Now, more than a half century later, as I again walk the street where I was born, memories come alive with a wave of nostalgia. I find it hard to believe this is where I had my beginnings.
Just Thinking is a teaching resource of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries and exists to engender thoughtful engagement with apologetics, Scripture, and the whole of life.

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In *Walking from East to West*, Ravi Zacharias invites you to follow him on a journey through his life, revealing how he has become more convinced that Jesus Christ is the one who came to give you life to the fullest. Available for purchase online at [rzim.christianbook.com](http://rzim.christianbook.com)
IN HIS POEM “On the Grasshopper and Cricket,” John Keats waxes,

The poetry of earth is never dead:

When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,
And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run
From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead

The shade of “cooling trees” and the barefoot lush of new-mown grass draw me inexorably outside in summer, even in the high noon of “Hotlanta.” There’s a certain steadiness in this season: school break, longer days, the expectation of vacation, fresh peaches, tomatoes, and corn at roadside stands.

Then again, summer sings of such surprises!
A spontaneous trip to the shore, a serendipitous celebration, a side trip for ice cream!

In the Just Thinking essays that follow, a neighbor’s simple gift turns Margaret Manning Shull from a garden observer to an avid gardener. A book from his parents, now tattered and worn, inscribes its words upon Aniu Kevichusa, whereas a book from a garbage pile introduces Ravi Zacharias to a world unimaginable. As Ravi observes in this final 25th anniversary issue, “I am persuaded that God alone, the Grand Weaver, knows our future and knits our lives…. Only God’s grace could have brought about this new life…. There simply was no other explanation.”

Alas, the brightness of summer inevitably gives way to autumn and winter. Yet, this constant remains, says Keats: the song of the grasshopper in “the hot sun” and the cricket “on a lone winter evening.” With each passing season, “The poetry of earth is ceasing never.”

“The grass withers and the flowers fall,” Scripture declares, “but the word of our God endures forever” (Isaiah 40:8). With each passing season, this confidence remains for those who know God:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
be leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name’s sake.

Danielle DuRant
Editor
I had watched for years as my mother worked in her garden and I appreciated the interplay of color and texture. But I didn’t know the first thing about caring for a garden, and as far as I was concerned, those details were best left up to my mother.

As the summer arrives each year, I revisit many fond memories shared with family. I recall fishing outings with my older brother and grandfather. Living near Lake Erie, my grandfather would thrill us with stories of his great fishing adventures with Northern Pike and Muskie. They were great fighters and would continue that fight long after they had been pulled from the water and thrown into the boat.

My own fishing career, if you could call it that, was far less dramatic than my grandfather’s adventures. My career began at Lake Pymatuning. Whenever we came to visit in the summers, my grandfather would take my older brother and me to fish in this kinder, gentler lake. Unfortunately, I was never successful enough as an angler to know the thrill of catching many fish. What I was successful at was hooking someone in the boat! Both my brother and I bear the scars of fishing hooks in our arms and legs.

A Growing Process

By Margaret Manning Shull

As the summer arrives each year, I revisit many fond memories shared with family. I recall fishing outings with my older brother and grandfather. Living near Lake Erie, my grandfather would thrill us with stories of his great fishing adventures with Northern Pike and Muskie. They were great fighters and would continue that fight long after they had been pulled from the water and thrown into the boat.

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Summer also brings to mind my mother’s garden. I had watched for years as my mother worked in her garden and I appreciated the interplay of color and texture created by the various flowers, trees, and shrubs. But I didn’t know the first thing about the process of cultivating or caring for a garden, and as far as I was concerned, the details involved in that process were best left up to my mother.

But then I took up gardening—well, actually gardening seemed to take me up. It all started very innocently when a friend gave me a cutting from her jade plant. I knew nothing about plants. But all of that changed when I received my jade cutting from my friend. She knew just how to initiate me into the wonders of gardening without overwhelming me with the details. Jade plants are succulents; it’s simply a plant that doesn’t need a great deal of water or attention. In other words, it’s the perfect kind of plant for a novice gardener.

I was amazed by how quickly this one plant put down roots in my heart. Watching this little cutting grow tiny, threadlike roots, planting it in a pot filled with simulated desert soil, and experiencing the wonder as it grew into the small jade tree that it is today—over fifteen years later—amazed me at how something so small, so ordinary, could become extraordinary.

I can tell you that it didn’t take long before I began to try my hand at plants that required more attention and care: African violets, cyclamen, gerbera daisies, tomatoes, peas, lettuce, and a whole assortment of garden flora and fauna. I grew enchanted by the variety of color, texture, and arrangement each new species added to my garden. I learned about specific care regimens, their particular pests, the difference between a partial-sun and partial-shade plant, and how soil acidity impacts the color of certain types of plants.

As a gardener, nothing is more rewarding to me than reaping the benefits of my labor, whether a lovely bouquet of flowers or the bounty of my fruit and vegetable gardens. When a summer’s soil, sun, and rain are just right, everything grows, blooms, and produces a bountiful harvest.

But, as I soon learned after a few seasons of gardening, not everything is just right.

Morning glory belongs to a family of unique and tenacious plants. While offering beautiful white or purple blossoms, that beauty belies a more pernicious and tenacious nature to spread and take over one’s entire yard! Morning glory is a variety of bindweed, which grows from rhizomes—underground storage structures that promote the spread of the weed. Hardy, tenacious, and opportunistic, the morning glory will spread in such ways that it will destroy every square inch of the garden.

Battling this plant nemesis in my own gardens has given me a new understanding for the process involved in the cultivation and preservation of gardens. Digging deep to get up as many of the rhizomes as possible takes commitment, hard work, and a great deal of time. Often, I look out over garden beds cleared of any visible evidence of morning glory after my labor, only to look out the next day and see new shoots where I had just cleared them.

With all of this back-breaking labor, it is easy to be tempted towards finding an easier way: A rock garden, perhaps, instead of a green one? Why in the world would anyone be attracted to the inconvenience of going out and working long hours in the hot sun battling insects, weeds, and other pests for a garden? Why would I labor in the summer sun for beauty or for bounty?

When I labor over my garden, or any project for that matter, I am
connected to a larger process, and not just an end result. It was my knees that began to ache from bending over, my hands that occasionally encountered a stinging or biting insect of one kind or another, my muscles that would cramp my fingers and hands from relentless weeding and digging. Yet, taking notice of this process makes me aware of my own tendency to desire convenience or to want to give up when things become difficult. Just as one might take for granted the process that goes into getting good food on filled grocery shelves, I often want for the shortcut or the expedience. Working hard to create conditions that enhance thriving for my flowers and vegetables in my own garden connects me to a part of the process that is done on my behalf on a much larger scale. I think of all the people who labor on my behalf so that I might enjoy the wonderful food on my grocery shelves. Going out and doing battle for my own garden reminds me that the process is just as important as the end product.

In many other regards, our busyness and commitment to convenience often keep us from engaging in vital processes that inform us of our beginning and guide us to our end, just as they contribute to a general amnesia about what it takes to put food on our tables. Our consumer conveniences often sever us from vital connections; we forget from whence we have come and where we are going. We look for the quick fix or the shortcut to the end goal, rather than journeying through many arduous processes essential to our growth and development as human persons.

How similarly people of faith often wish for the easy way or the convenience of a “seven-step plan” for spiritual growth. And yet, Jesus’s frequent use of agricultural imagery should not surprise us. Some of the most beloved images from Jesus’s conversations with his disciples evoke the vine and branches from grapevines and vineyards that likely filled the landscape. Growing grapes requires a long process. It takes three years to establish a grape planting. Yet, even during the third season, only a limited harvest may be expected from the vines. The first full crop normally takes between four to five years.

Perhaps this knowledge can give new insight into the words of Jesus:

*I am the vine; you are the branches...*  
*Remain in me, and I will remain in you...no branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine...remain in my love...I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.*

The spiritual life, like our development as human beings, is about the process. God, the Gardener, begins to tend to the soil of our lives. Through the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctification, the weeds of sin are dug out, and branches are pruned so that we can bear much fruit. To be sure, some years the ground lies fallow or the harvest is lean. Just as in farming, the process of spiritual growth involves watching and waiting, tilling and cultivating the land, even having to persevere and dig deep to pull out yet another encroaching rhizome. We will bear the marks of weathered hands and feet, sore backs and tired knees. There are no short cuts for a bountiful harvest. But we trust the One who chose us and appointed us to bear fruit—that the process will produce fruit that lasts.

Margaret Manning Shull is a member of the speaking and writing team at Ravi Zacharias International Ministries in Bellingham, Washington.

1 See John 15:1-16.
On March 1, 1999, Bertrand Piccard and Brian Jones stepped into the gondola of a hot air balloon and lifted off from the Swiss alpine village of Chateau d’Oex. Nineteen days, 21 hours, and 55 minutes later, traveling 28,431 miles, they landed in the Egyptian desert. Their journey successfully marked the first nonstop flight around the world in a balloon, earning them the distinction of a world record, a book deal, and a million dollars from the sponsoring corporation. Their victory photograph now rests in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum beside the “Breitling Orbiter III” itself.

As with all successes in life, the accomplishment of Jones and Piccard’s journey is memorable. Like the trophies on our shelves or the moments we remember as crowning, the successful passage of the Breitling Orbiter III is the story we celebrate—a story that seems to begin at Chateau d’Oex and ends in Egypt. But this trip, like most memorable achievements, was not quite the linear move from start to finish we imagine it to be. In fact, the journey that would end with a world record actually had three hopeful starting points and two frustrated finishes.
The often miry course of personal growth and human development is similar. There is a reason Jesus seems to insult the paralytic with the basic question of desire. We indeed must first want to be well.

I have long understood this concept personally. But thinking of this call for help as being inherently present within the human developmental process has only recently entered my perspective. What if every pang of trust or mistrust, every cry for autonomy or cry of shame, was the call of the human spirit to that which is beyond it? What if our cries over mistrust or longings for trust exist explicitly because there is one who is trustworthy? Psychology and theology professor James Loder offers this perspective explicitly: “It is evident that human development is not the answer to anything of ultimate significance. Every answer it does provide only pushes the issue deeper, back to the ultimate question, ‘What is a lifetime?’ and ‘Why do I live it?’”

Such are the questions we wrestle with in the twists and turns, stops and successes through the journey called life. How incredibly helpful to suspect there is a reason we ask all along. What if God is not merely the God who comes near in the midst of the pain of adolescence or the cries of an adult for understanding but also our very Creator who leads and guides us through certain paths? What if it is not merely, as one developmental psychologist writes, the “capacities of the human psyche” that “make spirituality possible,” but it is the Spirit of God who makes the human psyche capable of knowing God?2 “You did not choose me,” said Jesus, “but I chose you” (John 15:16).

As its name suggests, the Breitling Orbiter III was built upon two previous attempts. The original Breitling Orbiter launched in January of 1997. Only a few hours after take-off, the balloon was forced to land when the crew was overcome by kerosene fumes from a leaking valve. One year later, the Breitling Orbiter II stayed in the air nine days longer than its counterpart, managing to navigate from Switzerland to Burma. To the dismay of all, their flight was cut short when they were refused permission to use the airspace over China. Yet from the finish line of 1999, there is little doubt that these early setbacks contributed to the development of the system and strategy that would allow Piccard and Jones to finally pilot their balloon across the Pacific.

Whether our days are marked by victory or by crisis, by progress or the call to turn around and try again, the Spirit goes with us, reinforcing that God has been there all along. To discover that there is a face inherently present behind many of the failures we long to forget, a Spirit within our celebrations of success, and a voice that speaks over and above all that has indelibly marked our journeys, is to experience the restorative hope and joy of the Creator who intended us to discover Him all along.

The words of the psalmist describe waking to this knowledge: “It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them” (Psalm 44:3).

What if our days are really marked with the intention of one who loves us? What if our winding and soaring journeys are a means to the face of God?

Jill Carattini is managing editor of A Slice of Infinity at Ravi Zacharias International Ministries in Alpharetta, Georgia.

Growing up in India, Ravi Zacharias lived in a neighborhood amid a jumble of sounds, sights, and scents. More than a half century later, he walks the streets where he was born, where memories come alive with a wave of nostalgia. This is where it all began.
one of my earliest memories is of the old man on my street, a mystic who wore only a loincloth. He was tall, with matted hair and piercing eyes, quite fearsome to look at. Mud was caked all over his bony frame, his face was scarred by deep gashes that were self-inflicted from his religious devotion, and his skin was burned by constant exposure to the torrid heat of the midday sun. “How did he come to look like this?” I wondered as a boy. “What had he done to himself?”

I found out soon enough. Two or three times each week he would appear on our street; then, almost like a coiled rope unwinding, he would lie down on that filthy road and begin his routine. Cow dung and dog droppings littered the path, to say nothing of the stones or sharp objects that cluttered it as well, yet he would roll down the length of the street with a howl that sounded as if it came from the depths of a cavern.

“Govinda! Govinda! Govinda!”

I had no clue what his cry was about—I only knew it terrified me. It was an astonishing sight to a five-year-old, and I recall scampering to my mother and asking her, “What is he doing? What is he doing?”

“He’s OK,” she replied. “Just ignore him.”

“But what is he doing?” I would implore. “Why is he doing it?”

“He’s calling to his god!” she said. That did not quench my curiosity. But I did not pursue it as long as he continued to roll away from me, and his voice became a faint but haunting sound in the distance: “Govinda!”

The old mystic was only one of the striking sights on our street, a place that teemed with life in my eyes. On that street, I believed I saw everything that living represented. The world there was filled with sounds and screams and, yes, smells of different kinds. Silence was at a premium. Every morning at sunrise, any seeming quietness was broken by the shouts of the street vendors, hawking the items they were selling. “Onions! Milk! Vegetables! Knife sharpeners!”

When these sellers came to our door, they would look through our open but barred windows. There was no privacy to speak of. We stepped outside onto the street, and the road itself was so narrow that a car couldn’t pass through but only hand-pulled or cycle rickshaws. Outside were stray animals and people, each about some pursuit. Sometimes it was a beggar at the door, sometimes a leprous hand reaching for a handout with a plea for compassion. Life with all its hurts and pains squinted at you, squatted before you, and stared you down daily. This was the street where I grew up.

Life in our neighborhood was lived out amid this jumble of sounds, sights, and scents. There, on the street every day, friends played soccer or cricket. Laughter, cries, angry outbursts—all the emotions were in evidence. Around the corner, a small shop sold potato-crisp snacks and spicy Indian treats, and the best thing you could do was go into the

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shop and have your uncle or your friend buy you a treat of some kind. Flavors were in the air—the smell of oil heated to its peak, frying food of some kind—and taking it all in was an all-day activity, with someone buying a morsel or two and munching on it as they went on their way. From sunrise to sunset, people of every stripe and need passed by.

Then at dusk, when the streetlamps came on, students came out of their homes to continue their studies under lamplight. In some homes, there was no electricity; in others, parents sent their children outside to study under the streetlamps to conserve electricity. There was often a tussle as to who claimed a lamppost first. Once that was settled, the fortunate student sat with his back resting against the post. Most of his scalp was shaved except for an area called the *bodi*, and he tied this part to the lamppost behind him. That way, whenever he began to doze off and nod forward, the pull on his hair kept him awake. This was the discipline of study in those days.

Now, more than a half century later, as I again walk the street where I was born, memories come alive with a wave of nostalgia. I find it hard to believe this is where I had my beginnings.

The narrow lane has been widened and paved. Still, it would be an adventure to try to wedge a larger car in here. Yet taxi drivers do it regularly and intrepidly, and as you watch you wonder if the metal shrinks when they approach an object that seems too close to avoid a scrape. An Indian friend of mine says that whenever he’s asked if India has a Disney World, he answers, “No, we just take a taxi ride. That is breathtaking enough.”

The first time I brought my wife here, we couldn’t get to the door of the house on this street where I was born and to which we returned to spend our vacations. A water buffalo had stopped in front of the door. That was twenty years ago, and I was completely overwhelmed then. The memories come flooding back so quickly and sharply: the neem tree in the backyard that we used as a wicket for our cricket games; the window to the room where my whole family slept; a kitchen with a clay coal fire in which to do all the cooking—the hot Indian flatbreads that would come out of the oven puffing fresh and make you hungry just by their smell, the curries that were lip-smacking good, the delicacies that to this day charm my imagination.

What a world that was for me as a youngster!

This house where I spent many a summer belonged to my uncle and was like our second home. It used to be number 7, but now it is number 13, and above the doorpost a large eye has been painted to ward off evil spirits. A Hindu family lives here now, a lovely couple with two young daughters, and I’ve made it a practice to visit them whenever I come back to Chennai (the historic city formerly known to the world as Madras in the state of Tamil Nadu, next to Kerala). The little girls have fallen in love with my Canadian wife, Margie. Every time she accompanies me, they giggle excitedly. They love her sandy-blonde hair and delightedly say, “Oh, Auntie, Auntie, I love your blue eyes!”

This simple little house is like most others on the street, very small, made up of four rooms, each measuring about ten feet by ten. Even these small rooms are carefully compartmentalized. There may be a stove next to a bed, that sort of thing. In fact, when my family returned here to visit, your bed was a chair, a desk, or whatever you wanted to make it for the moment. During those long summer stays, there were twelve of
This house where I spent many a summer belonged to my uncle and was like our second home. A Hindu family lives here now, a lovely couple with two young daughters, and I’ve made it a practice to visit them whenever I come back to Chennai (the historic city formerly known to the world as Madras in the state of Tamil Nadu, next to Kerala).

us altogether, including our relatives, squeezed into this tiny place. But we never once thought of complaining. This was life, and this is the way we grew up.

I am sitting with the present owners in a room that has been further divided into two. He and his brother have had a falling-out and have divided the house into these two compartments. Each family now uses two rooms. The girls probably sleep on the floor, just as my siblings and I did fifty years ago. Their mother offers me tea—there is always the beautiful custom of tea in India. This, too, takes me back. It is a marvel to sit here drinking tea with this family in the house that was my uncle’s years ago. They plead with me to stay for a meal, but much to their disappointment I have an appointment elsewhere, a speaking engagement.

It is an August evening, and it is hot—around 100 degrees. I remember having ceiling fans that kept the air circulating, but there was little else to cool you. You simply got used to it. And there were various other ways to manage. We had thatched-straw drapes—called khus-khus—that were woven together. You could water these homespun creations with a hose to moisten them, and then, as the breeze blew through the thatched straw, it cooled things somewhat.

I have brought the two girls of this family a bag full of gifts. Margie and I always prepare something for them at home before we come. And they’re always appreciative that we think of them.

The father asks, “How was your trip? Why are you here this time?”

“I’m speaking in various places here in Chennai. Then I’ll be going up to Delhi in a few days.”

This man is a marketing director for a small firm, with a master’s degree that he attained by going to night school. His English is broken, as is my Tamil, but between the two of us we make a sensible conversation. The girls do fairly well with English; the mother speaks none at all. They know I live in the United States, and one of the girls ventures to ask what city I live in.
“In Atlanta,” I say.
They begin to tell me their dreams.
One wants to be a teacher, the other a doctor.
“A doctor,” I think, for I also was a premed student at one time.
The father tells me, in so many words, that his greatest burden is for his children to get an education, because none of his family did. Yet he doesn’t have the wherewithal to send the two girls to college. “Anything you can do to help them get the best education in America or Canada is my heart’s deepest desire.”

I tell him we could help. Our ministry provides scholarships toward education for families in need. His eyes get moist, hoping that this dream for his children might come true.

The last time I was here I tried to give the father some money, but he wouldn’t take it. He said, “You gave to me last time, sir. I am just honored you have come. That is enough for me, to see your face.”

So I handed it to one of the girls instead, telling her, “I want you each to have a bicycle to ride to school.” They beamed with gratitude, and now they ride those bikes to school every day.

Later, the father and I discover in our conversation that this house was sold to his father by one of my uncles. Family ties run deep here, coloring virtually every detail of life. I tell him that just a few doors down is the home that my mother’s family owned, the house where I was born.

That house was called “Dalmejiem.” The name was an acronym that included every member of my mother’s family: Devaram, the father; Agnes, the mother; Leela, the oldest daughter; Margaret; Elizabeth; James; my mother, Isabella; Ebenezer; and Manickam, the surname.

Now the girls are begging to show me the tree in their backyard. With their mother’s permission, they lead me to the very same neem tree that my cousins and I used as the wicket for our cricket games. The girls tell me they worship that tree for its antibiotic qualities. Every now and then, the mother lights a fire, and they hold a ceremony to pay homage. They tell me that she goes to the temple every day. “Every day, Uncle, she goes there,” they assure me, calling me by the affectionate term that Indian youths use to address their familiar elders.

Their mother’s eyes reveal the inner quest for piety, and my heart longs to tell her that God does not live in temples made with human hands. I trust that the time we spend together during my trips here will present the right moment.

It is not for sentimental reasons that I visit this family in my uncle’s former home. They are simply more of the beautiful people of my homeland with whom God has chosen that I cross paths. The truth is, I’m happiest when I’m with people such as these, people with whom I’m at ease. Here in my homeland I am most free to be me, with no one to recognize me because of my profession. And I get to do what I love best—simply to be with people. It reminds me of my youth when I surrounded myself with friends.

But the reality is, in the next month I will be speaking before the United Nations on the opening day of their assembly. I have been asked to address the ambassadors on the subject of “Navigating with Absolutes in a Relativistic World.” The contrasts between where I am now, in this humble house, and where I am going to be in a matter of weeks are too vast to fully process. Yet, there is no doubt that God prepared me for this life I now lead, connecting the varied and ironic threads of my experience into a beautiful tapestry as He would see fit.
It is not a natural drive within me to appear in such a prominent place as the United Nations. Yes, it is a privilege I hold dear, and a sacred trust. But I never would have wanted to engineer something like this. That was my father’s life. Because of the position to which he rose in the government of India, my siblings and I shook hands with prime ministers and presidents. We met and mixed with international leaders; we even entertained ambassadors and their entourages. The wealthy and the powerful are one side of India. Yet, I can’t explain why today I shrink from such a public life. I can only say that it has to do with the way the Lord has framed me. I truly do feel for a world in need. And I relate with ease to the ordinary person.

Even so, the last time I came here to Chennai, to the very street of my birth, a man came running out of his house and called me by name. “Raviji! Raviji!” he cried, using a term of reverence. “What are you doing here?” He had heard me speak in Amsterdam some years before and now as I passed in front of him, speaking to someone in Tamil, he was shocked to know that I understand his language, indeed, that this was the very street where I was born.

India is a nation with polarities of incredible proportions. Some of the world’s greatest minds come from here, making great advances in medicine, philosophy, and in the world of the Internet and high technology. Yet in the midst of this, of course, is dire deprivation and longing for a better way of life. In this subcontinent, the raw reality of life stares you in the face. For that very reason, it has always been easy for me to see Jesus on these streets. Any time I read the accounts in the Gospels, I can envision the Lord with the lame man in all his bare need on the side of the road, or the leprous body longing for a touch. After all, that’s what I saw growing up, every day. Moreover, each time I read of the Lord walking in the streets of Bethany or Jerusalem and telling a parable, I see my Indian culture, which also deals in parables.

I see the tailor who sets up his machine in the open air on the street corner, wedged between other craftsmen and craftswomen, shoe shiners, fabric menders—all business-people who eke out a living from wherever they can find a small, square space. The people here know how to manage with very little. Yet, sometimes I wonder how they make a living out of it. Theirs are lives full of burdens and chores, and they’re so very hard-pressed for money just to get by. Some are forced to set up home on the side of the road in a little shack. Others live on the streets in poverty, without even the advantage of a roof. And it’s virtually impossible for the lower classes to rise upward.

This unvarnished reality must be one reason why India is the largest producer of movies in the world. The movies that are made here are the best barometer of humanity’s gnawing need for an escape hatch. Through movies, you can escape to romance, to justice, to the fulfilling marriage you never had, to upholding the cause of the poor. Yet, in spite of the escapism that movies promise, you can never escape the sharp edges of life in India. It’s always there to greet you as you exit the theater.

At the same time, there is also evident on these streets the very real resilience of the human spirit. People make a go of things with what they have. As I look from one side of the street to the other, I see those who will survive against all odds and who have learned to cope. India also is a deeply artistic culture. You see it even in this muddled-up, mixed-up, mishmash of a marketplace, in the way a merchant hangs beads or arranges his cushions with a pleasing aesthetic.
Each time I walk the streets in my homeland now, it’s a matter of good news/bad news to me. The good news is, I am able to see clear-eyed here—to behold life and all its pain. The bad news is, the pain is so overwhelming that I can get desensitized to it, and one has to be careful of that. It’s why I keep telling my children to never forget from whence they ultimately came.

As I walk my home street now, I’m hit with the reality that my own life came out of nothing. By the time I was a teenager, when my family returned here on vacations to my mother’s home in Chennai, in the South, from our home in Delhi in northern India, I realized how small her family’s house was and how little my cousins had. I would ask my mother, “Why are they so poor?” By then, coming to Chennai always reminded me of the meager side of our existence.

Now, whenever I return, I have a yearning in my soul to be a solution to this. How can I help the very people whose blood is in my veins? Their food, their language, their ragtag existence from day to day, their struggle to survive—all of that is in me.

I always bring an envelope with money I’ve saved up or set aside. At the beginning of the week, that envelope is open to various needs. By the time I leave, everything in it will be gone. In a little over a week from now, I will go home to a steady income and a comfortable home, and, yes, a kind of sanitized life. But the ones I see struggling here I know cannot make it on their own. Sharing with these people some of what I have, and seeing the small bit of happiness it brings into their lives, is the privilege of a native son.
Sometimes we can convince ourselves that the answer to everything lies in economic well-being. Obviously, this is a very important facet of life. When you can afford a meal, a bed, a home for your family, you can be content. But it does not ultimately solve the deepest questions that haunt you. That is where religion is supposed to help, to offer answers.

Whether we like to admit it or not, many religions of the world are concocted to hold fear and control over people. Nobody likes to talk about this, but it’s the way it is. The human psyche is vulnerable because of its built-in fear of failure, and becomes an easy prey.

That’s the way I remember first experiencing religion—as something involving fear: A man rolling down the street, chanting the name of his god. Men and women with deep gashes in their faces. Tales of goats being sacrificed in temples to procure answers to prayers. Each time I asked my mother about these things, she explained, “They do it to worship their god.”

Worship? It was an empty word to me, steeped in some mysterious expression that didn’t make ordinary sense. It was a magic wand to ward off tragedy. The one thing I learned from observing such rituals was a palpable sense of fear. Everything had to follow a certain sequence. If you didn’t do it right, something bad was going to happen to you. If I didn’t make my offering, what would befall me? If I didn’t do this one thing correctly, what price would I have to pay to some sharp, implacable divine being? Was all that just superstition born out of fear, dressed up into a system, and embedded into a culture?

There was one wonderful aspect of the religious world I grew up in that held my fascination—and that was its stories. I loved the pictures; the mythologies; and the ideas of rescue, of winning wars, of magical potions, of how your mother could be saved by some god who came down and carried her away from harm. It was a bit of folklore here, a bit of drama there, a bit of religion, a bit of historical fact, all mixed together.

I used to go with my friends and their families to watch the religious plays at the festivals, and I became quite fond of them. To me, it wasn’t so much religious as that it was part of a family’s annual routine. Each year, when the Hindu god Ram’s birthday came around, I went with my friends to see the plays that reenacted stories about Ram. I loved these dramas, because my little brother Ramesh was named after Ram.

My siblings and I got our first taste of Western religion when two Jehovah’s Witnesses came knocking on our door one day. A Mr. and Mrs. Smith appeared, telling my father they wanted to teach us children to read and to know the Bible. They assured our dad how very important this was.

So the Smiths came to our home once a week, and for the next year and a half they sat in our living room and taught us for an hour or two at a time. I remember reading the Witnesses’ book *Let God Be True* and the magazines *The Watchtower* and *Awake*. Most impressive, though, were the assemblies where they gathered groups and showed movies. One of these movies featured tens of thousands of people attending a Jehovah’s Witnesses rally at Yankee Stadium in New York City. When my siblings and I saw that spectacle, we couldn’t help being awed by it.

Yet, in retrospect, it shows how easily the human mind and heart can be manipulated. Ours was a small family with very little in comparison to most families in the West. And seeing that movie, with all those highly successful-looking people gathered in a magnificent stadium, my siblings’ hearts must have raced as my heart did. I’m sure they also
From East to West
(clockwise from top left)
Ravi on his favorite means of transportation
Ravi (third from left) with Fred David (far left) and the Youth for Christ team in India in the mid-1960s
The Zacharias family

Back here in my homeland, I see the threads. My family, my home city, my spartan beginnings, a life having come out of nothing—I’m reminded again that the threads are all being pulled together.
thought, “This has to be true.” It made us want to be part of such a great event, in a great city like New York.

So we continued to study with the Smiths until the day Mr. Smith came to the chapter on heaven in the book of Revelation. He stopped there and told us that, according to Jehovah’s Witnesses’ teaching, only 144,000 people were going to make it to paradise.

That hit me like a ton of bricks. Here my siblings and I had thought we were becoming very spiritual. These Western missionaries had sat with us each week, giving us homework and encouraging our studies. But now I scratched my head over this news. I asked Mr. Smith, “Only 144,000?”

“That’s right,” he said.

“Sir, how many people are there in your organization?”

“Oh, we have many.”

“Do you have more than 144,000?”

“Oh yes.”

“So even all of your people aren’t going to make it to heaven?”

I thought of the Smiths’ constant praying, of all their efforts to reach more and more people—and yet even they had no way of knowing where they were going after death. So they certainly couldn’t assure me of where I might be going.

“Mr. Smith, before you came, I didn’t know where I was going after I died,” I said. “But now, after all this study, I still don’t know where I’m going after I die.”

They probably sensed they were up against something difficult at that point. Or perhaps my outright shock over this curious point of doctrine registered with them more deeply than normal. But not long afterward, the Smiths were succeeded by another couple, and when they sensed they were getting nowhere, they stopped coming to our house. Who knows, in another six or eight months, maybe we would have been convinced by them. But at that stage, I told myself, “I don’t much care for this. I’m done with Christianity.”

I didn’t know that it wasn’t Christianity I was rejecting, but I really had no idea how to distinguish one sect from another. At best, each of us was only thinking pragmatically, “What is it that’s going to work for me?”

Like most of India, my mother was very spiritual and at the same time very superstitious. In our home hung a picture of Saint Philomena, a Catholic saint, because of a commitment my mom had made after my sister Shyamala (Sham to us) was diagnosed with polio at five days old. The doctor gave Sham no hope of surviving, and in desperation my mother decided to send a gift to the Saint Philomena shrine in South India. She pledged that if my sister would get through this, my mother would give money to the shrine faithfully.

Sham survived. In her younger years she wore a crude knee brace from just above the knee to her ankle and walked with a bit of a hop. (Today, after a surgery, she has only a slight limp that is virtually undetectable.) But what was most important to my mother was that her daughter’s life was spared. That is why, almost until the day Mom died, she faithfully sent money to the Saint Philomena shrine. It is also why my sister Sham was given the middle name Philomena.

After that ordeal, our family was brought to the brink again years later over our baby brother Ramesh. I especially was very close to him, so it struck me hard when little Ramesh, only six or seven years old, became ill with double pneumonia and typhoid. Very little could be done in those days for someone in his condition, and the doctors offered us no hope.

I remember the evening my parents decided to take us to the hospital to visit
our brother in what we sensed might be our last time to see him. I was deeply shaken when I witnessed what had happened to Ramesh. He was shriveled down to a bag of bones. I barely recognized him; he looked like a picture of a starved child. After seeing him, we all expected that this would be the night he would die.

My mother stayed at the hospital with my brother while my dad took us home. We gathered for prayer in my parents' bedroom around a picture of Jesus that hung on the wall beside the picture of Saint Philomena. I recall that night clearly, on our knees in that room, my father's voice cracking as he prayed. I couldn't believe we were losing him. My little brother was really dying.

One of the people my dad had called to come and pray with us was a certain Pentecostal minister. Mr. Dennis had come to our house occasionally on his motorbike to talk with my dad and pray with him. We used to make a lot of fun of Mr. Dennis and to joke behind his back because he always sang when he prayed. He simply broke out into song, and it sounded so odd to us. We were unkind because we had no clue what this was all about, and our Hindu servants in the house reprimanded us for making fun.

But now, with my brother dying, I prayed as I never had, alongside Mr. Dennis and the others in the room that night. In a voice of deep reverence, this man asked God for a touch of healing, for a miracle. There was nothing funny now. I was moved to tears as he called on the Lord to have mercy on my brother.

Meanwhile, the doctor had come to my mother soon after we left the hospital. He uttered to her the worst news of her life. “Sometime between midnight and 5:00 a.m.,” he said, “it will be over.”

My mother had not slept for several days. She had sat by Ramesh’s side the entire time. Now, as she faced the torturous hours ahead, she was overcome with exhaustion. She simply couldn't keep her eyes open. As the night wore on, she fell sound asleep at my brother's bedside.

Hours later, my mother suddenly shocked herself awake. When she realized what had happened, she feared the worst. The hour had long passed at which Ramesh was to have gone. Yet when she looked at my brother, she saw that he was still breathing. In fact, his chest now rose and fell with a stronger rhythm than before. Something had happened during the night.

When morning came, my mom sent a message to us that Ramesh was looking stronger and better. None of us were sure what this meant. But the same message came to us on the second day, then the third day, then the fourth. Our brother had made the turn, and his strength was restored.

In our family's collective memory, this was one of our most defining moments. I don't know to what degree Mr. Dennis’s prayer consciously played a role in this monumental episode of our history. But to me, there was something of God in it.

I don't recall ever seeing Mr. Dennis again, though I have often thought of him. He was a missionary living on a meager salary, a living saint. Somebody must have supported him. Why did he pick our family to visit? Was this not God in the shadows, keeping watch over His own? I did not think of it then, but I see it now. I made an association with the life of prayer and calling in that man, and with the miracle we all had witnessed—my brother’s life had been spared.

Being back here in my mother’s brother’s home brings me closer, I sense, to the reality of a sovereign God. I can never forget that sovereignty behind my life, and it brings to mind a great Indian custom.
If you travel to the north of India, you will see the most magnificent saris ever made, and Varanasi is where the wedding saris are handwoven. The gold, the silver, the reds, the blues—all the marvelous colors threaded together are spectacular. These saris are usually made by just two people—a father who sits on a platform and a son who sits two steps down from him. The father has all the spools of silk threads around him. As he begins to pull the threads together, he nods, and the son responds by moving the shuttle from one side to the other. Then the process begins again, with the dad nodding and the son responding. Everything is done with a simple nod from the father. It's a long, tedious process to watch. But if you come back in two or three weeks, you'll see a magnificent pattern emerging.

This is an image I always remind myself of: we may be moving the shuttle, but the design is in the mind of the Father. The son has no idea what pattern is emerging. He just responds to the father’s nod.

Back here in my homeland, I see the threads. My family, my home city, my spartan beginnings, a life having come out of nothing—I’m reminded again that the threads are all being pulled together.

This is the only explanation for the great irony in my being here now. You see, of all five siblings in my family, I had the unhappiest childhood. Yet I am the one who is most drawn to come back.

It’s unexplainable. All of my siblings are natural leaders, and all live in Toronto today. Each had the beginnings of his or her success and happiness sown here, in India. Ajit, the oldest, was an engineer with IBM in the 1970s who later went on to his own commercial success as an entrepreneur. You would think he’d want to come back to the place where his mind was shaped, where all his dreams and hopes and promises were formed. You would think the same of my younger brother, Ramesh, now a successful surgeon, and my two sisters, Sham and Prem. I have no doubt they have this desire, but not one shares the deep, soul-wrenching, unshakable tug that I feel. Ramesh does tell me, “I want to go back sometime. But I want to do it with you, Ravi.”

I’m the one who keeps coming back—and who wants to keep coming back. I have maintained the language and the contacts, mainly by walking these streets. When I return and see the buildings and the beauty and the people, I reminisce, “This is where my life was shaped. This is where my calling began. And this is where I very nearly ended it all, out of my own despair.”

The sound of a voice crying out to God, a voice that once spelled terror in my heart, is now the very cry to which I respond with a sense of privilege all over the world. Still, to me, coming back is a dip into an ocean too deep for me to fully fathom. The full story only the tapestry can explain.

One escape I had other than sports was the movies. I enjoyed the Westerns, where the bad guy was caught because the good guy had tracked him down. I liked some of the old classics, such as South Pacific, and I thought the World War II movies were great—films such as The Guns of Navarone. I was never quite a fan of Hitchcock; I liked a strong story line more than a film that tried to scare you. And I really liked historical movies. For me, good entertainment fell back on history.

That’s why my favorites were Indian movies. I loved the romance stories, which were portrayed with such innocence. There was never any kissing on-screen, just a chase around a tree to preserve Indian modesty. That was funny to us,
but it was intended to be very romantic. When an Indian comedian was asked to give the difference between love on the Western screen and love on the Indian screen, he answered in one word: “Trees.”

Mostly, I loved every movie that applauded the human spirit, which is at the core of most Indian movies. The very best of them was Mother India, which I saw in the 1960s. The story focuses on a family from a small village that was struggling to make it in their world wracked by tragedy, deprivation, and conflict. It is reflective of the larger picture of India’s struggle for survival as a people. It is truly a masterpiece, and I do not believe it has been surpassed, even forty years later. Its story of the indomitable human spirit had such great appeal to me, and I saw it again and again. Mother India starred an actress named Nargis, who became famous after
that role, and her son in the film was played by the actor Sunil Dutt, who also became a famous matinee figure in India. The movie portrayed a significant age difference between the pair, but in real life they later married. I was in my young teens when the movie was released.

Another one of our favorite escapes was to a centuries-old place called the “Old Fort.” It had been an actual fort built by the Persians in the 1500s, and it was only a short bicycle ride from our neighborhood. It provided a great place to wander around, scale walls, and spy out from the minarets at the top. It was also a great place to find some delicious food on Saturdays, when vendors and hawkers set up their food stalls along the inner wall.

Even as I nibbled on snacks of bread, potatoes, and chickpeas, history again made all the difference for me. I loved knowing that the Old Fort had been built by the Persians after they attacked India. The Mughals also invaded and established India as a major center for themselves. I actually had to study all that in history class. But I associated it with the great food we got to eat, because it was during the Mughal period that Indian food became essentially what it is today. The Mughals used almonds, cashews, and crèmes to marinate their foods, while India supplied the spices. Combined, it became known as Mughlai food.

I also used to love riding my bike up a steep hill into the fort and then come tearing down at a furious pace. This was actually quite foolish, because most of the time my bike didn’t have brakes that worked and it put both me and the motorized rickshaws and masses of people cluttering the road at risk. That was youth in the name of bravado—in reality, being foolish.

There is a memory, though, from that steep slope that I remember only too well. One Saturday, I was on my way into the Old Fort when an older man came riding his bike out through the front gate at a good speed. As he came down the slope, his bike hit a stone, flipped over, and threw him to the pavement, cracking his head severely. I quickly dismounted because, in an instant, the man was lying, totally unconscious, in a widening pool of blood.

I stood frozen, not knowing what to do, while people casually passed him by. Some stared and tittered with embarrassment, while others turned around as they walked by. But nobody stopped to help. No one called for the police or for medical help—not one did anything. Not knowing what to do, I slowly remounted my bike and moved on. Several minutes later, I came back, and the man was still lying there.

By this time, the blood had congealed, and those in the area were just muttering, “He’s dead. They’ll come and pick him up.” I was horrified. I had thought that an adult, someone who could rise to the task of confronting this tragedy, would have stopped to help. But they hadn’t. It was an early taste of life in the raw for me. I remember the thought registering with me that life was cheap.

Finally, in a daze I rode home and frantically told the servants in the house what had happened. They told me that sooner or later the police would be there, not to worry. Years later, when I read the story of the Good Samaritan for the first time, I remembered that old man and his horrendous accident, and I thought how real such imagery from the mind of the Lord was—people walking by and leaving a dying man even more destitute.
One of the memories from those days well sums up what was going on inside me and who I was really leaning on. I had a daily practice that I wouldn’t have been able to explain if anyone had asked me. But my mom often commented, even in my young adult years, that she remembered this too.

There was a bus stop at one of the main intersections near our home. As I visit that spot today, I see it is such a brief walk from our home, really just a couple of blocks away. But back then, it seemed like such a long way off.

My mother used to teach at a school a short bus ride away, to help earn income for our family. She used to come home every day at about 3:45 in the afternoon. For some reason, out of all five kids, I was the one who would always wait outside the front of our home until I saw her get off the bus. I wouldn’t let myself go into the backyard to play or head off to meet my friends at the park until I was completely certain that Mom was coming home. She arrived almost spot-on-the-button every day at 3:45, so I knew I was safe in predicting when I would see the bus rolling around. I could see it coming in the distance. And that’s when I told myself, “It’s OK. I’ll be able to go now.”

She was a very small woman and very slightly built, barely five feet tall, so she was easy for me to recognize from that distance. And only when I saw her step down from the bus, clutch her purse close to her, and start walking toward home did I feel everything was OK. It is so ineradicably etched in my memory that I can relive that scene vividly. She later told me she always wondered why I was the one who would wait there. But she must have known.

I did that until I was fourteen or fifteen. Although the reasons may be apparent now, I still don’t think I could explain exactly why I did it. At the time, I might have felt I wanted to make sure she was OK. I suppose I was afraid of losing her, as she was my only hope in a young life stalked by failure and haunted by shame.

My mother once brought an astrologer to our house to read our palms and tell us our future. Actually, he was a sari seller who came once every few months, with a big trunk saddled on the back of his bicycle. He would customarily spread out a sheet on the floor, unload the trunk, and display his beautiful saris for sale.

This man also claimed to be a palmist. He put on his old-fashioned, thick glasses, which dropped down halfway over a nose that was constantly sniffling, and in turn held our palms in his hand with total concentration. The “hmm’s” and “oh’s” and “ah’s” that issued from him kept each of us riveted on what he was doing as we awaited his final pronouncement. One after the other, we took our turn, and the futures he read for each of the others were all positive. But then he came to me, and the first note of uncertainty was sounded as he kept shaking his head with bad news about to spill out. “Looking at your future, Ravi Baba (Ravi, little boy), you will not travel far or very much in your life,” he declared. “That’s what the lines on your hand tell me. There is no future for you abroad.”

To say that I was deeply disappointed is putting it mildly. The one goal everybody had at that time in India’s fledgling economy since Independence was to go abroad. Of course, I had no reason to disbelieve this man, or for that matter to believe him. But it did plant another seed of uncertainty, however small....

Ravi Zacharias is Founder and President of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries.
Tucked away among the many books on my dusty shelf is the first Bible that I really owned and truly read—my New International Version. This Bible not only tells the story of God and the world but also my story; for, like me, it is smudged, smeared, speckled, soiled, stained, scratched, splodged, and scarred. (And that is just the letter “s”!)

This inexpensive Bible was actually given to me by my parents before I became a Christian. For a long time, it just sat there, dead to me and I to it. It was only after an experience in November 1992 that I picked it up and began to read. And then—it was different! Not unlike a piece of rock that suddenly comes to life, or a Labrador Retriever that suddenly begins to appreciate Bach and Beethoven, the miracle of Christ suddenly made me alive to the truth, beauty, and goodness of the words therein. I was now alive to him as he was to me. I could not put the Bible down, reading it, marking it, clasping it, preaching it, crying with it, and singing of it.

Reflecting on what this old Bible has done for me, three words come to mind: informing, indwelling, and immersing. As I read and reread this Bible for the first years of my Christian life, I began to realize that its “new words” spoke of a “new world” through a new Person who was suddenly real to me. This One was actually informing me of another world and another reality—
world and a reality I never knew existed. This new world—of God and Satan, angels and demons, heaven and hell, sin and salvation, wisdom and folly, and oh so much more—was a world that I never knew was there, let alone believed.

But like a new piece of information in a crime mystery novel that suddenly changes the narrative, plot, and meaning of the whole novel, the Bible’s new reality supplied me information that enabled me to “read” the story and “see” the meaning, both of my life and the world, in a completely new and different way. This Person I encountered in the pages supplied me vital information about the most basic questions of life: “Who am I?” “Where am I?” “What is wrong with me and the world?” “What is the solution?” “What is the meaning of life?” “Where is the world heading?”

But this book went beyond informing me. Through it, God also invited me to indwell its story and its world. It slowly, yet no less startlingly, dawned on me that I was part of the biblical story through Christ. I was called to play my small part in the unfolding drama that spanned from the creation story of Genesis to the new creation of Revelation. I began to realize that my task as a Christian was not just about being informed by the Bible and then correlating that information with contemporary situations. It was not simply a matter of learning precepts, principles, and paradigms from the Bible and then applying them in present-day life. It was, rather, a summons to join the unravelling story of the world as told by the God of the Bible, learning Christ’s internal logic, finding my place and playing my part in his story, as he moves me towards the coherent, hopeful end promised by God.

Like a nameless, faceless foot soldier in an epic war movie, I found myself among the rank-and-file of the biblical story. God’s story, I realized, was our story, my story. I may well be unknown by humankind, but I am part of the plot and plan, counted by angels, known unto God.

This indwelling of the biblical story was neither easy nor early. It came through a slow, continual and intentional immersing of myself in the Bible. I had to immerse myself in the Bible and the Bible had to be immersed in me—reading and studying God’s vision chronologically and thematically; binding myself to reading and study plans; praying God’s prayers; crying God’s tears; singing God’s songs; obeying God’s summons; and alas, repeating the story’s sins, and, yes, responding to its Savior and relying on his Spirit.

Experienced musicians immerse themselves in the given musical score, and seasoned actors immerse themselves in the playwright’s script. In a similar manner, I realized that I am also required to commit myself to a lifelong journey of immersing myself in the biblical script. It is only by “soaking” myself in the Bible that I become intimately familiar with God’s voice and gain a deep, intuitive sense of the movement of Christ’s story. I am not just to underline the Bible; it has to underline me. Its script has to underwrite me and its score has to underscore me. My bloodline has to be “Bibline.”

Through it all, it has been a scarring journey and wounding experience. Needless to say, I often falter and bungle. But I surprise myself that I am, somehow, still standing. Standing, because I have been held together by the loving and healing hands of the Love that will not let me go—not unlike the sticking plaster that adorns the spine of my old New International Version, just far more personal.

Ketbozer (Aniu) Kevichusa is a member of the speaking team at Ravi Zacharias International Ministries in India.
Novelist and philosopher C. S. Lewis once said something quite fascinating. He said that most people, if they have learnt to really look deep into their own hearts, realize that they want, they desire, they long for something that cannot be had in this world. Faced with the fact that the world can’t provide it — no matter how much freedom, how many possessions, how much sex — you’re faced with disappointment.

And when life disappoints, you can do one of four things: you can blame the things that disappoint and try to find better ones; you can blame yourself and beat yourself up; you can blame the world and become cynical; or, says Lewis, you can realize that only if your orientate the focus and energy of your life toward hope and toward God, will you ever be truly satisfied. He wrote:

“If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”

What we need, I would suggest, is something that can speak to all of this — somehow. To help us navigate what it means to be human, what it means to truly want or desire love or justice, or meaning or purpose. Something that could address these themes now, something that would be relevant, helpful, and revelatory.

It’s fascinating that these are all issues that the Bible addresses. Indeed, the Bible addresses them more deeply, more profoundly, I would argue, than anything else that I know. Isn’t that an astonishing claim for something as old as the Bible? Well, maybe. But maybe it’s also the case that human beings

No Better Story

By Andy Bannister

The Bible tells us that human beings have incredible value and dignity. Only the Christian worldview pays you that compliment, telling you that God created you in his image.
haven’t fundamentally changed all that much in several thousand years. Culture may change; we may be better at distracting ourselves in new and clever ways, but the fundamental questions remain the same, through time and across culture. What does it mean to be human? Who am I?

So what does the Bible have to tell us? Five things. First, the Bible tells us that human beings were designed primarily for relationships. Yes, sex is good. But relationships are primary. We’re built, says the Bible, for a relationship with God and a relationship with one another. That’s what life is primarily about.

Second, the Bible tells us that human beings have incredible value and dignity. The Bible puts it this way: “So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God, he created them, male and female” (Genesis 1:27). Only the Christian worldview pays you that compliment, telling you that God created you in his image.

Third, the Bible tells us that the dignity God bestowed on us extends to choice. There are real, meaningful choices to be made, and the choices we make have consequences. One consequence is that we live in a moral universe. Nietzsche was wrong. There is good, there is evil, and each of us is affected by and caught up in both.

Fourth, the Bible tells us that there is such a thing as love, and that love is ultimately defined by the character of the God who created us, a God who goes to fantastically great lengths to reach out to us.

And fifth, the Bible tells us that there is a big story. And that big story is ultimately a love story. A story of how the creator God reaches toward each one of us, with our hang-ups and our fears, our desires and our longings, reaching as far as death on the cross that we can be reconciled with Him.

The idea of a “big story” is a curious one for postmodern ears. Most of us have been raised and taught to think there are no big stories any more. My beliefs are my own, my story is my own, my journey my own. But maybe, just maybe, we’ve been sold short.

In the movie The Matrix, which is a bit old now but nevertheless is one of the best portrayals of our postmodern world that I know, there’s a fascinating scene. The character Cypher, who is given the choice to escape the computer-generated fictional reality of the Matrix, decides instead to choose a life of pleasure and illusion over reality. He even defends his choice. “You know, I know this steak doesn’t exist. I know that when I put it into my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious…. You know what I realize?” He takes a bite of steak. “Ignorance is bliss.”

Perhaps some of us need to wake up from our illusions of pleasure, possessions, friends, sex, drugs—whatever our distraction or fantasy—and realize that reality is an awful lot bigger than that.

Is the Bible repressive? It certainly might appear that way to postmodern eyes, but perhaps our eyes are a bit jaded. Is the Bible outdated? No. If anything, it’s never been more relevant. As Bono of U2 put it: “The goal is soul.” And if that’s true, we can have no better guiding story than the Bible. A story that, if we follow it, can lead us home to the God who created us, loves us, and is able to meet all of our needs—for meaning, for purpose, and for identity.

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I have shared that my mother once brought an astrologer to our house to read our palms and tell us our future. Examining my hands, the soothsayer confidently pronounced that I would not travel far or much in my life. “That’s what the lines on your hand tell me. There is no future for you abroad.”

I was deeply disappointed to hear this, but oh, how mistaken he was! After 45 years of spanning the globe and speaking in countless countries, I am persuaded that God alone, the Grand Weaver, knows our future and knits our lives. He has brought lasting change not only in my own life but in my family as well. Sometimes this has happened seemingly instantaneously; hearing Jesus’s words in John 14:19, “Because I live, you also will live,” literally brought me from the brink of death in a hospital room to new life. Other times, such as in the remarkable conversion of my father years later, many seeds were planted prior, but the change was no less profound.

I recall, too, that I was never much of a reader growing up, preferring to watch movies or discuss issues with people. I very rarely picked up a book out of interest. But then one evening in my late teens, and a few months since coming to Christ on a bed of suicide, I walked out the back door of our house and saw something lying on top of the garbage heap in the alley. As I looked closer, I saw it was a book with no cover—an old, tattered copy of a volume I realized my dad must have thrown out.

Curious, I picked it up and read the title page: The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary by a man named W. H. Griffith Thomas. I had no idea who this author was, but my hunger was so fierce that I immediately opened it and began to read. Over the next few days, I devoured that book—of all things, a Bible com-
mentary! It became a treasure, and I still have the tattered copy of that commentary in my possession.

Just like that, I was plunged into a world I’d never known—the world of reading. One of the first volumes I was presented with was *The Cross and the Switchblade*, an amazing story of the conversion of Nicky Cruz the gang leader and of the work God was doing in the lives of such young people through the ministry of David Wilkerson. I loved the book so much that I began seeking out biographies. I lapped up the stories of William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army; David Brainerd, the missionary to American Indians; and, most intriguing of all to me, C. T. Studd, the English cricketer who gave up everything to become a missionary. Studd had been the captain of Cambridge’s cricket team, had turned down an opportunity to play for his country, and even refused his family inheritance—all to help take the gospel into China and India.

For the first time, I felt my mind being stretched—and I loved it. I realized that thinking could be fun, and with that simple realization I was sent headlong into the lifelong discipline of reading.

I also cannot say enough about the significance of the role that Youth for Christ (YFC) played in those early days of my conversion. On the day that I tried to take my life, it was these friends who prayed for me. A man named Fred David—sent, I would discover only recently, by YFC Asia director John Teibe, another gift from God—brought a Bible to my hospital room (and, by proxy, the words that breathed eternal life into my broken body). Both before and after my suicide attempt, they showed me that I meant something and that God loved me as an individual. It was my relationships at YFC that gave me hope of coming back to a caring group. And it was they who, as time passed, gave me opportunities for leadership.

The rapid changes taking place in me daily were beyond my power to describe. Yet, from everything I had learned in my life with Christ, I knew that He had not just changed what I did but what I wanted to do. One day, I had been a creature of despair, irresponsibility, and failure. Then I became a creature of hope, diligent and accomplished in the things to which I set my hand.

As I read about these inspiring lives, the old adage became true for me: “Fire begets fire.” The standards these Christians set by their examples raised the bar for me. Though I later learned, as I grew in my faith, that these saintly lives weren’t as perfect as their biographers made them out to be, the basic truths were undoubtedly in place, and their examples stoked my consciousness as to what the Christian life could be.

So there it all was, the unlikely strands that came together, weaving the small patch of fabric that was my conversion: a soft-spoken man who drew me to the message of truth, a group waiting to share the love of Christ with me in my time of greatest need, a Bible brought to my mother for me, and a passage of Scripture that sprouted in the moisture of God’s sovereign grace. It all came together for me in the hospital room,
but Youth for Christ is where those seeds were sown. I had now found a new home in my faith—and I could say I was finally home.

Along with everyone else, I wondered how such a turnaround could have taken place, and so swiftly. The key was that now I looked at life through a window of meaning. And that was the one thing I had been desperately longing for: meaning. Now everything in my life was packed with it: my studies had meaning, my family had meaning, my friendships had meaning, my sports had meaning.

All the things I had thought were the causes of my despair—my failing studies, my senseless wandering, my hopelessness—had actually been the results of my despair. The Austrian concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl wrote, “Without meaning, nothing else matters. With meaning, everything else falls into place.” If you can’t see the why, you cannot live for the what. And as soon as I was able to answer the “why,” even my failures began to make sense.

The rapid changes taking place in me daily were beyond my power to describe. Yet, from everything I had learned in my life with Christ, I knew that He had not just changed what I did but what I wanted to do. One day, I had been a creature of despair, irresponsible, and failure. Then I became a creature of hope, diligent and accomplished in the things to which I set my hand. To me, the reversal was staggering. Nobody fully understood the dramatic transformation on the inside. This was the work of God.

It was also a huge paradigm shift for me to suddenly see life—my own and others’—through the eyes of God. For years, I had looked at life the way a kid might work through a puzzling, new toy, taking it apart but not knowing how to put it back together again. He wonders, “What makes this thing tick?” So he takes a screwdriver and tries to unpack it, but with each piece he removes, it makes less sense.

Only Jesus could legitimately explain the multifarious strands of human personality locked within me. He could explain my emotional life, my actions, and my reactions. He could explain why I longed for human touch, and why it was actually the touch of soul that I was ultimately after. Without Christ, I still would have the gnawing undercurrent that had run through everything in my life and that had led me to the tragic choice that very nearly brought me to an end.

Jesus wasn’t just the best option to me; He was the only option. He provided the skin of reason to the flesh and bones of reality. His answers to life’s questions were both unique and true. No one else answered the deepest questions of the soul the way He did. And because Christianity was true, it was emotionally experienced. There was no greater example of this than my own life.

The story of my early days was that only God’s grace could have brought about this new life for me. This was a new DNA, a new birth. There simply was no other explanation. The songwriter George Wade Robinson said it well:

Heav’n above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green!
Something lives in every hue
Christless eyes have never seen;
Birds with gladder songs o’erflow,
Flow’rs with deeper beauties shine,
Since I know, as now I know,
I am His, and He is mine.

Warm Regards,

Ravi
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"It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them." — Psalm 44:3