

FISH MAG

OCT-DEC
EDITION 2024



YOUR **PLACE**
YOUR **PEOPLE**
YOUR **PURPOSE**



NOTE FROM THE **PASTORS** _____



GREETINGS IN THE NAME OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST!

As we reflect on the incredible year of 2024, our hearts are filled with joy and gratitude. This year has been a milestone in the life of Freedom Church Chennai, marked by growth, transformation, and God's abundant grace.

There is so much to celebrate as we prepare to step into a brand-new year with fresh vision and new challenges.

The growth of our Freedom community is something that is worth celebrating. We are truly grateful and thankful to God for each one of you who have found **'your place'** here in Freedom. Whether it be through discovering us on social media, or being invited by a friend, I'm glad you said yes. There is something altruistic in experiencing the lively fellowship (aka its-very-loud-in-here cafe), the joy of being in the midst of unconditional love, and the warm welcome as you stepped in through our open doors. Some have discovered **'your people'** here—a family of believers who share life and faith together. And so many of you have found **'your purpose'** through our powerful messages, mid-week groups, and the teachings at the Academy.

I firmly believe, Freedom Church Chennai is a unique, distinct with its God-given identity. Let me tell you about a symbol from the early Christian Church known as **'the fish', or ICHTHYS**. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, people who believed in His life and accepted him as their Saviour began to be called Christians.

Both the Judaic religious authorities and the secular Roman rulers sought many brutal ways to crush the growth of this communal faith. Christians used the fish symbol as a covert way to identify each other during times of persecution. The word ICHTHYS is a Greek acrostic that stands for: **Jesus Christ, Son of God, our Saviour**.

It was a powerful declaration of faith in a dangerous world.

When one Christian met a stranger, he/she would draw one arc of the fish symbol in the sand on the floor. If the stranger completed the arc, it revealed they were also a believer, and then they could share fellowship together.

Our hope with this quarterly magazine is quite similar: take this mag, share it with your friends and colleagues, use this as your opportunity to “draw an arc in the sand.” You'll never know, someone might just ‘complete the arc’ by finding Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as their Savior!

Our vision for this magazine is to serve as symbol to build **Faith, Inspire** you, **Strengthen** our relationship with Jesus and bring **Hope** in this lost & dying world that we live in. We are incredibly proud of our church and thankful for the content and amazing stories that we get to share. Have a wonderful time reading and sharing this magazine around. From our family to yours, we wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

In His service,
Praveen & Shana Emmanuel,
Pastors, Freedom Church Chennai



HUMANS OF **FREEDOM**





EN ROUTE TO FAITH!

My name is Raghav and I come from a good orthodox traditional non-Christian family. Since childhood, I was taught that if I'm not good, our "god" would poke my eyes. As I had never seen this "god", those threats didn't scare me. However, it gave me the notion that a god is a really strict type of a guy - like a policeman or a teacher who would punish all who are not good by poking their eyes. It wasn't a good picture of God at all.

As I grew up, I made sure that I would be seen as a good "orthodox" boy wherever I went. I did well in academics, socially, morally and spiritually by going to temples, doing poojas and chanting mantras. I was so good at chanting mantras that are generally hard for others to enunciate. I was sincere and honest and authentic in whatever I had to do.

I had faith in myself, a lot of trust in the people around me and I believed that I have "god" by my side as I was dutiful in all godly rituals. I believed I was in the right system, that I had everything under control. In my mind and to the world around me, I was good. Or so I believed.

My father had the strangest habit of going to churches. This was so bizarre. It puzzled me as to why so many would gather together every Sunday morning to listen to an old man robed in white. All I knew about Christianity was that there was Jesus, Mother Mary, Christmas and that Jesus was very forgiving. I was intrigued about this whole idea of forgiveness and how that would play out in my life.

By the time I was done with my under graduation and my whole life underwent drastic and rapid changes. Everything that I believed would sustain me, slowly started to deteriorate. The very people I believed in the most failed me. Loneliness, as usual, became my constant companion. The belief system that I firmly held on to was miserably failing me to the point where I was fed up with myself. I stopped believing in myself or in any god and I couldn't even bring myself to saying that I did. On top of all of this, April 2020 happened and before I knew it, every door of belief that I could knock on was closed. I was suffering from a bad case of hemorrhoids. Along with the Lockdown, I was also "locked down". As the days went by and I was left with disappointments, regrets, bitterness and of course, more loneliness.

The question which I was asking myself was, **“What would I do when I see my entire belief system collapse and shatter to pieces in front of me?”**

My father’s work acquaintance invited him to a church in Nungambakkam. Ever since he started attending this church, I saw a lot of positive changes in him. He had been visiting many churches in the past but had never invited me to any of them. Something was different here and he asked me to come along and see for myself. His invitations did not stop despite my disinterest. After about 7 months of persistent persuasions, I decided to check out this church just to get them off my case.



On that particular Sunday in August 2022 I heard the preacher talking about Jesus giving rest to his people in the book of Matthew of the Bible. I wondered, **“A God who invites people so that he can give them rest? Sounds odd.”** All my life, I only thought that you have to be on God’s good side if you don’t want your eyes poked or be punished. I was intrigued and wanted to know more about this God who offers rest to his people.

There were a couple of things that I found really strange. Firstly, for a place of worship, this church had no idols of any sort. The lights were made dim during certain times like the singing and then it was well lit for other sessions. The music was way too loud, and there was always a passionate crowd in the front who seemed wildly unashamed to sing and dance to the songs of worship. Despite all my apprehensions there was something about that place that drew me. I found peaceful comfort in the lyrics of the songs and in the core message of the preach. After each service the Pastors stayed back to talk with anyone who was interested. I was able to discuss and dialogue with the Pastor all my doubts and questions that were in my heart. Also here in church, I found this brand-new community of people who would do anything for Jesus. It was then I knew in my heart that there’s still hope and that God loves me.

I was promptly but intentionally welcomed to come back the following Sunday. Though my initial reaction was to hesitate, I resolved to come back to taste and experience the presence and the love of God again. Soon it became something that I looked forward to, week after week, with or without someone asking me to come.

Jesus was not just a good teacher or a perfect man who lived 2000 years ago. He is so real and personal. I began to hear God speak directly to my heart addressing my innermost fears and faults. I believe that He willfully chose to die a sinner’s death on the cross so that I do not have to pay the cost for my personal sins. I have been saved from the power of sin and the penalty of eternal death and I look forward to being in His presence for eternity in heaven. As I put my trust in Jesus I began to experience a newness in me. There was a different kind of joy in my heart. Not the kind of happiness we feel when all is good but a kind of joy that is welling up within me that had nothing to do with the people or the circumstances around me. My loneliness disappeared with the newfound Christian friendship and fellowship in church. People I hardly knew, placed their hands on me and prayed and my body was healed. I wasn’t on any medication at that point of time and I got to experience healing by faith in Jesus.

Its been an amazing journey ever since. It wasn’t something that I could touch, feel, and see that caused the birth of a new life in me. Rather it was the unseen move that only Jesus can accomplish in anyone anywhere who seeks the truth. The fearful empty and lonely Raghav is now a new creation in Christ. I now live by faith, bold, confident, joyful, hopeful and full of abundant life.

-Raghavan Venkatesh



TAKE AWAY FROM **OUR** **SUNDAY** **PREACHES**



Each week, our local teaching team bring messages of hope and inspiration. Messages that aim to bring you closer to a life-changing relationship with Jesus



PREACH 01:

Breaking Through Jericho

A Life-Changing Message by Pastor Praveen Emmanuel

Pastor Praveen delivered a stirring and profoundly encouraging sermon that challenged the listeners to rethink how they approach challenges and pursue God's promises. Centered on the story of Jericho, his message spoke directly to me that God's vision extends far beyond the walls that limit my perspective.

From the very beginning, Pastor P challenged us with his call to not stop short on the promises God has called us to seize. He acknowledged the struggles we face when our progress seems invisible and life takes unexpected turns. Yet, his reminder was clear: God's work isn't finished yet. Just because we don't see results doesn't mean the process has ended.

The question, **"What is your Jericho?"** struck a deep chord, encouraging introspection. It was a prompt to identify the walls I personally feel trapped behind. In my mind I pictured obstacles that seemed overwhelming, constricting and hindering. He then spurred us to refocus on what God is doing within us during the process. The preach emphasized that our journey is as much about personal transformation as it is about reaching the destination.

His practical yet faith-filled blueprint for overcoming challenges was built on the foundations of God's presence, praising Him, and perseverance.

In my mind these translated from abstract concepts to realistic action steps that I could cultivate into faith filled audacious living.

Instead of focusing on my Jericho's walls, I am called to focus on God's presence, praising Him in the middle of uncertainty, and persevering through each step, trusting His sovereign timing.

This sermon wasn't just a feel-good motivational message; it was a deep spiritual charge to keep going even when progress isn't obvious. I was inspired to actively pursue what God has promised with unwavering faith and relentless trust.



PREACH 02:

Living by Faith, Not by Sight

A Masterclass by Neil Smith

Neil – being one of my favourite teachers, delivered a powerful message that transcended beyond mere words and spoke straight to my heart. Anchored in 2 Corinthians 5:7 **“Live by faith and not by sight”** this sermon was a profound call to reframe how I approach life, especially when the future looks uncertain.

The message unpacked the tension between the practicalities we perceive and the unseen promises of God. He brought clarity to a truth that resonates deeply: **Being loved by God and Pleasing God** are two different things. While His love for us is unconditional, faith is what pleases Him most. I was firmly reminded that faith is an action word, not a passive belief. It's the bold, tangible steps we take when circumstances feel impossible that demonstrate trust in God.

Drawing from Hebrews 11:1, the preach painted a clear picture of faith as **“confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”** His reference to Abram's unwavering belief — credited to him as righteousness underscored how foundational trust in God is to my relationship with Him.

There are several standout moments for me, one of them being the striking truth: **faith is the trigger that ignites miracles. And that asking God is not a sign of weakness but the very outworking of our faith.**

Another one was the reflective statement: **“What you believe about God is the most important thing about who you are as a person.”** It was a wake-up call to realign my thinking and to activate my faith in difficult situations rather than passively waiting.



-Preeja Pio

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If you would like to contribute to the content in our future editions of the FISH magazine, kindly email us at chennai@freedomchurch.cc



SON.
BROTHER.
WARRIOR.

BARBARIANS

SON. BROTHER. WARRIOR.



Barbarians is our
ministry for men.
It started with a
simple question:



What does it mean for men to live a life that is devoted to Jesus and His kingdom?



Barbarians is about being the men that God has called us to be. Men who are ready to answer the call, hungry for more of God and want to get onto the Battle Line.

Many have followed God's leading in Barbarians and have gone on to become pastors, leaders and church planters all over the world. We are raising men who are sons, brothers and spiritual warriors.



SHE SPEAKS



Once a month all the women in our church gather together, because we believe that God has something specific and powerful to say to his daughters.

These nights are called SHE, and are often teaching nights when we gather to worship together, hear from God's Word, pray and press forward into all that God is calling us to.

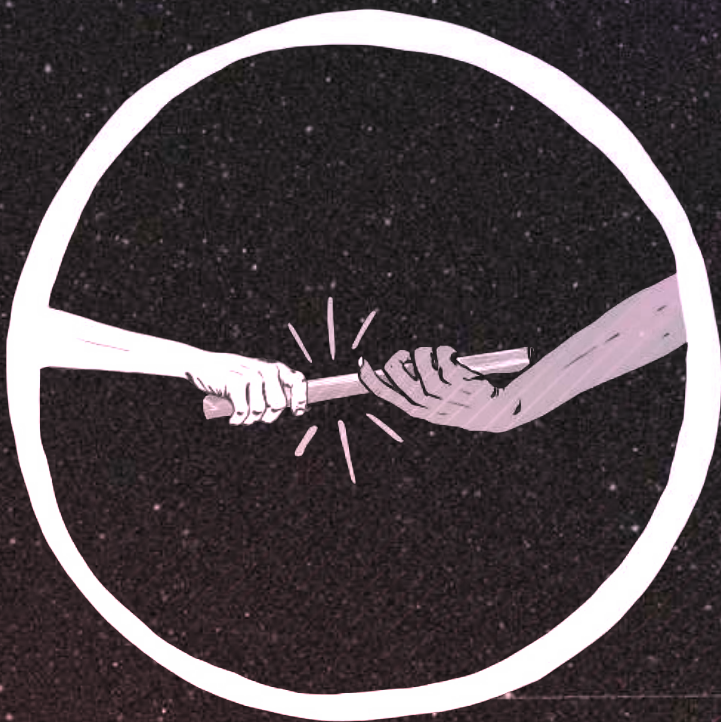


Occasionally these nights might be focused on building sisterhood, connecting and enjoying time together out in our cities, getting creative, or holding nights especially for inviting friends along to.

In SHE we are sisters, daughters, warriors, and our goal is to champion and equip each other as we pursue the God-given dreams and plans we are running with.



RAISE THE **NEXT**



We lovingly disciple, we release leadership, we inspire kingdom influencers and plant new churches.

We share the truths and opportunities given to us, changing the world through a legacy of multiplication.

Freedom Kids is the enriching children's ministry at Freedom Church.



It has been designed to teach the love of Jesus to children in a creative, safe, fun filled, interactive and engaging way.

Our Kids church has different set-ups for different age groups, serving children from 2 years to 14 years. This allows us to take an age-appropriate approach to teaching the principles of the Bible to help our children follow Jesus.





E _____ **P** _____ **I** _____ **C** _____

Engage Purpose Inspire Change

EPIC is a dedicated space for the Youth of church to come together to have clean fun, build their faith and grow together. At Freedom Church, we deeply value and believe in the purpose of young people.

They are not just the generation of tomorrow but an important part of the church today. E.P.I.C. meetings are exactly that—EPIC! Through discipleship, worship, game nights, paintball, ice cream, biryanis, and more, we take great joy in teaching young people about Jesus.

We also help them understand that, in a world that appears to offer so much, **He truly is better.**

“ Raising the next generation is in our DNA and one that we are fully committed to.”

Surprise!

tear-off
this
poster for
your
wall at
home or
office

IN OUR DNA



RELEVANT TO OUR TIME

RELEVANT TO OUR TIME

We will share an ageless message that engages the next generation and is easily understood by unchurched people. We will adapt our methods and lay down our preferences for the times and cultures we are called to reach.



RELENTLESS REACHING

RELENTLESS REACHING

We persistently share the hope and salvation of Jesus with our family, friends and communities. We won't stand by and be silent about the truth and love God has for this world.



CHANGELING

CHANGELING

We are on a constant journey of transformation and personal freedom to become more like Jesus. We refuse to get stuck in our ways, taking individual responsibility for our learning and growth.



WILDFIRE

WILDFIRE

Expressing outwardly the work that God has done inwardly, our faith and love will not be contained. We have a contagious passion for Jesus that is raw, real, and unapologetic.



HEART AND SOUL

HEART AND SOUL

We take personal responsibility for the vision and unity of our church. We are committed to making God's kingdom the central cause of our lives, no matter the cost.



FIRST AND BEST

FIRST AND BEST

We will serve God and our church with all that we have, giving sacrificially to the one who gave us everything. We won't just go through the motions or do the minimum. The best of our talents, time and resources will be used for the kingdom.



WE WILL ELEVATE

WE WILL ELEVATE

We freely give honour to everyone: women, men, all ages and all races. We reveal God's value for each person by opening our homes and our lives. We honour leaders who serve us. We honour God when we build a culture that honours people.



RAISE THE NEXT

RAISE THE NEXT

We lovingly disciple, we release leadership, we inspire kingdom influencers and plant new churches. We share the truths and opportunities given to us, changing the world through a legacy of multiplication.



PUNCHING ABOVE OUR WEIGHT

PUNCHING ABOVE OUR WEIGHT

With audacious faith, we set impossible goals, take bold, confident steps and watch our God move. We are giant-killers who refuse to limit the Holy Spirit.



LIVE FULL DIE EMPTY

LIVE FULL DIE EMPTY

We are adventurers who take risks and grab life by the horns. Our joy stands in opposition to lifeless religion. Dancing and laughter mark our lives, and we are determined to release all our potential before we die.



WARRIOR POETS

WARRIOR POETS

We reflect the creator by embracing and expressing creativity. The colour of our lives becoming a revolt against the mundane and ordinary. We communicate the Gospel with the life and vibrancy in which it was intended.



EVERYTHING'S A GIFT

EVERYTHING'S A GIFT

We intentionally celebrate and give thanks. We shake off complacency and entitlement to overflow with gratitude for God, our lives and one another. Practicing thankfulness gives us a joy that will sustain us.

Surprise!

tear-off
this
poster for
your
wall at
home or
office



The Academy is a once-a-week course held every Thursday evening here in Freedom Church. It is designed not only to teach you more about the Bible and the church but predominantly about who you are called to be. One of the most powerful components of the Academy is that you pursue being more like Jesus with other like-minded believers who are there to spur you on in your faith.

01

Becoming Christ like!

02

Honouring people!

03

Bringing the world closer to God!

Catchy tag lines right?....But I didn't need much convincing and I responded with a resounding and immediate "Yes" when I was asked if I wanted to join "Freedom Academy Chennai". I knew in my heart that this will be a new journey where God can "fix" my brokenness and set me on solid ground so that I never question my identity in Him again.

A bit about my background – I joined Freedom church after being treated and healed from a high-risk, but treatable, tumour. Added to the physical trauma was a more emotionally damaging relationship failure. I was led to believe that I had lost my purpose in life and can never be what I was spiritually called for.

In my first session at the Academy, each of us in the class was asked to write down what we wanted to become by the end of the course. With a lot of skepticism I listed 12 spiritual goals, wondering if they would actually come to pass. 24 classes have been conducted in this batch and one can see tangible changes in me.

Those 12 goals seem to draw nearer and nearer with every session. I see myself differently in Christ. I am confident that He loves me, no matter my past.

In our Academy sessions we have been taught about The Church, its principles, the DNAs of Freedom and what we as Church believe in. We are given hands on training on

- **How to read the bible**
- **How to pray**
- **The Biblical ways to fast**

We received much clarity in the sacraments of the Church like Baptism and Communion.

We were given wholesome scripture-based teaching on our identity, our calling, the gifts of the Spirit, Spiritual warfare, character building, overcoming sin, fear, insecurity and pride. Each and every lesson that was taught and discussed in our class group has been life changing!

One of the most beautiful lessons I've learned is the importance of people and loving them as Jesus did. Community matters. The people of God matter. Those who have strayed from God matter. Those who do not know God matter. I am called to show Christ to everyone through my life and the gifts God has given me.

It has been delightfully liberating to have myths, religiosity, and false teachings broken while God continuously rebuilds and stabilises my inner self in Him. This is what is happening in Academy - **I am seeing more of Christ and less of myself.**

God used the pastors and this church community to restore my flickering faith. They spoke words of godly encouragement and edification over me which transformed my thought process.



"I lost my purpose" has now become "I am here to reach out to people and show the goodness of our God."

"I failed God" has now become "He will bring His Will to completion in me"

"God can never use me" has now become "He has given me spiritual gifts, and I can now boldly use them to set others free."

"God was not there with me" has now become "There will be trials and temptations, but My God will deliver me from all of it and use it for His glory"

And here's the best change that happened in me:

“Does God love me?” has now become “God loves me” with no buts and ifs.

I am deeply thankful to all my pastors and mentors who have been non-judgmental towards my doubts, failures, and flaws. I know that God is working in me, changing me, restoring me, and making me more like Him. The transformation is far from complete. But He is the author and finisher of my faith and I completely surrender myself into His hands.

Jesus Christ has a mission and purpose for me which is why I joined Academy—to discover my purpose. Even as I write this, I realize it is all about Jesus and nothing about me. I am on this amazing roller coaster of a journey and I look forward to all the wonderful things God has in store for me through Academy!

Glory be to God our Father, Jesus Christ who has redeemed and restored us by His love and the Holy Spirit who reveals all the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

“And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”

-2 Corinthians 9:8



“To God and only God be the Glory”

-Joanna Priyadarshini



LAUGHING OUT **LOUD**



Who was the
smartest man in the
Bible?

**Abraham. He knew
a Lot.**

What kind of lights
did Noah have on
the Ark?

Floodlights.

Who was the
greatest comedian
in the Bible?

**Samson he brought
the house down.**

Why did Jesus
never need a GPS?

**Because He is the
way.**

Why did the
scarecrow become
a pastor?

**Because he was
outstanding in his
field!**

What did Adam say
on the day before
Christmas?

**"It's Christmas,
Eve!"**

How does Moses
make his coffee?

Hebrews it!

Which Bible
character was super-
fit?

Absalom.

Where was
Solomon's Temple
located?

**On the side of his
head.**

Which nursery song
would Jesus have
heard the most?

**"Mary Had a Little
Lamb."**

Why didn't the
skeleton go to
church?

**Because he didn't
have the guts!**

Who in the Bible
knew the most
people?

**Abraham knew a
Lot.**

Which book of the
major prophets is
the easiest to
understand?

Ezekiel.



FREEDOM **GLOBAL**



CAPE TOWN

Freedom church is an international movement of churches with about 32 locations across the globe.

In this issue of FISH we would like to highlight one of our international campus - Freedom Church, Cape Town. **Pastors Josh and Meg Cooke passionately love God and the church.**

Josh and Meg grew up in the UK but have lived and led church in different nations around the world. From Uganda and Cambodia to three different cities in the UK, they have been leading in local churches for over 10 years. In March 2020, they felt God calling them to move to Cape Town to lead Freedom Church. Since the end of 2020, they have had a beautiful baby girl, Evelyn, and have put down roots in the city. They have been blessed with a baby boy Noah Josiah Cooke this Christmas season.

Their vision is to build a multi-racial church that cuts through socio-economic barriers across South Africa. This is the pathway to building a healthy church. They dream about people from different racial, national and socio-economic backgrounds, sitting across dinner tables building deep, vulnerable friendships together.

A personal note from Pastor Josh:

Please pray for us as we are unable to use the school hall we meet in for the next 3 Sundays. Currently we are meeting in a big tent on the school field. Please pray for all of the logistics and practicalities to work out from the tent perspective.

Pushing hard for people to come, so please pray that it would be a really impactful time for people.

Please pray for me to balance responsibilities in leading the church and my family in these challenging season. Thank you so much.

**-Josh & Meg Cooke
Pastors, Freedom Church Cape Town**



WARRIOR POETS



We reflect the creator by embracing and expressing creativity. The colour of our lives becoming a revolt against the mundane and ordinary. We communicate the Gospel with the life and vibrancy in which it was intended.

AMRIT's SONG

The first chapter of the Gospel according to Luke in the Bible tells the story of an old barren couple blessed by God. Their baby boy would be Jesus's cousin John the Baptist. Both Mary mother of Jesus and Zechariah father of John the Baptist barely understood the depth of the divine mission their sons would accomplish. But they undoubtedly, deliberately and intentionally burst into a song of praise in response to what God was doing in their lives.
And... this is what I took away

Amrit's song: Amrit... what will your song be?

Praise be to God who sees through every lie
Praise be to the king who is Holy and most high
Praise be to Him who saw me in the dark
And when I shrivelled at the light, he said "That's not who you are"

He lifts up my head when It's hung down low.
He clears off my sin and turns ashes to snow.
He pulls out the thorn of sin, death and shame
And in it's place He gives a stone with my name.

Praise be to God who calls us His own
Praise be to the Shepherd to whom all names are known
Praise be to the Father who loves everyone
And through his Son redeemed me no matter how far I've run.

He lifts up my head when It's hung down low.
He clears off my sin and turns ashes to snow.
He pulls out the thorn of sin, death and shame
And in it's place He gives a stone with my name.

Praise be to God in whom all hope is built
Praise be to Him who calls us to be still.
Praise be to the Lord who holds time and space in hand
And not to harm but to prosper He's written us a plan.

He lifts up my head when It's hung down low.
He clears off my sin and turns ashes to snow.
He pulls out the thorn of sin, death and shame
And in it's place he gives a stone with my name.

-Amrit Elango

OUR FATHER or YOUR FATHER?

One day a beggar came asking for food. The owner of the house told him to go around to the back door and asked him to sit on the floor while he went in to bring leftovers. Putting the food in front of the beggar, he said, "Let's pray. Repeat after me, 'Our Father in Heaven.'" Instead the beggar said, "Your Father in Heaven".

The owner said, "No, say, 'OUR Father in Heaven'." The beggar again said, "Your Father in Heaven." The man got really angry. He asked, "Why do you keep on saying, 'Your' Father when I tell you to say 'Our' Father?"



The beggar said, "Sir, it's like this. If I say Our Father, then I would be your brother. If we are brothers, you would invite me in through the front door and not the back; you would ask me to sit at your dining table not on the floor; and you would not give me stale food. Sir, it's not possible that we are sons of the same father. God may be your Father, but he can't be OUR father."

-
- 1. What does the story teach us about living out the message of "Our Father" in the Lord's Prayer?*
 - 2. In what ways does the story challenge us to examine our actions toward the poor and marginalized?*
 - 3. How can we better embody the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 25:40: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me"?*
 - 4. What does James 2:1-4 teach us about showing favouritism in our daily lives? How do we sometimes fall into this sin without realizing it?*



COFFEE WITH HOPE - PART 01

When men forget to speak of bygone poetry, it learns to speak for itself.

Rivalry and anticipation flooded the warm rows in the cramped auditorium of the Variety Hour Show while delicate frost and snowflakes perched on the window sills and icy balcony, peering inside at the empty chair beside the ravishing Host of the evening, Mr. Ambrose.

The man and his famous show constantly kept people at the edge of their seats. Diverse personalities from all walks of life were interviewed on controversial topics every Friday night.

Mr. Pride, Mrs. Adultery, and Ms. Rebellion were exceptional favourites.

Lots went around, trading dignity for wealth over a fortunate guess.

The largest vote was for Mr. Rage, a fierce frequent.

The lights grew darker and a twilight hue fell. The show had finally begun. Ambrose's thundering prologue stirred up much frustration over the unknown guest. The curtains remained tightly shut despite the roar of famous names being proposed.

Finally, a cry broke out, pleas growing. They chorused for the reveal.

Upon the arrogant wag of finger, a slender form finally emerged into the marble auditorium, moving across the room with captivating charm. Her presence sparked uncomfortable silence followed by whispers of opposition.

With a smirk, Ambrose motioned to the green velvet couch on the dais.

She was a stroke of white paint on their black canvas.

The cameras stalked her like attentive serpents. The people committed every inch of her mysterious eyes and ancient smile to memory, displeased with her confidence.

Gaze gingerly searching the audience, her brows momentarily furrowed at what stared back with wordless hostility – grieving hearts and sorrowful minds from painful memories and unanswered dreams of all kinds.

The whiff of hot coffee lured her attention back to a grinning Ambrose. Returning a smile brewed from genuine delight, she took a seat.

“Good evening!”, he greeted. “We’re simply thrilled to have you here.”

The tension spreading over the crowd like a canopy was unmissable for they knew she wasn’t one of them. Their open spite swallowed up any trace of a friendly welcome.

Nevertheless, she tenderly addressed them. “I’m Hope. It’s my pleasure to be amongst you this evening.”

Hushed mockery was cast her way. Scoffs, too.

“They don’t bite,” Ambrose joked. “I promise they’re as tolerant as it gets. Afterall, the face of betrayal is an unforgettable one.”

Hope knew the dangers of mortal expectations that easily ruined one’s peace. The Host simply sought a raise out of her. To foolishly fall in his trap was to push The Lost Flock in the room further away from the truth.

She humbly commented, “I’m grateful for their patience.”

He nodded with raised brows, briefly taken aback. “So, what have you been up to this time of year? Helping children write letters to Santa Claus, I believe.”

“Restoring dreams and faith, I’d say,” Hope confessed.

“Faith in what?” he provoked.

She knowingly smiled. “God.”

Loud laughter filled the room, bouncing off the walls with growing cruelty.

“An incredible imagination,” He started. “I must confess, my research on you wasn’t easy. Everything you say and do points to a non-existent character parents trick their children with.”

Hope lightly joked, “I thought you’d be creative with definitions as much as you are with your accusations.”

“Pardon us,” He slowly set a hand on his chest. “When you’ve been failed long enough, the many forms of lies become undistinguishable.”

Hope reached for the cup of warm coffee set on the low wooden table before her. “Failed? Do tell.”

Ambrose opened his arms for emphasis. “Withheld promises. Empty storehouses of blessings. Barren and weary. We’re an unfairly forsaken lot. We seek water but find it bitter. We seek refuge but find murky rivers with haunting nightmares within. Clearly failed by ancients like you and your God.”

Pain flashed across her face.

Every dawn was painted with redemption and favour, and the Earth birthed goodness for the belly of man. However, this crowd chose to dine at tables of doubt and feast upon the spoil of hate and blasphemy.

"It's foolish to define God by results from unreliable sources," she corrected. "What then does God have for us?" The host challenged. "Pray, tell." "Renewal."

Disbelief washed over the gathering, people sharing glances of confusion. The unfamiliar word and its distant essence slipped through the grasp of their understanding.

Ambrose cleared his throat, turning formal. "Tell us, Hope. With a large populace against you, how do you find it in you every morning to keep falling in lower regard amongst men by sending them for weeks, even years on wild goose chases?"

"With three shots of espresso," Hope laughed, draining the dregs of her cup for irony.

He teased, "Is that fear I smell?"

She calmly replied, "Oh, I've seen God's unfailing faithfulness through the ages too much to perfume myself with the stink of fear. Without relationship with God, His divine timeframes seem like a goose chase."

"Relationship?" The host parroted in shock. "You're a beautiful maiden. I could promise you a ring in the near future and leave you begging at my feet for it for decades. What happens when my timeframe outlives you?"

Hope shrugged, "I'm Isaiah 55: 11 coded."

Ambrose leaned forward and prodded, "Do your childish brothers, Christians, still believe that scripture when it fails them? Or is their stupidity a product of the false promises your God forces them to believe?"

Warmth rolled over her as she corrected, "Their victory is a product of their perseverance."

He sniggered, "As much seasonal as yourself, I'd say. Once Christmas boards the winds back North, you'd flee with it."

Secret wisdom twinkled in her eyes. "Only after I see you off to the abyss."

"Is that a curse?" He snapped, audience gasping.

"Quite a dashing new mask, old friend."

His smile dropped, expression swiftly changing.

"You've hidden well..." she began, offering him coffee. "...since Calvary."

to be continued ...

Written by Angeline Judith Leonard



EVERYTHING'S A **GIFT**



We intentionally celebrate and give thanks. We shake off complacency and entitlement to overflow with gratitude for God, our lives and one another. Practicing thankfulness gives us a joy that will sustain us.



AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Rufus is my oldest dog is a male dachshund about 16 years old which translates to 80 in human years. He is partially blind and mostly deaf, old and grey with a limp in his hind leg. He is always the last in line when it comes to getting attention, because the younger dogs are relentlessly greedy and needy. At any point of the day, you can find him quietly sleeping in the corner of the room, under the bed or somewhere out of sight and unnoticed.

Even when it is meal time, he seems hardly interested and is again the last to the party. Yet, one thing is always and without exception – If he eats, when he eats, after he eats, he comes straight to me to thank me for the food.

I find this strange, because I am not one of those meticulous dog owners who train their dogs. I'm satisfied with teaching the basic commands like "sit" and a "shake hand", "come" and "go". **I have never taught them to say thank you for the food.** But Rufus and Randy (my over expressive Doberman) RooRoo (I can eat a horse - hungry all the time) and Ruby (picky-pure meat eater) always come to me with their noses messily covered with the chicken and rice. With sloppy wet licks, I am forced with their aggressive, affectionate, admirable, grandiose gratitude.

My grandmother used to tell me that after the chickens slurp up the water into their beaks, they lift up their heads, they look up to heaven and thank God and then gulp it down the throat. I am no zoologist and maybe there is a scientific explanation to this. But I imagine it to be the most natural way to drink.

I do believe that dogs are very thankful by nature. Humans on the other hand are quite the opposite. I was reminded of the moments in the Bible where Jesus always holds up the food and thanks God the Father – the source of every good gift.

Why would Jesus – God the Son need to thank God the Father?

Jesus was all powerful and fully God to multiply the loaves and fish and bless the food on His own. (Matthew 14:19 Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves) Yet He sincerely thanked God and in that divinely natural expression we get a glimpse of supernatural.

- 1. Be thankful for what you have – joy of contentment**
- 2. Being thankful to the person who is the Provider. Give glory and honour where it is due.**
- 3. Being thankful is a godly virtue, a kingdom value, a heavenly etiquette, an eternal lifestyle.**

When it doesn't come naturally to me and you like Rufus or Randy, we can practice and practice and practice till we get it right. We find it so easy to clink our glasses and say "cheers" or say "bon appetite" as though that was indigenous to life. But why do we whisper under our breath or omit all together the "grace" in private or public meal times? Under the guise of being non offensive and not wanting to draw attention, we choose to be a people pleaser rather than a God pleaser.

Pride and entitlement choke genuine humility.

By the time you become an adult, if you have had an average of 3 meals a day, you have had 20,000 opportunities to thank God for that life nourishing sustenance. And food is not the only thing that we ought to thank Him for....no?

We have all been through joyful and tragic seasons in our lives. As you look back at 2024 and look forward to 2025, would you take a moment to be thankful? In what ways can you express your gratitude to the One who is our good Shepherd?

-Praveena Paul



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