



Christian Today Digest

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Christian Today Website Articles

Sometimes Christian Today also includes an article of interest, which is not necessarily a good-news item but rather one that has been included for readers to pray about.

Unless otherwise stated, articles in this magazine are transcriptions of material selected by the editor at Christian Today and were first published recently on www.christiantoday.com.

Stand firm and meet your threshold moment: What Moses advice means today

Dr Irene Lancaster

**The seventh and final Haftorah of
Consolation before Rosh Hashana**

(Jewish New Year) is Nitzavim (aligned to the Torah reading, Deuteronomy 29: 9–17, 30).

Moses is now 120 years old. He knows he is approaching death and that he will not be entering the Promised Land. He has done all the donkey work, got the Children of Israel into shape, encouraged and cajoled them on their journey of Exodus from Egypt to this pivotal moment – and then, at the last hurdle when he hands the reins of leadership to Joshua, what does he say?

‘Today you are standing firm, all of you, before the Lord your G-d.’

Why ‘all of you’? Isn’t the phrase redundant? But what Moses is telling the Children of Israel is that this is a threshold moment for the entire world. This moment is not just for their own ramshackle body of refugees,

exhausted from heat, drought, war, pestilence and betrayal.

Threshold moments are key in life per se and as long as you ‘all stand firm’, you should be able to see this through.

This Haftorah (Isaiah 61:10 – 63:9) is divided into three sections, depicting the three activities of prayer, TSEDAKA (justice and mercy) and repentance which characterise the Rosh Hashana period.

The Haftorah starts with the prayer: ‘I will rejoice in the Lord, the Transcendent and merciful Being; my soul will exult in my G-d, who dispenses justice.’

For the Children of Israel, prayer is a matter of rejoicing and exultation, but only when justice and mercy are kept always in mind.

‘For Zion’s sake I will not be silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be still,

until her righteousness shall go forth like a bright light and her salvation shall flame like a torch.'

What is the difference between Zion and Jerusalem? Zion refers to the site of the Holy Temple, seat of the Sanhedrin, dispenser of law courts and justice. Zion is therefore the centre of Jerusalem. The term 'Jerusalem' here refers to the entire city whose salvation brings out the merciful aspect of G-d.

When justice and mercy are equally dispensed in this realm, then the Jewish people herself will no longer be called 'Forsaken' and the Land no longer 'Desolate'. The Jewish people will be renamed Hepzibah ('My desire is in her') and the Land will be called Beulah ('settled').

'Perpetual guardians will guard the walls of the city of the Jerusalem day and night, without cease.'

Who are these guardians? Maybe angels. Maybe the people of Jerusalem themselves. Maybe the entire Jewish people whose renewal keeps Jerusalem going – together with the entire world.

The final section deals with TESHUVAH – repentance – the mainstay of the imminent 10-day Rosh Hashana-Yom Kippur period.

G-d didn't find anyone to help Him in his quest to bring righteousness to the world.

2,000 years ago the Romans brought about the current exile of the Jewish people. But G-d 'looked and there was no helper. I was astonished, but there was no supporter'.

G-d created the world to be a partner with Him in his quest for righteousness, but found that He was on his own. In order to save the world from itself, he

had no choice but to destroy before restoring.

Isn't this what repentance is all about? We have spent the year in ways of which, coming up to Rosh Hashana, we are now ashamed. We have to make things right with our nearest and dearest – our families – our friends – our wider groups. We have to heal the rifts within ourselves.

Only then will it be possible for the whole world to be saved – but we must start with ourselves.

But we are not on our own in all this. For although for the last 2,000 years of Exile we have been (according to the first Selichot service, which took place on Saturday night) 'dispersed, slain, slaughtered and butchered; we remained a mere few in number among the piercing thorns of the nations, our eyes were strained to look for relief,

while oppressors of Thy people . . . prosper continually’, soon the mockery of the nations will cease.

For, as Isaiah concludes, G-d says of the Jewish people: ‘Yet despite all this, they are My people, children who will not be false.’ And because of this: G-d ‘was a Saviour unto them. In all their troubles, He was troubled. He lifted them and bore them all the days of the world.’

The Haftorah therefore ends with the inspiring words that G-d joins Israel in her Exile, so that the Jews knew that they were never truly abandoned.

G-d was watching. If one corner of Israel’s Exile became unbearable (as in our own day), G-d was preparing the way for the next stage in the journey to the Messianic Era of Redemption. G-d always shared in the travails of G-d’s

people, sometimes hidden but always there.

So as the year 5777 in the Jewish calendar comes to an end and the New Year of 5778 starts on Wednesday night – the birthday of the entire world – let us hope that the year now upon us brings us the salvation we all need and a world based, as G-d wishes, on justice tempered with mercy.

And only we, the 7 billion-plus people of the world, working together with G-d, can make that happen.

‘Reaching the unreached’ – and other phrases guaranteed to alienate your community

Martin Saunders

A newly-refurbished church near where I live has just had new signage done, in an effort to engage and draw in passers-by. They’ve got so much about it right: the colours aren’t too garish, the type is clear; they’ve even managed to avoid the use of Comic Sans. The only real problem is the wording of the sign itself, which loudly proclaims the church’s apparent mission statement. The slightly archaic church name is followed by six excruciatingly out-of-touch words which are presumably designed to entice and enthrall, but actually do anything but:

‘reaching the unreached of our community’.

I can imagine that in the church planning meeting that decided this wording, the sign sounded like a great idea. Among a group of church folk, entirely literate in the strangeness of Christian jargon, this was a fine description of what the congregation aims to do. The only problem is that when you view it from outside the church bubble, you realise that you are one of these ‘unreached’, which is not only a weird word but also makes you sound like a child in need. If you’re ‘unreached’, you probably don’t particularly like the idea of being ‘reached’, and certainly not by the sorts of people who announce that intention on a town-centre sign.

It’s fun to laugh at the weirdness of the Christian language register, at least among ourselves. The problem comes

when the worst examples of Christianese slip out into externally-facing use. Weird jargon can actually harm our mission to – yes, reach – people who are uninitiated to church, because it makes us seem out-of-touch, insular, and yes, quite odd. So here are a few examples of the sorts of words and phrases that we can sometimes unintentionally allow to escape the context of the great private joke that is Christian jargon . . . and some possible alternatives that might be more appropriate.

‘Enjoy Fellowship’

Yes, it’s a biblical word, but it’s also now inseparable in our culture from **THE LORD OF THE RINGS**. If you invite people to your church to enjoy some ‘fellowship’, they’ll immediately

imagine they're going to be spending their time hanging out with orcs and elves. Which might well be true in some churches, but it wasn't what you meant.

A better alternative: 'Make new friends'

'Not-yet-Christian'

This phrase appeared as an attempted improvement on 'non-Christian', but if anything it's worse. The idea that you can categorise all people into two groups – those who've seen the truth, and those who've just not got it yet – is unbearably smug. It's also theologically inelegant; the Bible is clear that not everyone will choose to follow Jesus, and this phrase implies that everyone will 'get it' eventually. Unless of course this is stealth universalism, which secretly believes everyone will end up

being saved anyway . . . but given that it's usually the more conservative churches which use it, I imagine that's not it.

A better alternative: 'People'

'The Lost'

Like 'unreached', 'lost' is the sort of label that no-one really wants to have applied to themselves. People might naturally come to the conclusion, particularly after discovering the love of Jesus, that they were previously a bit lost, but it's not something you'd welcome being said about you. Besides, 'The Lost' sounds like an 80s soft-rock band where the singer has an unruly blonde mullet. They almost certainly exist. They are almost certainly a Christian band.

A better alternative: ‘People’

‘Seeker-friendly’

Again, this is one of those words which should never appear on externally-facing publicity. Yet I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve seen an evangelistic service or event advertised as being for ‘seekers’, as if there’s a group of people out there scouring local event listings for opportunities to satisfy their seeker-based cravings. What we’re really getting at when we use this phrase is the idea that we’ve stripped out all the weirder churchy parts of our event, in order to make it relevant to normal people. And then we’ve brilliantly fallen at the final hurdle by labelling it ‘seeker-friendly’. Alanis Morissette would be delighted.

A better alternative: ‘Normal’

It might seem like I’m poking fun, but there’s a serious point here. We work so hard to make our churches welcoming, inviting places, and then so often we fail to engage people because we get our marketing wrong. If we just thought a bit more objectively about how some of our go-to phrases sound to outsiders, then perhaps we’ll stop alienating them with weird unnecessary jargon. Because when you strip away all the bizarre words, churches are very often full of kind, normal people (yes, and a few orcs), with whom the lost, unreached, not-yet-Christian seekers of our communities would surely enjoy fellowship. Or rather, among whom normal people would probably find they make new friends.

Remembering my friend Nabeel Qureshi

David Bennett

There are few words to describe how grateful I am for my beloved friend, Nabeel Qureshi. The news of his passing came to me as I was surrounded by Christian theology students praying in St Andrews. In that moment of prayer I knew the blessed assurance of the fact that Nabeel has now taken the eternal rest from his saintly ordeal in living through stage four stomach cancer. My prayers and mourning continue for his precious daughter, Ayah, and his godly wife, Michelle.

Nabeel to me personally was a friend like no other. The proverbial adage ‘There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother’ couldn’t be truer of our bond. The intensity of his whole life

experience having converted from a family of the most devoted Muslim faith, 'seeking Allah', to his radical conversion to Christianity, 'finding Jesus', meant that we formed a friendship of a kind I have never known elsewhere. Our common experience of leaving one world entirely carried with it an unspeakable weight. For him it was the house of Islam, and for me, it was the gay world. There was a common fault-line that we both crossed in culture, and that crossing carried a huge price personally.

We would often discuss the implications and the profound difficulties that others often didn't understand as they hadn't walked a walk of such a similar kind. The loss of friends, the spurning and scorning, the mockery, and the effect on some on our closest loved ones who simply did not understand was a point of commonality and identification. Like

Jesus with the help of Simon of Cyrene, the burden of our crosses often felt like too much but Nabeel was unreservedly a friend strengthened me as I carried my own cross.

This was an ineffable synergy I feel connects us beyond his death. His legacy lives on. The zeal, passion and dissatisfaction with the evangelistic status quo, and our desire to see a reviving change to the witness of the Church and of Christians was deep in both of our DNA as people because of how we had come to know the blessed and saving grace of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ from a place of the very opposite. We both wanted to reach impossible people like we both were. We both wanted to see the Church becoming a place we could belong truly.

When I moved to Oxford to start my studies, Nabeel shared his wisdom, love, joy and hospitality with me so naturally.

We laughed and celebrated together in the victories, and met to pray and seek the Lord in the difficulties. One night as we sat enjoying one of our many meals, Nabeel looked at me and said ‘David, it’s time for you to share your story.’ I will never forget these words of encouragement. ‘Writing your book will minister to more people than you know,’ he said as passed the baton on to me from his bestselling book, **SEEKING ALLAH, FINDING JESUS. I will never forget the joyful smile and earnest quest for truth that characterised Nabeel Qureshi, and this moment of commissioning in writing my book, **A WAR OF LOVES**, to be released next year.**

Nabeel’s life meant that we can never let prejudices or fear of difference hinder and blind our love and understanding of the neighbour who can be so different to us, nor can we cover over the differences in order to make it

‘easier’. There has never been a time where such a message is of such profound importance. To Christians, Nabeel’s life resounds as a message from our Lord: let us press on in loving, dialoguing, befriending, being challenged by and sharing the gospel of God’s love with our Muslim neighbours. To them, Nabeel’s life is the invitation to start the conversation to consider who Jesus Christ really was.

That is the mission and message that marked Nabeel’s life. Let us honour it in all of our lives, and as the blessed legacy of his life lives on in us.

Why Christianity has a solid, historical basis and can stand up to intellectual questioning

J John

Some years after becoming a Christian, Lee Strobel wrote a book, THE CASE FOR CHRIST, based on his long search for the truth about Jesus. The book has become something of an evangelistic classic, sold millions and been widely translated. It has now given rise to a film, released in the US in April and in the UK this month.

It's an interesting film with a double focus. One part of the film deals with the spiritual voyage of Lee Strobel and his wife Leslie towards belief in Christ. She comes to faith first and this is something that Lee struggles with and

which pushes him into a long exploration of the evidence for Jesus, and specifically his resurrection. Interwoven with this account of the couple's far from easy spiritual journey is a portrayal of Strobel's interviews with various experts about the resurrection of Christ. (These are to some extent 'creatively re-imagined' for the film: what were presumably letters and phone conversations are turned into much more cinematic interviews.)

The first thing to say is that this is an enjoyable, well-acted and well-filmed production. The days when you had to make embarrassed apologies for the quality of Christian films seem, thankfully, to be behind us. The **CASE FOR CHRIST** will win no Oscars but it's a good piece of work, particularly when it covers the Strobels' evolving relationship. Probably inevitably, the interviews that, in his quest for the

truth, Lee has with various individuals do intrude somewhat awkwardly into this family drama. One fascinating aspect of the film for those of us old enough to remember the 1980s is the way that it faithfully captures that almost forgotten era with its typewriters, pagers, payphones and sideburns. Ah, nostalgia!

Yet the film is more than a story: as the title suggests this is a film that seeks to make a case. Perhaps the best and most important thing here is the big message that Christianity has a solid historical basis and can stand up to intellectual questioning.

Does the film make an effective ‘case for Christ’? In part, I think so but, for good or ill, the world has changed since Leslie and Lee became believers. So, for example, the idea of criss-crossing a continent interviewing experts in the flesh seems more improbable than ever.

Today's hunt for truth would involve websites, online forums and endless emails. Equally, there are far more resources now on the resurrection than at the time of Lee Strobel's initial search. So the first port of call for any enquirer on the resurrection today would have to be the various articles and talks by N.T. Wright including, for the serious enquirer (it is 800 pages long!), THE RESURRECTION OF THE SON OF GOD.

I noted, too, that the emphasis throughout the film of searching for truth seems to be somewhat out of tune with our 'post-truth' world. Evangelism today must grapple with the many for whom the big question is not 'did Jesus rise from the dead?' but 'so what?'

I was also struck with the fact that, possibly due to cuts in the film's editing, the film focused entirely on the event of the resurrection of Jesus and

told us little about what it means or even who Jesus was. This is important; one of the most convincing things about the resurrection is the way that there is a logic to it. Yes, this is an utterly unique and astonishing event, but then Jesus was an utterly unique and astonishing man; if any man could bounce back from death it would be this man. Equally, too, the big story of the Bible, which culminates with God in Jesus dying for the sins of the world, is lost. This is a film that points to a key aspect of the good news of Jesus but doesn't tell the whole story. But then how could it?

Nevertheless, these are minor points. Is it worth seeing? Well if it comes to a cinema near you I think so. It's certainly worth getting hold of when it comes out on DVD. This could help many on their journey of faith.

Let me close by suggesting that critics will not be kind to this film. After all, we live in a culture in which a persuasive account of someone moving out of faith will, in all probability, be praised as ‘heroic’, ‘truthful’ and ‘authentic’. Yet a not dissimilar film showing someone taking the reverse journey INTO faith will almost certainly be dismissed as ‘propaganda’. When it comes to films about faith, the playing field is far from level.