

NORTHERN LIGHT

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Is Jesus unique?

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I got my first real taste of Jesus being unique from a lady with Parkinson's disease. She could not speak and she lay in bed all day with splitting headaches, and her only means of communicating was pointing to letters of the alphabet on a card. It was so shocking to me at the time that I had to ask

her how on earth she coped with such pain and restriction. I held the card for her as she slowly lifted her hand and with her index finger she spelled out JESUS.

But here she was, a wife and mother with children at home still. It was a happy home too, and she loved filling it with guests. At one point we had a house church of up to twenty-five people meeting there.

And we still met as a house church when she was confined to bed, silent and immobile, in another room. It must have been excruciatingly painful for her, listening to all the chatter and not being able to join in. But enter her room and there she was, smiling away, and so wonderfully, obviously at peace.

Years later I was hunting for a decent answer as to how we as a church could explain to a room full of university students why we place so much importance on Jesus. I mean, what real, living proof do we have that Jesus even exists? And how would we describe our proof in terms that young people—and especially those with no interest in Jesus or religious sounding language—can relate to?

And then it dawned on me that the answer was in that word "peace," because it's the peace we Christians experience in the most trying and impossible circumstances that speaks louder than any explanation of our belief. I'd already experienced the huge effect it had on me in the lady with Parkinson's, but I'd also seen the effect it had on a university age student too, when the mother of my daughter's best friend was dying from cancer in her mid 50s, but she radiated such peace that my twenty-something daughter told me later, "I wish I had faith like that."

Peace that defies all logic clearly has an impact, but Paul did speak of a peace that "transcends all understanding." It's the kind of peace that cannot be explained logically. How could two mothers with children be at peace when dying so young?



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Paul explains, same verse (Philippians 4:7): It's "the peace of God" gift wrapped "in Christ Jesus." So the peace comes from God, but it's transmitted to us in Jesus, and that's why the lady with Parkinson's spelled out JESUS on the card.

And good for her, because God made it obvious from the day Jesus was born that his transcendent peace is what he'd sent Jesus to bring us. With eye-popping fanfare the cry immediately went out on Jesus' birthday, "Peace to those on whom God's favour rests" (Luke 2:14). And on whom would God's favour rest? It's on those who believe "the Spirit of the Lord is on me," Jesus said (Luke 4:18), the proof of which would be Jesus himself lifting impossibly huge burdens off people (verses 18-19). In other words, trust in the peace God provided in Jesus alone, and we humans would experience a peace that no human logic can explain.

And what more practical challenge could there be for any of us, young and old, than that? We've been offered peace in a world where no one copes all the time, including the arrogant authors and circuit speakers who love to spoof Christianity as a washed-out relic and just another religious soother. But one of Christianity's most ardent critics, Christopher Hitchens, admitted he had no solution to his fear of dying, other than saying, "I'd like to give it my best shot." Well, the best of human shots wasn't what God was offering in Jesus; he was offering something utterly unique in Jesus that anyone facing a situation, with no human way of coping, could experience.

And that was a promise for this life now from the day Jesus was born. Jesus himself then extended that promise and the challenge in John 14:27, when he said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives." In other words, what he was offering was unique. It wouldn't be like the peace the world gives that has holes in it the size of Greenland—like World War 2, for instance, when millions of good people had to die in gruesome ways to procure peace, and Christians killed each other too. Or like World War 1, when a truce along the Western Front at Christmas-time in 1914 soon fizzled out and back to killing every-one went.

The American Civil War, on the other hand, saw a huge revival of Christianity among the soldiers on both sides. Hundreds of thousands of men sought peace among the horrors, filling chapels to bursting point, and even kneeling in prayer while under attack. And to whom were these desperate soldiers turning—after realizing there was no human way of coping? To Jesus.

And good for them too, because Jesus did say in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." He didn't say, "If you can't cope check out what the world has to offer for coping." He said point blank, "You come to me." Jesus wasn't shy, then, about stating his uniqueness, that he, and he alone, was the only one who could truly help in the hopeless muddles and desperate situations we find ourselves in. So there's a challenge for us: Start with him and see what happens. And there's also the promise of God's favour waiting in the wings for trusting Jesus too, the obvious proof of which will be a peace in our lives that totally defies logic.

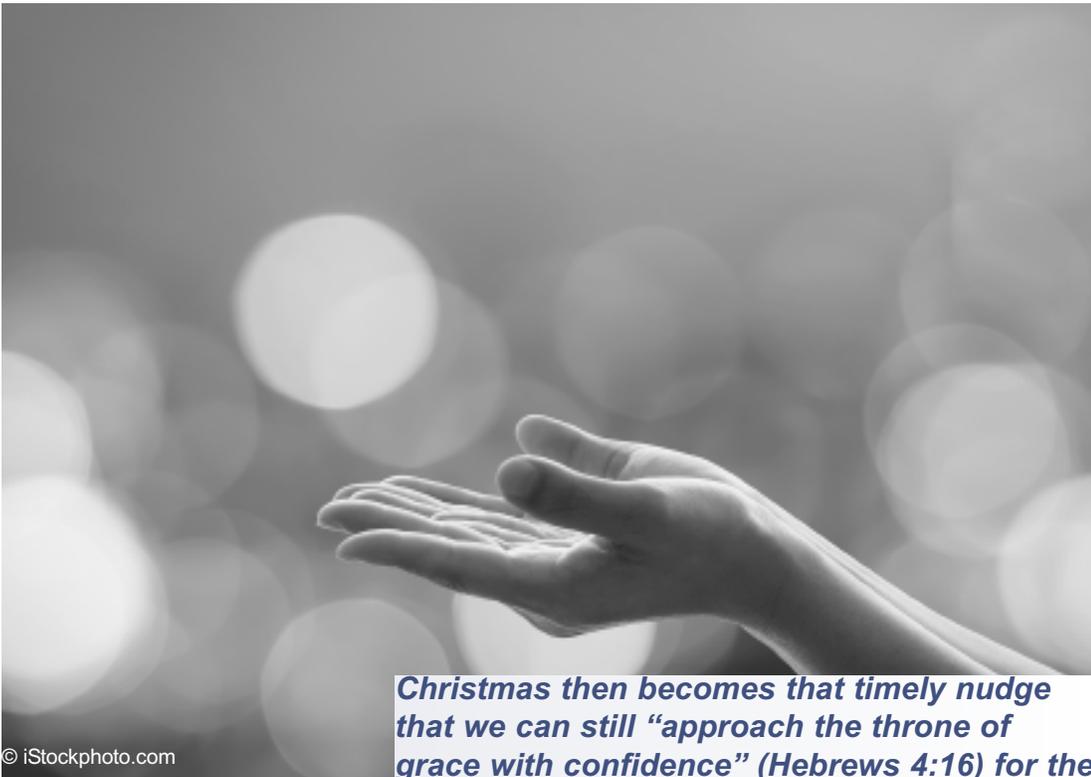
And there was a time back in 1940 when a stammering British monarch took up that challenge. Faced with the might of the German war machine about to wipe out the only army opposing it, and the prospect then of Britain being the next in line to fall, he called for a National Day of Prayer—and the Empire responded. Old black and white Pathe News newsreels show thousands of people lining up at Westminster Abbey, and gatherings all over South Africa "testifying to our belief in divine intercession." And we know what happened next, including the extraordinary calm that settled over the English Channel for several days enabling a third of a million soldiers to escape Dunkirk in boats of all shapes and sizes.

And who doesn't want "calm"? I know I do. I long for calm in my head when I cannot get over something stupid I've said or done, or what others have said or done, or I can't cope with situations I have no control over, or I'm frustrated at my inadequacies and the endlessly conflicting Christian views on things, like Halloween and war. If Jesus is real, then here is my chance to prove it. It's in those terribly practical things I need his peace in.

And isn't that the ultimate proof that Jesus is unique, in that we have a God who cares? He's not the demanding god of other religions. We have a Jesus who lived as one of us, so he knows exactly what keeps us awake at night, what stresses us out, what eats us up inside to the point we can't go on, and exactly where and how his transcending calm is needed. And he customizes it according to our need, so we know it's him doing it.



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What the lady with Parkinson’s disease needed in her life, therefore, is what any university student up to his or her eyeballs in stressed-out relationships and deadlines can experience too. It’s what a millennial, whose reputation has been shattered by social media, can tap in to. It’s what those who think Christianity and its teachings are confusing can zero in on. They can all start from scratch with the promise given at Jesus’ birth, repeated later by Jesus himself, and now proclaimed every Christmas-time in carols belted out in malls and offices, that a real, living Jesus has his unique transcending, customized peace for all situations just waiting for those who trust him.

Can Christmas be a comforting reminder of that, then, that it’s in the peace that Jesus gives us in our impossible situations that we have our proof that he is unique? Christmas then becomes that timely nudge that we can still “approach the throne of grace with confidence” (Hebrews 4:16) for the peace that “transcends all understanding” when our human methods of coping aren’t working.

And wouldn’t I just love to have that kind of confidence, knowing his peace will be there when I need it? But it’s from trusting him right now that the confidence comes. Like Paul said in 2 Thessalonians 3:16, “Now”—meaning right now, today, and for the next however many waking hours—“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way.” Imagine a lifetime of believing that and receiving calm whenever we needed it. Who wouldn’t have confidence in Jesus being real and unique after that?

How ironic, then, that people who think Jesus is just the brainchild of neurotics, are celebrating a Christian holiday every year that pictures Jesus as the one who came to bring us peace, and now lives to ease what stresses us “at all times and in every way.”

It took a lady with Parkinson’s disease to get the reality of that started for me. Here’s hoping, then, that if I’m incapacitated or approaching death and I’m asked how on earth I can be at peace, that my answer too will be JESUS, so the reality of his uniqueness can begin in someone else’s life as well.

By Jonathan Buck

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Bill Hall
Managing Editor
Layout and Design

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The Editor,
Northern Light Digest
Suite 203A, 2121 Airport Drive
Saskatoon, SK S7L 6W5

or email us at:
northernlight@gcicanada.ca

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email:
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More Than Just A Gift

During the Christmas season I have many traditions. One of my favourites is watching YouTube Christmas television ads from the UK. Each year there is a competition among the various food and department stores to determine who will have the most effective advert that portrays the spirit of Christmas. Some are quite memorable. For example, in 2014 Sainsbury's produced an ad about the famous soccer game that occurred on the front line of the Allied and German trenches on Christmas day in 1914.

This year John Lewis and Partners Christmas ad features musical artist Elton John playing his hit "Your Song" while vignettes of him performing and getting younger and younger are shown. Near the end the ad shows him as a little boy coming down the stairs of his home on Christmas day. In his living room, in the presence of his mom and gran, he finds a large wrapped piano. In anticipation and delight he peels back the wrapping paper and touches the piano keys. The scene then brings us back to 2018 where we began. This time we see a nostalgic Elton pressing the same keys on his piano. As the commercial ends, the words, "Some gifts are more than just a gift," appear on the screen.

After viewing this ad, I thought about Matthew's account of when Joseph was confronted with a pregnant Mary who was betrothed to be his wife, in Matthew 1:18-23:

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

"God with us"—some gifts are truly more than just a gift.

Sainsbury's ad:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eJn3j7Qr9A>

John Lewis ad:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNbSgMEZ_Twtos

By Bill Hall

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