words on the banner came alive to me and nourished my soul at a time of immense uncertainty. During the three-day convocation, I was able to lay down my worries and burdens before my heavenly Father. In return, I obtained much-needed encouragement.

*“The news shocked me and as I left the hospital with my husband, I was in tears. Suddenly, I felt scared and uncertain of the future.”*



During times of trouble, most Christians tend to reflect on their life and faith, correct any wrongdoings and unrighteousness, and draw closer to the Lord. I was no different. The three days spent in the house of God were an excellent opportunity to reflect. I asked for the forgiveness of my sins and weaknesses; for faith to fully believe that He makes all things work for the good of His children (Rom 8:28); and for strength to trust and obey, accepting my Father's will. I was reminded that God knows what I am going through, and more importantly, He knows what lies ahead. One message stood out:

*My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.*  
(*Jas 1:2-3*)

We should count ourselves blessed to be worthy of undergoing trials, as these refine our faith. Hence, I resolved to face my trial of sickness with joy and courage, and count myself blessed.

#### FINDING PEACE THROUGH FAITH

Two weeks later, I underwent a CT scan, which confirmed the diagnosis of a sarcoma tumor. Thank God, it did not indicate any signs of metastasis (spreading) to the lymph nodes or other sites.

With the unexpected diagnosis of this rare cancer, I could do nothing but commit the matter to prayer. After searching the definition of the term "sarcoma" on the internet, I decided not to research any further. I would hand over the matter to my heavenly Father, trusting that my life is in His hands. I knew the facts were terrifying, but I also believed that what is impossible with man is possible with God. I held on to this belief and begged God for a way out while learning to accept His will. I took statutory sick leave from work but continued to carry out

*“ My heart felt truly at peace and even a little excited! I knew that my life was in God’s hands, and I had no need to fear. ”*

church duties and spent more time in spiritual cultivation. One hymn I found particularly comforting was *Only Believe*,<sup>1</sup> particularly the second verse, as it reminded me:

*Fear not, little flock, He goeth ahead,  
Your Shepherd selecteth the path you  
must tread;  
The waters of Marah He'll sweeten for  
thee—  
He drank all the bitter in Gethsemane.*

Furthermore, I was greatly encouraged by a group of brethren who had started a daily 9:00 p.m. prayer to intercede for the sick, including myself. At that time, several brethren in my local church had been diagnosed with cancer. Each night, I looked forward to this prayer, and both my husband and I truly felt strengthened and at peace, despite the circumstances. We had never experienced the power of intercession like this before. We felt very blessed knowing that so many brethren were praying with us and for us. Text messages, flowers, gifts, and cards started pouring in from family, brethren, and friends from around the UK, adding to the peace, love, and comfort that my family and I experienced.

On October 8, I had a biopsy. While lying on the bed for the procedure, my legs started shaking. But my heart was calm. I found peace and strength through singing hymns out loud and making silent prayers. My husband held my hand throughout, praying and sobbing quietly. The doctor attempted

six times to obtain a tissue sample. On the first two attempts, the needle bent when trying to penetrate the tumor. On the third and fourth attempts, the doctor used a thicker needle and managed to obtain a tiny sample. The fifth attempt was unsuccessful but also the most painful. The doctor advised that he would stop as he could see I was in severe pain. However, I asked him to try one more time, and on this sixth attempt, my husband and I prayed out loud in tongues. By God's grace, the doctor could obtain a substantial sample, and I felt no pain at all!

Four days later, we met the surgical oncologist to find out the next steps. In the waiting room, I asked my husband how he felt. Thank God, he replied that he was at peace and knew that God would not let us face something that we could not bear. After exchanging pleasantries, the surgeon told us that he could operate on me and was confident that he could remove the tumor altogether. He booked me in for October 24, in twelve days' time.

Due to the tumor's size, the surgeon advised that the operation would take at least six hours and that I would end up with a long scar. Though my right kidney was healthy, it had to be removed since the tumor had grown around it, and there was a possibility that my right ovary and parts of my bowel would have to be removed too. Despite this information, my husband and I felt great relief, joy, and gratitude! Even when the surgeon described the risks associated with such a major surgery and the long recovery time afterward, we did not feel worried. We had prayed for a way out, and God had answered our prayers and those of our brethren.

#### FEAR NOT, FOR I AM WITH YOU

During the church prayer on the Sabbath day before my operation, I asked my heavenly Father if He could

*“ We should count ourselves blessed to be worthy of undergoing trials, as these refine our faith. Hence, I resolved to face my trial of sickness with joy and courage. ”*

<sup>1</sup> By Paul Rader (1879–1938).



*Sister Lok Sze and family, at the 2019 New Year thanksgiving service, two months post-surgery.*

hold my hand or embrace me during the operation and send His angels to surround and protect me. Later that evening, one church co-worker sent a Bible verse to our WhatsApp group, which gave me great comfort and encouragement. She quoted from Psalm 91:11, “For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways.”

On October 24, at 9:30 a.m., I was wheeled into the Western General Hospital’s anesthetic room. My heart felt truly at peace and even a little excited! I knew that my life was in God’s hands, and I had no need to fear. As the staff prepared to inject my spine with a spinal block, I sang *Only Believe* out loud and was surprised that I felt no pain at all.

My next memory was being wheeled out from the operating theatre post-surgery, at around 1:30 p.m. I recall the surgeons telling me that the operation had gone “swimmingly well” and that it had taken only four hours as they did not need to remove any other organs

apart from the tumor and the right kidney.

Though I felt disoriented, having just woken up from the anesthetics, I remember feeling profoundly humbled and in awe of God’s wondrous grace and love. I wanted to cry and praise God as He had answered all my requests: He gave me a way out in the form of an operation; He left my other organs untouched; He protected me throughout the process by taking away my fear and giving me peace, and He allowed me to wake up after the surgery.

A few days later, I learned that my fellow patients in the Surgical High Dependency Ward also had spinal blocks, but they experienced varying degrees of severe pain, whereas I had felt none. This was further testimony of God’s mercy.

I was hospitalized for eight days, with no further complications. Thereafter, my recovery was smooth. As the tumor had not spread, I did not require follow-up chemotherapy or radiotherapy. I

only needed to have a CT scan every six months for the next ten years, along with annual checks.

When I first consulted the doctor on my bloated stomach, I also had a very dark mark on one toe. The doctor suspected possible skin cancer and referred me to the dermatology clinic. We decided not to share this with our wider family until a diagnosis was confirmed, as the tumor was already enough of a worry for them. Instead, we added this matter to our prayers. Around a month after the sarcoma tumor operation, I visited the dermatologist. Thank the Lord, after a few minutes of examination, it turned out the dark mark was merely a blood clot that would eventually disappear. Once again, I felt deeply humbled and in awe of God’s mercy.

After one year off to physically and mentally recover, I returned to work, with my employers arranging a sympathetic and gradual phase-back plan. I now realize that having the health to work is a blessing from God and not something to take for granted.

The tumor weighed three kilograms (around six pounds and ten ounces), which was my son’s weight when he was born! I had to have forty metal staples to hold the incision together. Many found it hard to believe that a tumor this size and weight had been growing inside me. However, this unbelievable fact demonstrated God’s almighty power. And now, my scar constantly reminds me of His wondrous grace, love, and mercy on my family and me.

Many brethren sent me beautiful reminders of God’s word by way of encouragement. One verse that stays profoundly with me every day since my diagnosis is from Isaiah 41:10:

*“Fear not, for I am with you;  
Be not dismayed, for I am your God.  
I will strengthen you.  
Yes, I will help you.  
I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.”*

May all praise, glory, and honor be ascribed to our heavenly Father! Amen.

# Desire, Difficulties, Determination:

## A Reflection on Volunteering in Myanmar

Zhi Xian  
Singapore

Every year, around April to May, a week-long Bible camp is held in Taungzalat, in the town of Kalaymyo, for children and students across Myanmar. By God's grace, I had the opportunity to assist in three of these camps between 2016 to 2019, as a teacher and facilitator. I thank God for this blessing and would like to share my reflections from these experiences under three Ds—desire, difficulties, and determination. How do these affect our members in Myanmar, and how are they also relevant to our own lives?

### 1. DESIRE

The first D is Desire. This desire is for God—to be with God, and for the things above that are of God. This includes the desire to be pleasing to God and to become better children of God. Do we have godly and spiritual desires? The Myanmar Bible camp students are strongly motivated by such godly desire.

Every year, children from Yangon will travel to Kalaymyo by coach for this annual Bible camp. In the past, this trip could take over twenty hours. With

better roads, it now takes just over half a day. But this is by no means an easy journey. There is a stretch where the bus has to travel through the mountains, on windy and bumpy roads. The trip usually happens overnight, when visibility is poor, making it difficult for the children to get a good night's sleep. Some even succumb to motion sickness. They endure this knowing that, a week later, they will have to make the return journey along the same route.

Yet, the youths would smile throughout the journey. Why were they so happy despite the long and arduous bus ride? I like to think that their cheerful demeanors revealed their spiritual desire—desire for spiritual companionship with their brothers- and sisters-in-Christ. Their desire to seek God at this week-long camp helped them to overcome their travel conditions. Their desire to leave their

*“ Why were they so happy despite the long and arduous bus ride? I like to think their cheerful demeanors revealed their spiritual desire—desire for spiritual companionship with their brothers- and sisters-in-Christ. ”*



True Jesus Church in Taungzalat, Myanmar.

day-to-day environment and be in God's house, to immerse themselves in Bible stories and sharing, in prayer, and in singing praises to God, brought smiles to their faces.

I am reminded of a Bible character who desired God. We can see his desire in good times when he was blessed by God, in bad times when he needed help, or even after times of folly when he had sinned against God. He is none other than David, a man after the heart of God (Acts 13:22).

*One thing I have desired of the LORD,  
That will I seek:  
That I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
All the days of my life,  
To behold the beauty of the LORD,  
And to inquire in His temple.  
For in the time of trouble  
He shall hide me in His pavilion;  
In the secret place of His tabernacle  
He shall hide me;  
He shall set me high upon a rock.*  
(Ps 27:4–5)

This is a psalm where David expresses his desire to dwell in God's house, seek God's presence, and inquire of His word.

In Psalm 63:1–8, David again expresses his desire for God. Pay particular attention to each active verb in this passage (emphases added):

*O God, You are my God;  
Early will I **seek** You;  
My soul **thirsts** for You;  
My flesh **longs** for You  
In a dry and thirsty land  
Where there is no water.  
So I have **looked** for You in the  
sanctuary,  
To see Your **power** and Your glory.  
Because Your **lovingkindness** is better  
than life,*

“ How much do we desire the fullness of the Holy Spirit, the fulfillment of God's word and will? Do we desire to know how to be more pleasing in God's sight? Do we desire to remain in the faith so that one day we can boldly enter the gates of heaven? ”



Happy faces on the trip to Kalaymyo.

*My lips shall **praise** You.  
Thus I will **bless** You while I live;  
I will **lift up** my hands in Your name.  
My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow  
and fatness,  
And my mouth shall **praise** You with  
joyful lips.  
When I **remember** You on my bed,  
I **meditate** on You in the night watches.  
Because You have been my help,  
Therefore in the shadow of Your wings I  
will **rejoice**.  
My soul **follows** close behind You;  
Your right hand upholds me.*

David's desire for God was the motivation behind his actions. Even after committing the grave sin of adultery, he still desired God's mercy and forgiveness (Ps 51). He did not want God to leave him. David was indeed a man after God's heart: He continuously desired God in all circumstances.

Reflecting on David and these smiling children, I ask myself, *How much do*

*I desire God?* Consider how much we seek God amid the things of the world, be it financial stability, emotional well-being, or a successful career or family life. How much do we desire the fullness of the Holy Spirit, the fulfillment of God's word and will? Do we desire to know how to be more pleasing in God's sight? Do we desire to remain in the faith so that one day we can boldly enter the gates of heaven?

We can gauge the level of our desire based on our decisions and actions. The Lord Jesus tells us clearly in the Gospel of Matthew:

*“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.”*  
(Mt 16:24–27)

If we genuinely desire to follow Christ, this will be reflected in our behavior and the choices we make. Denying ourselves means to physically or mentally put aside our personal interests, yield to God's will, and follow Him. To take up the cross means to obey God's word,

fulfill our Christian duties, and bear the sufferings of Christ in our lives. This manifests through our daily prayers, our pursuit of God’s word, and our worship of God. More practically, we can see this in how we make decisions in life. Do we decide based on the word of God and striving to be Christ-like in our daily conduct? Do we honor God both in good and peaceful times as well as in troubling and trying times? Let us learn to cultivate such sincere godly desire so that we can overcome our carnal desires through the power of the Holy Spirit.

## 2. DIFFICULTIES

Overcoming carnal desires is especially important when we face the second D: Difficulties. Specifically, the difficulties one faces in keeping the faith.

*But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. But evil men and imposters will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.*

(2 Tim 3:10–13)

Here, Paul talks about perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, evil men, and deception. All who desire to live godly in Christ will face all of these things. The cross that Jesus bore was not light. We may also find this cross heavy and difficult to handle at times.

Not all of the children I met in 2017 were able to return to the camp in 2019. There were many reasons for their absence, including school commitments, having to supplement family income, or simply



The Myanmar Youth and Student Bible Camp, held from April 27 to May 3, 2019.

because their families could not attend church services regularly.

### Poverty and Family Life

Our members in Myanmar are generally not as affluent as members in more developed countries like Singapore. The poorer members have to live from hand to mouth, and some families require the children to work to make ends meet. Poverty can be challenging to the faith because people are preoccupied with surviving. This takes up so much focus that they may not have time or energy for things like keeping the Sabbath. Poverty can even drive people to do unconscionable things, such as selling tobacco or alcohol or committing crime. Additionally, some members head overseas to work in the hope of earning more money, yet stumble in their faith over time, as they work in foreign lands without access to our church and community.

### Culture

Many cultural influences and vices, such as smoking, chewing betel nuts, and drinking hard liquor, conflict with Christian beliefs and values. Divorce and remarriage are also not uncommon in Myanmar society, with people eloping with their lovers or parents deserting their homes, resulting in many broken families.

Moreover, developing technology and social media are also threatening our members’ spiritual lives. In 2016, I observed that only the senior church youths, aged eighteen and above, owned smartphones. In 2019, around a fifth of the teenagers in my class had their own mobile phones and social media accounts, giving them unfettered access to the internet. If they do not know how to discern right from wrong, they could be corrupted by harmful online content.

### Religion

Myanmar is a predominantly Buddhist country. In a society where schools and workplaces advocate Buddhist rites and practices, it can be tough to be a small Christian church.

Kalaymyo has a relatively large Christian population because, historically, many Christian missionaries have preached

“ Members in more developed countries face similar issues, albeit to a different degree—things like dissatisfaction with our quality of life, struggling to make ends meet, and the need to work hard to achieve success. ”



*Our children in Myanmar in 2017.*

and established churches there. To many locals, churches are akin to community centers where people can find support, so church-hopping is common. If our members are tempted to do the same, these churches could influence and lead them away from the true church.

### **We Must All Endure**

Members in more developed countries face similar issues, albeit to a different degree—things like dissatisfaction with our quality of life, struggling to make ends meet, and the need to work hard to achieve success and upward social mobility. Some members head overseas because they perceive that the grass is greener there, yet their focus strays and they lose their faith.

Cultural influences that may negatively impact our faith are pervasive in modern societies. Secular mantras that encourage us to put ourselves first and do what makes us happy may cause us to become more self-seeking and deviate from our traditional Christian values. Technology and social media, too, have changed the way we plan and spend our time, and multitasking is taking our focus away from things that once mattered to us. While praying or reading the Bible at home, how many of us would stop to answer a text? Or

during services, would we be tempted to answer active chat groups or scroll through our Instagram or Facebook feeds?

Additionally, alternative religious influences may pull us away from the biblical doctrines of the True Jesus Church and the belief in the one true church. Many Christian denominations subscribe to simpler and incomplete gospels of grace and salvation while infusing popular culture into worship. These trends often attract believers from a younger or middle-aged demographic in droves. We may even have friends, colleagues, relatives, or family members drawn to such trends. However, does the Lord want us to abridge or amend the gospel of salvation in an attempt to attract more people to the church?

On reflection, we are indeed not too different from our members in Myanmar. We face the same difficulties that attack our faith from all angles. What should we do then? As Paul endured, we have to endure.

*But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation*

*through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.* (2 Tim 3:14–17)

We should not stop in our tracks or turn from this path. Continue with what we have learned from the Holy Scriptures. The world is changing, but what we were taught will make us wise for salvation. We have to persist and be corrected by God's word whenever we stumble. Carry on improving ourselves until we become perfect and complete. This is what our heavenly Father desires for us.

### **3. DETERMINATION**

The third D is Determination—the determination to remain in this faith and the one true church. We have to believe that despite the winds of change, and the doubts that may cloud our hearts, the Lord God is in the True Jesus Church; the church holds fast to and preaches the complete truth according to the Bible. The church also has the presence of the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues alongside miracles, signs, and wonders.

I truly praise and thank the Lord that in the 2019 Bible camp, twelve students received the Holy Spirit. God even manifested His presence through a vision witnessed by one young brother. While the students would typically be playing or resting during a lunch break, this brother and his friends had set their hearts to pray for the Holy Spirit in the church hall. As he prayed, he felt an intense light shining upon him, and he was lifted up to heaven. He saw a beautiful golden building before him, with shimmering ponds surrounding him. Above, figures with loud voices were flying like birds in the sky. It was a magnificent sight. He felt that his prayer was so sweet, and he was filled with joy. His tongue also started rolling smoothly as he prayed.

Now, the truth is we do not have to rely on signs like these to prove that God abides with us. In our walk with God, we would have probably experienced

something spiritual or supernatural in one form or another. This could have been when God answered our prayers, planted wisdom in our hearts, or moved us to feel comforted or to experience tears of joy or sadness. At the very least, whenever we pray in tongues, it is not self-taught. Upon receiving the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues is the sign that the Spirit of God is dwelling within us! It is essential to engrave these spiritual experiences deeply on our hearts and not to forget them. When we are feeling down or weak in faith, we can recount God's blessings and mercies that we have experienced. These will strengthen us and make us more determined to remain in the faith and in the True Jesus Church.

### CONCLUSION

*Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.* (1 Pet 5:8–10)

In this passage, the brotherhood refers to the church, our spiritual family worldwide, who endure the same sufferings as we do. Be it physical sufferings like poverty and illness, or moral ones arising from the conflict between worldly values and our Christian faith, these same difficulties unite us because they are the sufferings of Christ. Those who desire to be followers of Christ, to bear our cross, and be raised from the dead into eternal life as He was, must suffer as He did.

Dear brothers and sisters, we are not alone. Let us be determined in our desire for the Lord and endure all difficulties. One day we will be perfected. It is then we will find rest in eternal glory. To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen!

Philip Shee  
Myanmar Mission Committee (MMC)

# Myanmar Situation Update

The church in Myanmar has over three hundred members spread across four areas—in the city of Yangon and in three rural towns and villages of Kalaymyo. As the COVID-19 pandemic took center stage in 2020, our church activities in Myanmar were severely disrupted. After February 2020, the borders were shut down, forcing us to suspend all missionary trips to Myanmar. Physical church services were subsequently stopped as the country imposed a lockdown. Initially, the local preachers continued pastoral work over the phone and conducted Sabbath services in members' homes as they gathered within their residential districts. When further restrictions were imposed, the local preachers, together with the Myanmar Mission Committee in Singapore, started to conduct services online via Facebook Messenger. Regular online services were eventually established on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings, with a mix of speakers from Singapore and the two local preachers. A virtual Bible study gathering on Wednesday evenings and youth fellowship on Sundays were also organized. Thank God that our members in Myanmar cherish the opportunity to gather online. At the end of 2020, we also managed to conduct year-end spiritual meetings for Yangon and Kalaymyo, respectively over two weekends. Both were very well attended.

The recent political developments in Myanmar have further complicated the situation on the ground. Internet connection has become intermittent across the country. Despite this, we were initially able to continue our virtual services as planned. We also managed to continue with our weekly morning devotion with staff, which include the local preachers, church administrator, and the two Singapore preachers who are involved with the Myanmar ministry. However, as the situation deteriorated with increased unrest and martial law now imposed, some members have scattered into rural areas and internet connection has become even more unstable. This led to a disruption to our online services. As such we cannot take for granted our current ability to maintain contact with our brethren. We thank God that we have been able to stay in touch with them and have resumed Sabbath services for those who are able to join in online. There are also food shortages in the country, causing food prices to soar. Although the MMC distributed food to the members earlier in the year, it is certain to have run out by now and the logistics involved in distributing food are not easy. It is therefore important for us to pray earnestly for the Lord to preserve and protect our church in Myanmar.



# True Jesus Church in USA

*I will say to the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust." Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler And from the perilous pestilence."*  
(Ps 91:2-3)

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we would like to share about the COVID-19 situation in the United States (US) and offer our thanksgiving to God for His grace and mercy and to brethren worldwide for your care and intercession.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirmed the first US COVID-19 case on January 21, 2020. After a national emergency was declared on March 13, 2020, forty-five out of the fifty states have since issued statewide stay-at-home orders. As of

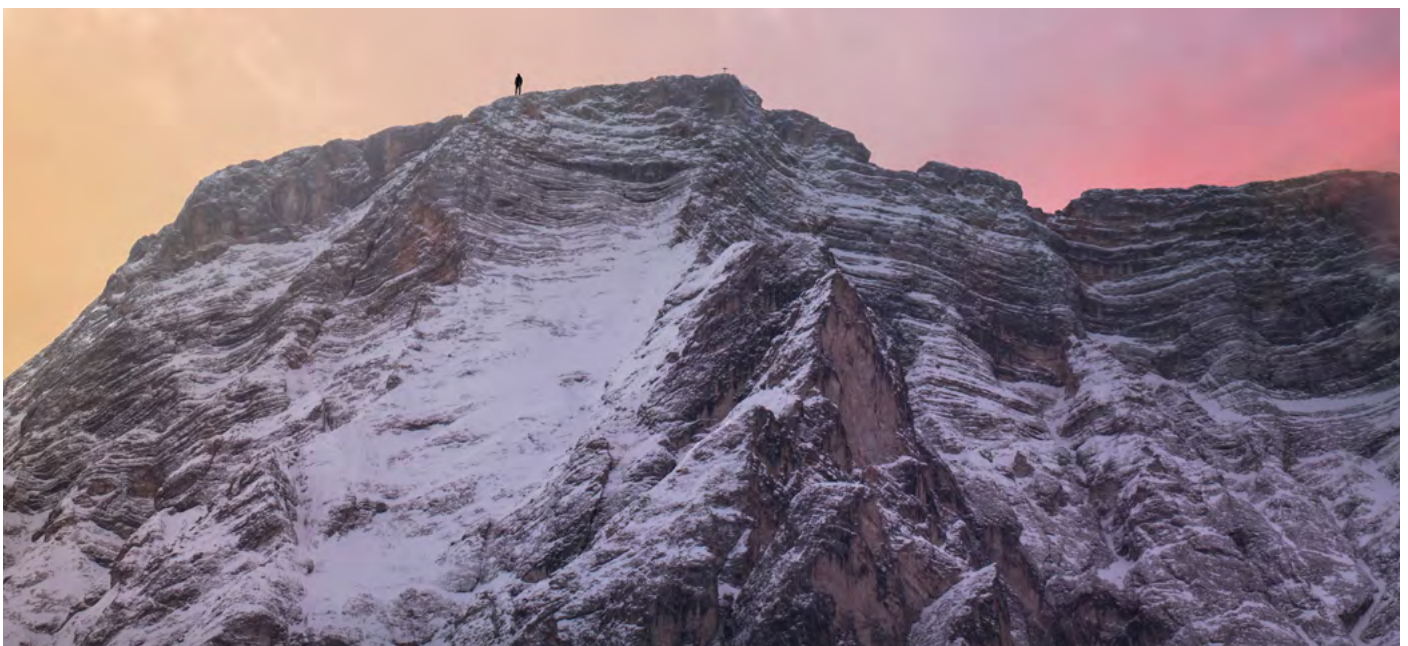
late April 2021, the number of confirmed cases in the US has grown to more than 31 million cases<sup>1</sup> (around 9.4 percent of the US population), which according to World Health Organization statistics, is by far the highest of any country.

With the stay-at-home orders, church services, religious education classes, and spiritual convocations were moved online. Although some states declared religious activities

<sup>1</sup> United States of America, World Health Organization, <https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/us>.

as essential activities not long after, permitting places of worship to open even during the stay-at-home orders, other states maintained the ban on religious gatherings. Eventually, non-essential indoor activities were allowed to resume on a gradual scale (e.g., 25 percent capacity, 50 percent capacity, and so on.) So, depending on the state, some of our church locations have remained closed until now, while others reopened in the summer or fall of 2020. When there were subsequent spikes, some states reimposed varying degrees of suspension on religious

*“The pandemic underscores the yearning and joy we look forward to in worshipping God together and having fellowship as one body in Christ!”*





services, forcing some churches that had reopened to shutter again in response. Consequently, most national and regional church events were moved online, and the remaining few were canceled.

Many of our US churches started regular online prayers throughout the week to strengthen members' spiritual growth in lieu of in-person services and fellowships. The USGA also adopted the theme of "Life of Prayer" in 2021, encouraging every member to make living a life of prayer a priority. Additional church efforts include setting up group communications (e.g., group email lists, LINE chat groups) for the whole church, conducting online or phone fellowship and visitations, delivering care packages and groceries, and establishing charity funds to help members in need. Furthermore, the four regional coordination centers in the US have been consolidating and sharing resources, such as facilitating joint Sabbath services, evangelistic services, and spiritual convocations online during the stay-at-home orders. Local churches have also been sharing online resources and working with one another, such as holding joint gospel classes and testimony sessions.

By February 2021, the US churches had around twenty families (of the roughly four thousand members) that had reported cases of COVID-19. From some of their testimonies, we see how God's peace and love are deeply felt among us, that our God is the true and living God who listens to prayers. The pandemic underscores the yearning and joy we look forward to in worshipping God together and having fellowship as one body in Christ! We pray to the Lord to comfort and strengthen the families that have been affected, to keep everyone safe in His grace and mercy, and that we all continue to seek and do the Lord's will during this challenging period.

May all glory be unto His name, and peace to all with whom He is pleased!



Footwashing sacrament conducted and livestreamed during the US Southwest Region spiritual convocation, October 2020.

London Members  
London, UK

# Building Altars in a Pandemic

## INTRODUCTION

Building an altar at home is to offer daily sacrifices of praise, thanksgiving, and devotion to our Lord. This comprises more than just the physical action of praying and reading the Bible. It is about genuinely seeking to align our heart with God's, to know Him better. We can learn from David's example, a man after God's own heart, who did God's will (Acts 13:22; 1 Sam 13:14). It is a constant learning process to pursue after God's heart, and requires regular introspection to identify areas we need to improve.

We give thanks to God that despite the inability to have physical gatherings during the lockdown, the church in London has organized various online activities to build up our altars. These online activities include midweek services, youth fellowships, daily Bible

studies, and weekly choir sessions. In this article, the London brethren share their experiences.

## AN ALTAR OF FELLOWSHIP

### Aveline Shek

*"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."* (Mt 18:20)

Thank God for this opportunity to share about His grace.

God has truly guided me into my first year of university and has spiritually fed and nourished me despite the extended physical church closure during the pandemic. Having applied to study in London, I had greatly looked forward to worshipping and having fellowship with the church youths there. I had even

chosen my accommodation to be within walking distance from the church.

However, God's ways are higher than my ways, and His thoughts than my thoughts (Isa 55:9). I did not foresee that these fellowships would be brought right to my fingertips. The first UK lockdown began in March 2020, before I was due to start at university. Around the end of April, one church sister from my home church in Edinburgh, studying in London, invited me to join their twice-monthly online Saturday youth fellowships. These fellowships are well-attended. Around twenty youths join each session to hear preachers and brethren share wide-ranging topics, from our basic beliefs, awareness in servitude, and fasting prayer to spiritual cultivation at home. Through these sessions, God provided me with an opportunity to build an altar



**“ I soon realized that this weird, uneasy feeling was because my faith was reliant on others. My altar of faith was to please men rather than God. If such was my faith, how could it stand when faced with tribulation? ”**

of fellowship with the church youths in London even before I had moved there.

Through WhatsApp chats and Zoom, I have genuinely felt the love, spiritual support, and warm welcome of these London brethren. Reflecting on the time since I joined these fellowships, it is clear that being active in the numerous online activities, regardless of the physical environment, was invaluable in establishing my personal altar. As God spoke to me through these brethren in Bible studies, fellowships and services, I grew to trust that it was worth putting aside schoolwork, entertainment, and socializing to set my eyes on things above during this period of transition and uncertainty.

May all glory be given to God! Amen.

## **AN ALTAR OF PERSONAL FAITH**

**Caleb Chan**

The pandemic has been a difficult and uncertain period for many of us. Having attended Sabbath services at church all through my life and being used to the weekly in-person fellowships, the experience of having Sabbath worship at home was initially a struggle. I missed that familiar warm feeling of church gatherings.

I soon realized that this weird, uneasy feeling was because my faith was reliant on others. My altar of faith was to please men rather than God. If such was my faith, how could it stand when faced with tribulation? How can my faith stand when those around me begin to stumble in their faith? In last summer's national student spiritual convocation, we studied the parables of Jesus. From the parable of the ten virgins, we learned how the foolish virgins did not prepare enough oil for themselves.

Consequently, they endangered their salvation, highlighting the importance of taking our faith seriously. We cannot rely on other people's faith when the Lord comes again. This message of taking our faith seriously has resonated with me throughout the pandemic.

I thank God for the church's arrangements in organizing the various online fellowships, Bible studies, religious education lessons, and convocations during this period. These activities helped me understand the need to focus my worship on God rather than it being an outward expression towards men.

*So Samuel said:*

*“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,*

*As in obeying the voice of the LORD?*

*Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams.”*

*(1 Sam 15:22)*

Is our altar built on obedience and faith towards God? Or do we only worship God in the presence of other people? May we always be willing to build our altars towards God and not towards ourselves and others.

## **AN ALTAR OF SINCERE WORSHIP**

**Charmian Chong**

The announcement of a national lockdown in March 2020 brought our joyful weekly choir practices at church to an abrupt halt, and we had to move to online choir sessions. Directing choir members via Zoom is vastly different from the experience of hearing a whole choir praising God in church. The process was challenging and a steep learning curve, often a test of our patience with technology. Roughly twelve to fifteen choir members join

the virtual choir practice each week. A typical session involves teaching the choir how to sing and express the lyrics of a four-part hymn, but only the leader's microphone is switched on to prevent latency and feedback issues. It is challenging to sing together without being able to hear the other choir members' voices. Yet, the blessings, teachings, and joy received through sharing our reflections on the hymns far outweigh any difficulties.

*Give to the LORD the glory due His name, Bring an offering, and come before Him Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness!*  
*(1 Chr 16:29)*

When learning a hymn called *Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness*, composed by a church sister in the States, we reflected on the above verse. We asked ourselves: do I genuinely bring the same heart of reverence and worship before God at home, although I am not physically at church? I realized it is easy for my attitude to become lax when listening to sermons in the casual surroundings of my living room. However, God sees our heart, and He is worthy of the best. The hymn continues to remind me that whether we are streaming Sabbath services online within the confines of our home or whether we are in the church building, God deserves that we bring our hearts fully before Him in true worship.

## **DAILY BIBLE STUDY: GOD FILLED MY VOID**

**Chris Yau**

Hallelujah, in the name of Lord Jesus Christ, I testify.

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.* *(Eph 1:3)*

The arrival of the first lockdown in 2020 enabled me to truly reflect on my faith and how God continues to lead me in His amazing ways. One example of His guidance is through Bible study.

Not long after the lockdown began, church youths in London decided to organize an informal daily Bible study.



*Fellowship for London Youths (FLY).*

Since its initiation, together, we have studied most of the New Testament and part of the Old Testament. We encouraged one another to continue learning God's word and to have fellowship, regardless of the circumstances. But personally, this small and regular affair has had a far more profound impact on me than just learning.

On reflection, my situation is different from that of the other youths; I am no longer based in London, having relocated back home to Limerick, Republic of Ireland. Here, I do not have many friends or close peers, nor are there any local church youths. Hence, I spent much of my time independently, which could have been detrimental to my faith if it had persisted. But God saw my need for companionship. Through these Bible studies, London church started to re-involve me in various fellowships and servitude. These include leading fellowships,

*“ God indeed works in mysterious ways; by allowing me to serve, He has delivered me from loneliness and emotional isolation. We can consider it a double blessing! ”*

helping with the national student spiritual convocation, and assisting with the audio-visual support for online sessions and sermons, delivered via Zoom and StreamYard. God indeed works in mysterious ways; by allowing me to serve, He has delivered me from loneliness and emotional isolation. We can consider it a double blessing!

I am reminded that small, casual, spiritual gatherings can never be overlooked. The Lord Jesus says: “where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20), and from there, Jesus blesses us even more. I also give thanks to my peers who still consider me as one of their own in all forms of activities; unknowingly, they have helped me, and I pray that God will continue to bless every one of us.

May all glory be to our heavenly Father!  
Amen.

## TEAM FLY

### Gaius Zhou

*So he built an altar there and called on the name of the LORD, and he pitched his tent there; and there Isaac's servants dug a well.*  
(Gen 26:25)

When I think of building altars, I think of the patriarchs from the Book of Genesis. They showed us that, wherever they went, building altars was vital to their lives. They needed altars to worship and to overcome problems; they were blessed in their actions because they remembered they had this great God.

Likewise, during my studies, the midweek fellowship for London youths (FLY) was an altar for me. These sessions consisted of students and working youths gathering for fellowships, Bible studies, and prayers. Sometimes I felt reluctant to attend; I had little time to spare and would rather spend it on my studies. However, I knew that, ultimately, God is in control. It is He who gives me wisdom, strength, and the chance to study, so I should not neglect this altar. Fellowships allowed me to pray over my issues, ask God for guidance in my studies, and be



London TJC's virtual choir sessions.

encouraged by how biblical characters relied on God to overcome problems. Thus, I believe God will help all the students who face the same stresses and difficulties as I did.

Although the pandemic resulted in youths being unable to gather and have fellowship at church, it showed the importance of continuing to build our altars. In the absence of services and fellowships, it could be easy to neglect this and spend more time on studies, work, or leisure. Therefore, as a youth fellowship coordinator, I knew it was important to keep the FLY schedule active so that the youths could still have that midweek opportunity to gain God's blessings and help during this unstable period.

Despite the move to online being technically challenging—finding the right platform and weekday to host FLY, while addressing audio and connectivity issues—by God's grace, the fellowship has been up and running smoothly on Zoom since the lockdown began. Also, FLY being online meant that it could cater to youths who previously could not attend because they lived too far away to commute. We truly thank God for guiding the youths. May we all be encouraged to build our altars.

May all glory and praise be unto God!  
Amen.

## COMFORT THROUGH HYMNS

### Ivone Bailes

*Bow the knee,  
Lift your eyes toward heaven and believe  
the One who holds eternity.  
And when you don't understand the  
purpose of His plan,  
In the presence of the King,  
Bow the knee!*

Hallelujah, in the name of Lord Jesus Christ, I testify.

I am a senior nursing assistant and have been in my current position for six years. I work at one of London's busiest hospitals and, since the initial wave of the pandemic, work has been hectic and stressful. Often I have been so tired that I would come home, have a shower, and go straight to bed. I have been exposed to the coronavirus daily, and I worried about my safety and that of my immediate family. So every morning and every night, I would pray to God for protection and that He would keep me

safe. In October 2020, I received news from my mother that my nephew was hospitalized because of his asthma. I did not think much about it because he was in his early forties and healthy. However, days later, she told me that he had died from COVID-19; I was deeply shocked and upset by the news. None of us knew he had the virus. My family and I mourned for him. It was out of our hands.

Weeks later, I was devastated to learn that my mother, who lives in Brazil, had contracted the disease. My mother is seventy-six years old and has multiple health issues, including diabetes and high blood pressure, putting her in the high-risk category. When she was hospitalized, my family and I believed she was going to die. We feared the worst. I was confused, and I remembered asking God, "Why? Why my mother? Why is this happening?" I felt desperate and lost; I did not know what to do. It was like I was going out of my mind.

However, while I was trying to come to terms with the situation, I felt the Spirit of God surrounding me. A feeling of peace and calm came over me. I heard Him speak to me through the hymn above, which we sang in choir: "When

<sup>1</sup> Taken from *Bow The Knee* by Chris Machen and Mike Harland, arrangement by Tom Fettke, 1997.

the path grows dim, and our questions have no answers, turn to Him.”

I also thought of Psalm 23:4:

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil;  
For You are with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*

It was like God spoke to me directly and was comforting me with this hymn and His word. I needed to pray, and I knew that I did not have to pray alone—I have my brothers- and sisters-in-Christ to pray with me. I sent a message to the choir WhatsApp group asking them to pray for my mother. I also told my family that the members of the church were praying for them and my mother. God is so amazing; He heard our prayers, and my mother survived. During this experience, I felt overwhelmed by the love of my brothers- and sisters-in-Christ.

My mother was discharged from the hospital, and she has now fully recovered. I continue to share with her about the church and how the brethren are praying for our family. I am so thankful to Jesus for His grace and blessings. At times I was so busy at work, I did not spend a lot of time praying. It was only during this moment of desperation that I remembered that I needed to pray to God. As I shared my heart with my brothers and sisters online, asking for intercession, praying, and singing, I received much relief from my crazy work life. To be able to spend time with God and the brethren through online services kept me going. I thank God that I can pray at home with my brothers and sisters. This is my altar. I hope that in this difficult time, others will find comfort and hope through this testimony.

“ It was like God spoke to me directly and was comforting me with this hymn and His word. I needed to pray, and I knew that I did not have to pray alone—I have my brothers- and sisters-in-Christ to pray with me. ”

“ Do I seek God only when in need? Or do I seek Him also in times of peace? As my condition improves, I am relearning the necessity of prayer and building my altar at home. ”

All glory be to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

### SEEK GOD IN TIMES OF PEACE AND TIMES OF NEED

Joanne Jones

*Bless the LORD, O my soul;  
And all that is within me, bless His holy name!*

*Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
And forget not all His benefits.*

(Ps 103:1–2)

Lockdown came as a blessing to me as it took away the need to leave the house. I could stay at home and not be exposed to further distress due to a skin condition called eczema. I had a terrible flare-up while on holiday in 2019 and developed an angry rash on my chest, precipitated by hearing the news of my mother’s death and that my step-father had suffered a heart attack. My sister and I arrived in Trinidad with the devastating task of arranging my mother’s funeral and visiting my step-father in hospital. (He, too, passed away soon after—eight days after my mother.) The rash on my chest itched and felt sore, but I managed to contain it until I returned to the UK.

As I tried to come to terms with the situation and return to my daily routine, my skin condition worsened, and the rash began to spread. It was painful to move, and the itchiness was worse at night, so I suffered broken sleep. When

the pandemic sent us into lockdown, I was no longer forced to get out of bed, get dressed, and travel on the London Underground to my placement. I could stay at home and wear clothes that did not irritate my skin.

The rash was no longer limited to my chest area but covered my whole body, from my scalp to my feet. Only my face was unaffected. I scratched and picked at my skin. I took pictures of my legs, chest, arms, and feet—anywhere the eczema had attacked my skin. I felt I had to make a record of it, as confirmation of what was happening to me. I hated and despised the way it looked and felt. It was making my life a misery. But there was God. Despite the physical torment I felt in my body, I could feel God’s presence willing and encouraging me to pray. I did pray, but my prayers were very short—it was hard to concentrate because my skin would itch even during prayer.

While I was glad not having to go to church and face members in my current state, I missed the opportunity to pray with others, and at times it felt lonely. I had a desire to draw closer to God, but I struggled to fast and pray. I was still grieving over the deaths of my mother and step-father.

Yet, thank God for the opportunity to join the evening Bible studies organized by the London youths, which helped me maintain some contact with members and be reminded of God’s faithfulness to His children. I was able to take to heart the teachings learned from the Bible characters we studied and how those that trusted in God obtained peace and blessings despite the trials they endured. I compare my attitude to theirs. Do I seek God only when in need? Or do I seek Him also in times of peace? As my condition improves, I am relearning the necessity of prayer and

“ I also learned to transform this physical altar into a spiritual one that dwells in my heart. The lockdown has reminded me that, as much as we serve and offer at the physical altar, what God ultimately desires is nothing less than a genuine and willing heart to seek Him. ”

building my altar at home. I press on to know God’s heart through His word and to remember to give thanks in all things.

All glory be to God! Amen.

## AN ALTAR OF THE HEART

**Nicholas Tam**

*[T]hat Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. (Eph 3:17a)*

Thank God for the opportunity to bear testimony for Him.

In 2019, as I became more involved in London church work, and as I learned and grew in the company of fellow brothers and sisters, I was, in a sense, establishing my altar of worship and servitude in church. This engendered quiet confidence within me that I was, slowly but surely, building a genuine faith in God.

Then, of course, the coronavirus arrived in the UK, and soon enough, I was confined to my not-so-big flatshare in central London, having to attend services and conduct all church work remotely. Inevitably, the lack of in-person interaction caught up with me. Praying, singing, and listening to one another in person—all these things I had taken for granted. I realized that while my altar was indeed being built, a big part of it was founded on other people.

Therefore, thank God that the lockdown has given me a lot more time to ruminate. More importantly, it allowed me to move the altar that I had built up in church into my own home by learning how to do everything at home

that I had done in church. This included observing the Sabbath in full, as I would have done in person, as well as giving all due reverence and attention to God when attending various services and fellowships.

I also learned to transform this physical altar into a spiritual one that dwells in my heart. The lockdown has reminded me that, as much as we serve and offer at the physical altar, what God ultimately desires is nothing less than a genuine and willing heart to seek Him. I am now learning how to maintain this altar independently and strengthen it with sharings from others (virtually, of course) and with the word of God through constant self-cultivation and self-reflection.

May all glory be given to His name! Amen.

## CONCLUSION

Building an altar to God is a privilege; it is not for God’s good but our good. God has invited us to establish His throne in our hearts. When we pray, read the Bible, and seek His face, we increase our knowledge of Him and strengthen our relationship with Him. Building altars is an act of thanksgiving, acknowledging that in all circumstances, such as a global pandemic, war, illness, fear, doubt, or failure, we get to turn our hope to Him. This pandemic has shown us that building altars is not limited to our time physically inside the church building but should also be done in our own homes.

We give thanks to God that His word has revealed to us the areas in which we need to align our hearts to Him fully.

This pandemic is indeed God’s blessing in disguise—we must not return to how things were before and allow our altars to deteriorate and crumble. We should all the more continue to build our altars at home and, ultimately, in our hearts when church reopens.

The common theme from the London members’ sharings is uncertainty. We may not know what is happening or understand our situation at any given moment, but we find that God reveals and continues to reveal His purpose for each of us. Our circumstances may change, but God never changes. These experiences have taught us more about God, but there is so much more to learn; building our altar is an ongoing process. God is faithful, and it is up to us to strive to know Him more fully.

May we all continue to build altars with the correct heart and seek to know God in all His holiness and glory. Amen.



# Holy Work Series: Religious Education

*Editor's note: Learning a new skill has never been easier—there are countless how-to guides and online videos offering guidance on almost any task or endeavor imaginable. However, when it comes to serving God, there is no guide better than God's inspiration—His word and His Spirit. With God's guidance, we need not worry, but entering any ministry unfamiliar to us can be daunting. In the Holy Work Series, we look at various ministries, duties, and roles within the church and ask experienced workers to offer practical advice for carrying out these works and, more importantly, to outline the spirit we should have. We hope these guides will benefit both beginner and experienced workers alike.*

When we think of a good religious education (RE) teacher, we may have in mind someone who makes ample preparations before class or is filled

with love and regularly visits students and communicates with parents. Perhaps we may think of someone who is a prayer warrior, constantly making intercession for the students or someone who diligently searches God's word before teaching. We may also think of those whose lives are marked by gentleness and humility.

Yet when we look at ourselves as RE teachers, we feel far removed from these descriptions. Instead, we see ourselves as inadequate, insignificant, or powerless, with limited knowledge or confidence to impart God's word, much less to correct our students' misbehavior. However, God uses each of us for His good purpose; if He has called us to teach, we should trust that He will also help us do the work properly.

Gideon's character teaches us many lessons about being called to serve God.

*Now the Angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth tree which was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon threshed wheat in the winepress, in order to hide it from the Midianites. And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him, and said to him, "The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!"*

*Gideon said to Him, "O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites."*

*Then the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?"*

*So he said to Him, "O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the*



*weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.” (Judg 6:11–15)*

When God first called Gideon, Gideon's immediate response was to question His presence, using words such as “if”, “why”, “where”, “but”, “how”, and “forsaken.” He continued to express doubt by saying, “Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house” and by asking God for a sign (Judg 6:15, 17). Gideon was not sure if God was with him, and he thought he could not do the job.

### GO IN THIS MIGHT OF YOURS. HAVE I NOT SENT YOU?

Thankfully for Gideon and for us, God does not give way to our fears or inadequacies. He reassured Gideon, “The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!” (Judg 6:12), “Go in this might of yours. ...Have I not sent you?” (Judg 6:14), and “Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man” (Judg 6:16). God encouraged Gideon many times, just as He always encourages us.

Whatever strength Gideon had was enough; God would handle the rest. God knew Gideon could do the work because God Himself had sent him, and He would give Gideon the power to do what he needed to do. The same is true for RE teachers.

God never calls someone to serve in the ministry and then leaves that person alone in the dark. If God calls us to serve as an RE teacher, He will be with us. God told Moses, “I will certainly be with you” (Ex 3:12), and promised him, “I will teach you what you shall do” (Ex 4:15). All we have to do is give our best with the strength God has given us. When we prepare a lesson, we do it to the best of our ability. When we teach, we tell the story from our hearts and trust the Holy Spirit to touch our students' lives. As long as we rely on Him, God will empower us to be effective teachers.

### GIDEON—A MIGHTY MAN OF VALOR

When God first called Gideon, He called him a “mighty man of valor.” From Gideon's responses, we can infer that he did not consider himself a mighty warrior. Gideon was functioning out of fear, insecurity, and doubt. He said that not only was he the least of his family, but his clan was the least of the tribe—he was the least of the least. He saw himself as the worst player on the weakest team, yet the Angel of the Lord bestowed on him the title “mighty man of valor.” Gideon later lived up to that name when he faced the Midianite army with a mere three hundred men at his side. What teachings can we learn from this?

### Viewing Ourselves from God's Perspective

When we lack confidence, it is easy to believe that we cannot do much. However, if God calls us to serve Him, we should learn to see ourselves from His perspective. Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” We may be dissatisfied with traits that we cannot change—perhaps we wish we were more eloquent or better able to handle challenging students—but we should remember that God made us the way we are, for His purpose.

How do you see yourself? Do you look at yourself in the mirror and see only your flaws? It is easy to have high expectations of ourselves, but these expectations are often based solely on society's standards. God sees us differently. He wants us to focus on what He has given us. Maybe He has made us kind, faithful, teachable, or a good listener. Perhaps we are adept at seeing when others are struggling in their faith or at ministering to the needy. Yet, we can easily forget or even overlook these God-given abilities when we focus on our perceived flaws or view ourselves using societal norms.

Whether we are veterans or novices in the RE ministry, we could be hiding



*“The first thing God commanded him to do was to destroy the altar dedicated to Baal. This was a test of Gideon’s faith, commitment, and obedience. It is also a reminder that we must first remove the idols from our hearts before serving God.”*

in our winepress out of despair or frustration. As RE teachers, we are, in fact, mighty men of valor, and God has seen our potential long before we see it. When we have this newfound understanding, we can go forward with the “might” we already have. This might, or strength, is the promise of God’s presence through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Judges 6:34, we learn that “the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon.” Imagine the power that God has given us, allowing us to do whatever He asks of us!

Furthermore, Jesus Christ told us that we “shall receive power (ability, efficiency, and might) when the Holy Spirit has come upon [us]” (Acts 1:8 AMPC).<sup>1</sup> God is reminding us that we are mighty men of valor, so we can “go in this might of [ours]” (Judg 6:14). God will enable us to accomplish tasks that we cannot do on our own.

### Knocking Down Our Baals

After calling Gideon, the first thing God commanded him to do was to destroy the altar dedicated to Baal. This was a test of Gideon’s faith, commitment, and obedience. It is also a reminder that we must first remove the idols from our hearts before serving God. What could be a possible idol in our hearts? Is it pride? Pride can result in disobedience to the church’s authority. Is it lust? Even Christians can be addicted to lustful thoughts and actions. Is it a physical idol? Maybe our minds are filled more with our achievements than with God’s power in our life. Perhaps we value leisure or personal comfort more than our service to God.

1 Scripture quotation taken from the Amplified® Bible (AMPC). Copyright © 1954, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. [www.lockman.org](http://www.lockman.org).

To knock down our Baals means that we must be willing to remove idols or sin from within ourselves and fully submit to His calling. If we do so, then God will work with us. Therefore, the first step to serving God is not starting the work itself. It is the tearing down of idols in our lives. Only then can we fulfill the service that God requires of us.

The seven members appointed to oversee the daily distribution in the apostolic church were chosen because they were known to be “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). Likewise, RE teachers must be of good character and repute. All sin is rebellion against God, and some sins have a serious impact on members’ suitability to be RE teachers. Teachers should set an example for the students and the congregation. What Baals in our lives do we need to destroy?

### God Is Gracious—He Will Build Up Our Trust in Him

After God called Gideon, the Midianites and the Amalekites joined forces against Israel. Gideon had to lead the Israelite army to fight. But before he did so, Gideon wanted a sign from God. His heart was full of doubt, both in God’s power and in himself. The Lord graciously confirmed His presence and power to cultivate Gideon’s faith. This way, Gideon would learn to trust and rely on God, despite his fears and worries.

*“We need to teach our students to trust in God. But how can we do this if we barely trust God ourselves, or if we do not believe His promises, or have endless worries about our future?”*

After we have removed the idols from our hearts, the next step is to build up our faith, trust, and reliance on God. God wants us to trust Him. When He first calls us, it is natural to have doubts, fears, or even mistrust, making us hesitant to commit to His work. It is easy to doubt our skills or worry over our assigned tasks. This is because we have yet to develop a relationship with God.

We need to teach our students to trust in God. But how can we do this if we barely trust God ourselves, or if we do not believe His promises, or have endless worries about our future? Albeit challenging, trusting God is a critical component in our relationship with Him. God expects us to depend on Him totally. He desires that we acknowledge His presence in our lives, moment by moment, day by day.

### Relying on God’s Power

As if to magnify Gideon’s doubts and fears, God ordered him to reduce his army’s size by over thirty thousand soldiers (Judg 7:1–8), leaving him with a mere three hundred men. Meanwhile, the Bible describes the Midianite army as being “as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude” (Judg 7:12). Can you visualize the difference in numbers between the armies? God wanted to ensure that the Israelites did not claim glory for a victory that belonged to Him. He wanted them to remember His power. This is especially apparent in the way He defeated the enemy.

When the Midianite army heard the horns and the smashing of jars and saw the sudden flare of torch fires, they turned on one another before fleeing in defeat. Because of God’s power, the Israelites did not have to lift a finger

*“ During such storms and crises, teachers can become stuck. But it is also in those moments that we can rely on God’s power through prayer, by asking the Holy Spirit to intercede for us with groanings too deep for words. ”*

to fight. All they had to do was obey Gideon’s orders and stand firm with courage and faith. God did the rest for them.

Serving as an RE teacher is never easy. There are moments when we are stressed by students’ misconduct, classroom conflicts, or spiritual battles at home. Such moments make us confused, overwhelmed, terrified, frustrated, weary, or desperate for relief. During such storms and crises, teachers can become stuck. But it is also in those moments that we can rely on God’s power through prayer, by asking the Holy Spirit to intercede for us with groanings too deep for words (Rom 8:26). We can depend on Him to help us walk that extra mile with our students. By drawing closer to Him, we approach His throne of grace to find mercy in our time of need (Heb 4:16). When we rely on God’s power, His strength is made perfect in our weakness so that the power of Christ may rest on us (2 Cor 12:9–10). In the same way, God forced Gideon to rely on Him by reducing the size of Gideon’s army.

On the other hand, if we are intelligent, talented, or gifted in teaching, we may forget God and rely on ourselves. Depending entirely on our own resources, we may be serving out of pride rather than out of faith. If this is the case, we may not accomplish anything at the end of the day. On the contrary, God promises us that for those who fully depend on Him, He will do “exceedingly and abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph 3:20). God is all-powerful, and His wisdom and understanding are limitless. We need to learn to trust in God’s power and not our own. When we do that, God is willing to help us, and He will accomplish greater things than we could ever do on our own.

#### CONCLUSION

RE teachers play a vital role in the church. An RE teacher has to teach future generations about God’s existence, His relationship with His people, and how to live by His commandments. Like Gideon, we may feel insignificant, unremarkable, or powerless in the face of such a crucial task. But God uses everyone for His good purpose, and we should trust that if He has called us to serve Him, He will also help us do the job properly.

Let us remember that God is not looking for a perfect servant; instead, He is looking for an obedient servant. To serve Him, all we have to do is destroy the Baals in our lives, serve with the strength that we have, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, and trust fully in His power. Then we will be able to become the mighty warriors of God, full of valor and able to defeat even the greatest armies through God’s power in the RE ministry.

## Relationship- Building Ideas

We have been unable to conduct our RE ministry during the pandemic as we had before, with regular face-to-face contact with our students and our co-workers. Remote learning and virtual classrooms have enabled us to carry on with our weekly lessons, but our screens are a barrier to showing our unspoken love and concern, making it much harder to build strong spiritual bonds with our students.

During the USGA’s RE coordinators’ workshop in 2020, the workers brainstormed some practical ideas for strengthening teacher-student relationships during periods of remote learning, all of which will still be just as useful when we return to physical classrooms.

Teachers can show love and concern through doorstep or driveway visitations and dropping off care packages for each family, especially those struggling financially during the pandemic. Home-baked treats are also an excellent way to boost the spirits.

We can also nurture a loving heart within the students by asking the younger ones to make care packages for senior students away at college or university and for all students to write letters and cards to the elderly members.

It is vital to set up regular online prayers for all RE teachers, students, and their families. Breakout rooms can be used for each class to share prayer requests before praying as a group in the main room. With technology, the possibilities for online fellowships are endless: monthly lunch fellowships, Bible trivia nights using Quizlet Live or Kahoot!, regular combined fellowships for all classes, combined fellowships or special classes with other local churches, and so on. However, we cannot underestimate the social and mental health benefits of meeting in person. If there is a chance to meet your students outdoors, it is an excellent opportunity to hold fellowships, go hiking, or do other fun activities.

Here is a further selection of ideas for each class:

### KINDERGARTEN (4–5 YEARS OLD)

For young students, parental support is vital. One good idea is to teach memory verse songs during class, which are also shared with parents to sing with their children during the week. Another idea is to have a fellowship session with students, parents, and teachers. Start with hymn singing before splitting into a parent breakout room for discussion and a student breakout room for art and craft activities, such as making a prayer jar or doing a step-by-step drawing activity. Consider dropping off or mailing resources for RE activities so that all students are using the same materials.

### ELEMENTARY 1 (6–8 YEARS OLD)

At this age, we can administer homework through programs and apps such as Seesaw, LINE, ClassDojo, or Google Classroom. Students can also submit videos of themselves reciting memory verses. A weekly Bible reading and prayer meeting for class students and teachers, lasting around thirty minutes, can increase class bonding.

During lessons, whether virtual or in-person, the students can each contribute to a group craft project, such as a wall poster or photo collage. They can also take turns choosing which hymn to sing and sharing why they chose it.

### ELEMENTARY 2 (9–11 YEARS OLD)

To increase engagement, teachers can use Google Docs or Google Jamboard for sharing during fellowships. One idea is for all students to work together to draw the meaning of a memory verse using Jamboard, which means students can work on it at different times. We can administer homework through Google Forms.

At this age, students can participate in virtual testimony fellowships and weekly lunchtime prayer sessions separated into brother and sister groups. They can also be encouraged to create virtual hymn presentations,



*“ Remote learning and virtual classrooms have enabled us to carry on with our weekly lessons, but our screens are a barrier to showing our unspoken love and concern. ”*

for which they individually record their voice parts as audio or video to be later layered together. Sending one-to-one messages is also an excellent way to keep up with their school lives and allow them to share their problems, opening a path for teachable moments.

### JUNIOR 1 (12–14 YEARS OLD)

In addition to the practical advice for younger classes, we can encourage students in this age range to become more spiritually proactive. Set up a shared weekly prayer request list and a nightly Bible reading, sharing, and prayer meeting via Zoom. One student per week can share encouragement or reflection via your class chat group. Get them to think about participating in holy work by assigning them small class projects, such as designing an evangelical theme and promotional materials.

### JUNIOR 2 (15–17 YEARS OLD)

Teachers need to develop a close relationship with students during

these difficult years of mental, physical, social, and spiritual development. Each teacher can be assigned a few students to look after and schedule weekly one-to-one catch-ups and prayers with. A couple of teachers can combine their students into larger care groups, which can meet virtually for Bible sharing and prayer before Friday night Sabbath services.

### SENIOR (18+ YEARS OLD)

To help build their spiritual independence as they transition out of the RE system and into adulthood, encourage students to join campus fellowships, and make a point of joining with them. Continue to set up weekly evening prayers to share about their week and give prayer requests. To help establish spiritual companionship within their peer group, set up casual post-Sabbath online fellowships using fun multiplayer game platforms (such as Jackbox Games) and Zoom.

# The Family Altar:

## A Personal Experience

The family altar refers to a designated time where the family reads the Bible, sings hymns, shares God's word, and prays together. As a third-generation True Jesus Church member, the family altar represents some of my most cherished childhood memories.

### MEMORIES OF THE FAMILY ALTAR

When my maternal grandmother stayed with us, she would join us for our nightly family altar. Although illiterate, she could sing a few hymns and listened intently as we read a Bible chapter. Once, we talked about our favorite Bible verses, and I asked, "Grandma, what is your favorite Bible verse?"

She paused, smiled, and quoted:

*Give me neither poverty nor riches—  
Feed me with the food allotted to me;*

*Lest I be full and deny You,  
And say, "Who is the LORD?"  
Or lest I be poor and steal,  
And profane the name of my God.*  
(Prov 30:8b–9)

I had never heard of this verse before, so I asked her why she liked it. She replied that it reminds us that the most important thing was to bring glory to God's name regardless of our circumstances. I was very moved. My grandmother was a young widow and had suffered much poverty to raise six children on her own. I remember her tales of her tough past, of times so desperate she had to borrow rice from her neighbors to feed her family. And yet, despite all her struggles, she was contented. Her words echoed those of the apostle Paul, that we should be content in all circumstances and to trust in God (Phil 4:11–12). On that occasion,

she taught us this message in real life. Today, whenever I reminisce about that time, her words still touch me.

In the Old Testament, Moses addressed the Israelites and reviewed the Ten Commandments before they crossed the Jordan River. They were to heed, keep, and not forget nor depart from God's statutes. Not only that, but they also had the responsibility to teach these things to their children and grandchildren.

*"And teach them to your children and your grandchildren, especially concerning the day you stood before the LORD your God in Horeb, when the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.'" (Deut 4:9b–10)*



We should not underestimate how important this is. Keeping God's word and teaching them to the next generation were commanded by God.

*"These are the statutes and judgments which the LORD your God has commanded to teach you...that you may fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged."*  
(Deut 6:1–2)

### Building the Altar

During the mid-eighties, a preacher visiting my hometown of Elgin, Scotland, spoke about the importance of establishing a family altar. Encouraged by this, my father decided to institute a pre-bedtime family altar. We would read a chapter of the Bible, talk about it briefly, and then pray together. If we sang a hymn, my sister and I would take turns playing the piano accompaniment. If friends or extended family were visiting, they would be roped in to join our family altar. When we got older, and our parents were both working the late shift in their takeaway food business, my siblings and I would take turns to lead the family altar.

Our favorite sessions were when our mum led the family service because we loved hearing the testimonies that she shared. I remember arguing with my siblings about which one of us would get to snuggle up to her as she read testimonies from the *Holy Spirit Monthly* magazine or recounted her personal experiences and memories. We would listen, wide-eyed, and filled with awe and thankfulness, as she testified to the grace of God. One of these testimonies involved the early workers in Taiwan. During a spiritual convocation, a hunchbacked woman came forward to pray. The preacher found the sight of a

### Experiencing God's Protection

One lesson we learned from the family altar was not to treat the word *Hallelujah*—which means "praise the Lord"—in a cavalier fashion. We heard several testimonies where members were protected from danger after calling out to the Lord for help by saying, "Hallelujah." As a child, this was valuable to me. Whenever I felt afraid, I would feel safe and comforted after saying "Hallelujah." Or if I was woken up by a nightmare, calling out "Hallelujah" would enable me to fall back to sleep quickly.

One winter, we had to drive about three and a half hours to Edinburgh to attend a family funeral. Although it was not late, it was already getting dark and, out of the blue, it started to snow heavily. My father was not driving on a main road, and visibility was greatly reduced. We only realized a car was right in front of us when its rear lights suddenly came on. Our car jolted as my father braked sharply to avoid hitting the car. In the back seat, my siblings and I heard our parents simultaneously cry out, "Hallelujah!" I recall looking ahead, startled by my parents' cry, and, with my heart pounding, I knew a collision was inevitable. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion but, strangely, I felt protected.

When we got out of the car to check, the front of the car was badly dented but, thank God, though slightly shaken, nobody was injured. However, with the vehicle in such a state, we had to turn back. On the way home, we stopped by a church member's takeaway shop. After hearing about the accident, the brother immediately offered his car for my father to drive down to Edinburgh. With God's protection and this church brother's love, we were able to continue our journey and then return home safely afterward. I thank God for this. The power of God's protection was something that we spoke about during family altar time and personally experienced as a family.

woman kneeling with her forehead to the floor strange. He asked the woman to straighten her back, not realizing that she was physically unable to. Miraculously, during the prayer, the woman's back was straightened! Thirty years later, I listened with the same awe when that very preacher, now an elder, visited my church and recounted the exact testimony my mother had shared with us.

Although my childhood family altar was simple, its activities—Bible reading, sharing God's word, testimonies, and praying together as a family—sowed

and nurtured the seeds of faith in us. Growing up, as we navigated through the angst of teenage years, the uncertainty of college exams, and challenging career decisions, the family altar was a spiritual anchor that constantly reminded us of God's word and promises. Regardless of what stage of life we were at, we could always find strength and encouragement from sharing God's word and mighty works and praying together. Even now, decades later, these fond memories of the family altar are my strength during the various storms of life that we all invariably encounter.

*“ Even now, decades later, these fond memories of the family altar are my strength during the various storms of life that we all invariably encounter. ”*

### AN ALTAR FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Years later, after I married and became a mother of two, I found myself on the other side of the family altar. Knowing that our children are a heritage from

**“ We are constantly pulled in different directions, be it work, study, church, or family-related matters. Hence, the family altar is a critical respite from the madness—a time for us to quieten down and recharge our spiritual batteries. ”**

the Lord (Ps 127:3), there was (and still is) a looming sense of responsibility and duty to bring them up properly in the faith. Of course, the best time to start is when they are young.

*Train up a child in the way he should go,  
And when he is old he will not depart  
from it. (Prov 22:6)*

When my children were younger, it was reasonably easy to build in family altar time. It became part of the nightly routine, and, like most families, the time before bed and lights out was a natural time for stories. My husband and I took turns to incorporate Bible stories into the routine and end with a short prayer, with the children repeating our spoken phrases. Eventually, when they could read independently, we progressed to reading chapters from the Bible and praying using the word “Hallelujah.” As my children got older, everyone would take turns to lead the family altar. The format of our family altar has largely remained the same as the one of my childhood. The only variation is that for one evening a week, we sing hymns instead of Bible reading, as a visiting preacher had encouraged us to use different ways to share God’s word with our children. On Hymn Sunday (as we call it), each of us chooses a hymn, and we sing it together. This allows us to receive God’s word and learn some of the infrequently sung hymns in our hymnal. Our occasional attempts to sing the more familiar hymns in four-part harmony produce interesting results!

Our family altar includes a reflection component. We discuss our encounters, count our blessings, and thank God for His providence and guidance during the week. Sometimes we share our concerns, discuss issues and identify

people who need intercession. Such sharing also gives us parents an insight into where our teenagers are, spiritually and emotionally. In our busy lives, we may have inadvertently overlooked an issue that was important to them. Perpetual busyness is an unfortunate attribute of modern lifestyles; we are constantly pulled in different directions, be it work, study, church, or family-related matters. Hence, the family altar is a critical respite from the madness—a time for us to quieten down and recharge our spiritual batteries.

Nevertheless, I feel that there is always room for improvement in our family altar. With our children’s study and exam pressures, and our ever-changing work schedules and deadlines, it can be a battle to find and devote time for the family altar. In moments like these, I question our family altar’s effectiveness since I cannot gauge how much my children have taken God’s word onboard. Perhaps it is my impatience. But I thank God, at such times, Paul’s words encourage me to continue, and to have faith and trust in God.

*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave  
the increase. (1 Cor 3:6)*

The process of a plant growing from a seed cannot be hurried. Much patience and effort are needed—first, preparing

the soil and, second, striving to ensure the conditions are optimal for the seed to grow. Ultimately, it is God who grants the growth. Similarly, for the family altar, we must make an effort to plant the word of God in our children; and do it with faith that God will give the growth. When God’s words have germinated in our children’s hearts, His teachings will come to their minds and guide them in their times of need.

Parenting comes with many different challenges, and at each stage of our children’s development, there is much joy and despair. There have been times when I doubt my parenting skills and worry about my children’s spiritual state. However, God’s grace is indeed sufficient. Let me share two incidents where God’s word spoke to my children. These have reassured me during my times of doubt.

#### Incident One

Once, my then fourteen-year-old son shared that a boy in his class (known to be a bully) had made fun of his subject choices, saying they would never get him a decent-paying job. He was upset by the boy’s words, so a few of his classmates suggested that my son “get back” at the bully by tackling him roughly in the following physical education lesson. However, my son told me he had considered this matter and concluded, “I shouldn’t do that if I’m a Christian. The Bible teaches us we shouldn’t think about getting even with others even though they treat us badly.” Better yet, he decided to pray about it and ask God to help this classmate change his ways.

#### Incident Two

A while back, at my daughter’s school, a special assembly was held to honor and

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recognize the years of service of the departing headteacher. The program included performances by the school orchestra, and strict adherence to the dress code was expected. As a teacher in the same school, I attended the morning rehearsal, and could see that my daughter—the first violinist of the orchestra—was without her tie! I later found out that someone had stolen her tie from her locker. Fortunately, a kind classmate lent her his tie for the actual performance.

As things turned out, a boy had taken her tie from her locker, and this was not the first time he had done this to someone. But when he was caught red-handed by another student, he begged, “Don’t tell anyone! I’ll get in trouble.” My daughter was infuriated. Even after she had gone home, I knew from her messages that she was still seething. But since I was still working at school, the only thing that I could do was pray in my heart that she would not do something that she would later regret. After a long break, she sent me a message: “I have thought about it. I will buy him a tie.” She explained her plan to pay for the tie herself and leave it in his locker, with an anonymous message: “I have bought you a tie. You do not need to take anyone’s tie again.”

At that moment, I was stunned but touched. I truly felt that the word of

God was speaking to her. Later, she shared with me that, although she was still angry with the boy, deep down, she just wanted to put a stop to him taking other students’ ties and causing trouble. When she was thinking over what to do, she recalled a Bible verse about heaping coals on your enemy’s head (Prov 25:21–22; Rom 12:20). When asked what it means, she replied, “It’s something about how we should do good even when people don’t do good to us; it’s like heaping coals on their head.” To this day, the boy has never stolen anyone’s tie again.

### CONCLUSION

As parents, we have dreams and aspirations for our children. Quite naturally, we want to pave a smooth path for them and help them to avoid difficulties and hurt. But this is neither healthy nor helpful for their spiritual growth and emotional well-being. In the long term, it is not sustainable for us to shelter our children from the harsh realities of life. The struggles we encountered ourselves were integral for building our faith and developing a personal relationship with God.

With this in mind, a proactive approach to help our children would be to nurture and empower them with God’s word. We can do this through the family altar, where we can read the Bible, encourage

each other, and pray together. We must persevere and have faith that God will grant the growth at the appropriate time—both for our children and ourselves—to help us weather the inevitable storms in our lives.

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# Call for Articles

## Content

- Content should be biblically sound and adhere to biblical principles.
- The article should be organized and have a logical flow of thought.
- The main point or teaching of the article should be clear to the reader.
- Readers should be able to apply what they have read to their daily lives.
- Do not plagiarize the work of other writers or institutions, published either in print or online. Any quotations, ideas, or concepts taken from other sources must be properly referenced.

## Grammar/Style

- Use active instead of passive voice.
- Write concisely.
- Use concrete words and ideas instead of abstract concepts.
- Use “plain English” instead of obscure, academic language.
- Use the NKJV version when quoting Bible verses.
- Use American spelling, if possible. in print or online.

## SUBMISSION INFORMATION

Please email articles as Microsoft Word documents to [manna@tjc.org](mailto:manna@tjc.org), including your name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number.

*By submitting an article, you consent for it to be edited and published in Manna, in print and online, distributed globally and promoted on social media. If accepted for publication, your article may also be edited and/or translated for other True Jesus Church publications and websites.*

*Manna only accepts submissions written by True Jesus Church members. If you are planning to write an article (regardless of topic), please try to adhere to one of the genres below.*

### Christian Living

A Christian Living article gives practical biblical guidance on real-life issues and how to use Jesus’ teachings in our daily lives.  
Article length: 1500–2000 words.

### Bible Study

A Bible Study explores a passage or character from the Bible and draws out the teachings for readers to apply to their lives.  
Article length: 2500–3000 words.

### Doctrinal Study

A Doctrinal Study examines an aspect of True Jesus Church beliefs and may present it in comparison to other beliefs.  
Article length: 2500–3000 words.

### Exhortation

An Exhortation encourages and admonishes the reader in different aspects of the Christian faith.  
Article length: 2000–2500 words.

### Testimony

A Testimony recounts an experience in the Lord that will encourage and edify the reader.  
Article length: 1500–2000 words.

### Creative Writing

Creative Writing pieces include poems, parables, or short stories that illustrate a biblical teaching or idea. Keep in mind as you’re writing: how will this edify the reader?

# Articles of Faith

## JESUS CHRIST

Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh, died on the cross for the redemption of sinners, resurrected on the third day, and ascended to heaven. He is the only Savior of mankind, the Creator of the heavens and earth, and the only true God.

## HOLY BIBLE

The Holy Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, is inspired by God, the only scriptural truth, and the standard for Christian living.

## TRUE JESUS CHURCH

The True Jesus Church, established by our Lord Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit during the time of the 'latter rain', is the restored true church of the apostolic time.

## WATER BAPTISM

Water baptism is the sacrament for the remission of sins for regeneration. The baptism must take place in natural living water, such as the river, sea, or spring. The Baptist, who already has had received baptism of water and the Holy Spirit, conducts the baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the person receiving the baptism must be completely immersed in water with head bowed and face downward.

## HOLY SPIRIT

Receiving the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues, is the guarantee of our inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

## FOOTWASHING

The sacrament of footwashing enables one to have a part with the Lord Jesus. It also serves as a constant reminder that one should have love, holiness, humility, forgiveness, and service. Every person who has received water baptism must have his/her feet washed in the name of Jesus Christ. Mutual footwashing may be practiced whenever is appropriate.

## HOLY COMMUNION

The Holy Communion is the sacrament to commemorate the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. It enables us to partake of the flesh and blood of our Lord and to be in communion with Him so that we can have eternal life and be raised on the last day. This sacrament shall be held as often as possible. Only one unleavened bread and grape juice shall be used.

## SABBATH DAY

The Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week (Saturday), is a holy day, blessed and sanctified by God. It is to be observed under the Lord's grace for the commemoration of God's creation and salvation, and with the hope of eternal rest in the life to come.

## SALVATION

Salvation is given by the grace of God through faith. Believers must rely on the Holy Spirit to pursue holiness, to honor God, and to love humanity.

## LORD'S SECOND COMING

The Lord's Second Coming will take place on the last day when He descends from heaven to judge the world: the righteous will receive eternal life, while the wicked will be eternally condemned.



## CONTACT INFORMATION

For additional information on the True Jesus Church, contact us or visit our website. We look forward to hearing from you!

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