

Because

...for anyone who's ever asked, 'why?'

August 2016

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The motto for the Rio games is “Live your passion” (Portuguese: *Viva sua paixão*), which, if you think about it is very apt because it is all about passion, about giving their best and I hope, being proud even in honest defeat and humble and gentle in victory.

As I think about these contests to come this August, I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that the thought of victory will be uppermost in the minds of every competitor on the field or in the water.

The idea of victory and of winning against all the odds is a very heady concept; but these are the glories that athletes dream about as they train day in and day out, preparing for the strenuous contests of the Olympic Games this year in Rio. Each contestant will train rigorously for the opportunity to stand with two others on the three tier rostrum to be awarded gold, silver or bronze medals for their performance. This is the place where hearts beat faster, where tears flow, as their national anthem is played, their national flag raised and as the huge crowd cheers

in appreciation of their efforts. As you can imagine their minds are always on this goal – they eat, sleep, and train for that very purpose; to be the best, to become the victor and to carry away the prize!

Perhaps we too can get a feel of just what that is like vicariously, as we are glued to our TV screens during those games later in the year. I'm sure that we will be rooting for our national favourites in all the events, hoping that they all do well for our nation against approximately 200 or so other nations and about 10,000 competitors.

Because victory is the goal, many of the sports shoes worn by some athletes will carry the logo “Nike.” I have always believed that this particular logo is a great name for sports products because, as you probably know, Nike is the Greek word for victory, or the means to victory or the power that confers victory and not surprisingly it's the name of the Greek goddess of victory!

As you know, the goal is always—“Swifter, Higher, Stronger!”

But the rewards in the ancient games were never gold, silver, or bronze medals but a garland or crown of either laurel or pine leaves, cut from the sacred trees at Olympia. Those who gained the victory and were awarded crowns were known as “*the Olympionikes*” and could even erect a statue of themselves to commemorate their success and they would have had victory songs written about their exploits! Just imagine how these competitors felt when a crown of sacred laurel leaves was placed upon their heads – wow! What an honour, what an achievement, actually it was considered the greatest accolade that an athlete could have bestowed upon him or her in that day and age. I guess they thought about all the effort, all the discipline, all the agony and the pain they had gone through during the ten months run up to those games and they would, I imagine, come to the conclusion that all the sweat and tears had all been worth it after all.

I don't know if you are aware of it or not but the Greek word *Nike* is used in the New Testament which has been translated from the original Greek language in which it was written. It is found in the writing of the Apostle John, who writes; “And this is the victory, (*Nike*), that has overcome the world – our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.?” So, our faith in Jesus is our means to victory and that faith is a gift from him also!

As the Apostle Paul reached the end of his life as a servant of Jesus, he wrote this to a young minister called Timothy; “The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also **to all** who have loved His appearing”.

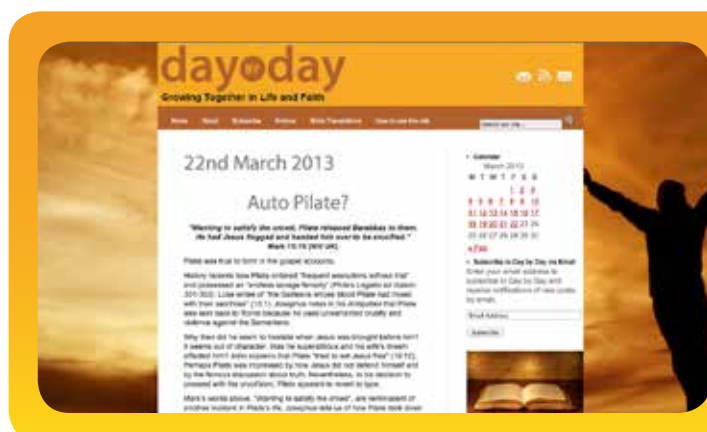
This old Christian warrior uses a special Greek word for “departure”. The word is *Analysis*, and it comes from the verb that means, the loosing of a vessel from its moorings before setting sail, or of soldiers breaking camp for their departure. He is obviously also referring to the Greek Games as a metaphor here as he declares that he has finished the “race” that he has been running all his Christian life; and expects to receive a crown of righteousness; this is not a diadem, a royal crown but the Greek *stephanos*, the laurel wreath given to the winner at the end of a race as we have just seen.



But the most exciting thing for me is that he declares that all those who run this Christian race will also have a *stephanos*, or crown of righteousness bestowed upon them too – they just need to finish the race.

So, in a physical race just one receives the prize but in the spiritual race everyone wins a crown! It's also interesting to note that a physical crown of leaves will wither and fade with time but as for this other crown, Peter tells the Christians in Asia; “When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the never-withering wreath (crown) of glory.”

Now there is a race well worth running, don't you think?



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Why Differing Worlds of Christianity?

by Hilary Buck

The lives that Christians live around the world vary a great deal.

In the West, for the most part, we live in peace and prosperity and ease, yet in other parts of the world Christians face opposition, threats, rejection by their families, destruction of their churches, imprisonment and death. It has been said that more Christians have been martyred in the last century than in any of the previous ones. Are such differing experiences the norm?

It may help if we start by looking historically at God's people. The lives of those who lived before Christ are summed up in six verses in Hebrews 11:33-38. First, we are told of the faithful who achieved great things - armies conquered, kingdoms overthrown, justice administered; weaknesses turned to strengths. They were saved from death and women received their loved ones back from the dead. But in the very next sentence we learn of those who met with imprisonment, chains, beatings, abuse, torture and death. Others were persecuted, destitute, and homeless, forced to be exiles living on the edge of society. Two groups with different experiences.

Thus, long before the time of Christ, we find the differences that we observe today: One world where God protected his people and enabled them to have a powerful influence over the world for good, and another where they were despised by others, reviled, mistreated and killed.

Moving on to New Testament times, after Stephen was killed Luke tells us that a great persecution descended on the fledgling church, and many fled from Jerusalem except, he adds, the apostles. It is possible that the persecution was directed specifically against Hellenistic Jewish Christians, who shared Stephen's views, and who downplayed the importance of the temple. But the apostles, who appeared to be supportive of Jewish institutions, were not forced to flee Jerusalem. There seems to be a division - the apostles seemed to be still safe in Jerusalem while others were fleeing for their lives¹.

Later on in the church's life, if we look at some of the letters sent out to the churches we can see differences in advice. For example, Paul admonished the Romans to bless those who persecuted them and not to repay evil with evil or take revenge (see Matthew 5:43), and he wrote to Timothy to urge the congregations to offer supplications, prayers, and intercessions for those in authority so that the churches could live in peace².

Such admonitions seem to imply that life could be difficult. But was it all like that? Was it wall to wall persecution? Paul also wrote to the Thessalonians urging them to make it their ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind their own business and work with their hands, so that their daily life would win the respect of outsiders and also so that they would not be dependent on anybody. Their lives seem to imply a certain ease and freedom from persecution³.

With just a few references we can see that both in the Old and the New Testament there have been substantial differences in the lives of God's people: we see persecution falling on one group in the church and another left in comparative peace; some who are safe and others whose lives are under threat. Those differences seem to continue in the lives of God's people today.

So what about us in the West? Apart from tirades from a small but influential and aggressive humanist brigade, we experience a certain amount of low level hostility with some outright sneering, but for the most part our lives are not threatened. Churches are closing but not through attack but through indifference. Most people simply don't care. We don't have a natural enemy, a hostile environment that may lead us to martyrdom - we are surrounded by apathy, indifference and lip-curling. But, though we do not have the challenges like our brothers and sisters in other lands experience, we still have a major one. In this western world that has signed up to secular complacency, our challenge is not to be like it and not to be apathetic. Jesus told his disciples to work while it was still day. As workers in his vineyard, we want to be gathering the harvest,

and not snoozing under a vine. So how can we leave our society's ways behind and, even though we have not been called to be martyrs, nevertheless be the reliable accurate and valuable witnesses as Christ commands to be, regardless of our circumstances? How can we be unaffected by the world around us?

There is surely one unifying answer to both groups, to those who suffer persecution and those live in peace and abundance: we all need to turn to Christ who lived in the world of both groups. We know he understood how to deal with suffering, rejection, persecution and death. But we also know that he knew how to celebrate and to enjoy eating and drinking, even taking a break from work.

We know little of Christ's early life, but I think we can assume that it was peaceable, even if the country was under Roman rule, and, although he would not have experienced anywhere near the affluence we have, there was probably bread on the table. He was part of a normal, growing Jewish family, yet from a young age he was "about his Father's business". Nor

was he a stranger to complacency. For example, in his ministry he encountered the smug assurance of the Pharisees who confidently believed that, as Abraham's descendants, they had no needs and they rejected him, eventually, of course, to the point of making sure that he was killed.

The Spirit will mediate to us Jesus' ability to live in both worlds and so therefore we live as those made alive in Christ. As the writer of Hebrews urges us: since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, (from the past) let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith⁴. He knows how to be a faithful witness in our increasingly secular and disinterested world.

Footnotes:

¹ Acts 8:1

² Romans 12:14-21, 1 Timothy 2:1-2

³ 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

⁴ Hebrews 12:1-2

BREXIT

CHOICE OF THE PEOPLE, OR MANIPULATION BY GOD?

BY RICK SHALLENBERGER

I had the privilege to be in Great Britain during the week of the Brexit memorandum. Everywhere I went people were talking about Brexit, sharing their personal views of the pros and the cons of "Remain" or "Leave", the two options on the memorandum ballot. Every paper I saw, and the ones I read had the topic of Brexit on the cover, with several of the daily papers making it very clear which way the editors stood on the issue. The press and media attempted to influence people on both sides of the decision with fear and manipulation. As I read one paper I would find myself being swayed on one side of the argument, but then after reading another paper, I found myself being swayed the opposite direction. There was a lot of frustration about what the decision would really mean. There will be for some time.

By the time I left, the decision had been made to leave. Brexit was a reality the country would face - though the ramifications will likely take months or even years to be fully understood. As I walked around the morning after the vote, it struck me how normal everything was.

At breakfast and at coffee later, all the discussion I heard was about Brexit and what the future held. No one had any absolutes, most speculated about how it would impact the economy, or how it would impact immigration, some of the speculations were on the side of conspiracy thinking. Not much different than what one might hear in a coffee shop in the US. What was interesting to me was how in one respect everything had changed for the future of Britain, and in another way nothing had changed for the average citizen - at least for the time being. A major decision had been voted for and the average citizen had no clue what the ramifications would be."

Because I was in Britain for Christian conferences, I heard a lot of questions, speculations and worries about how Brexit might be fulfilling some type of prophetic plan by God. After all, isn't God involved in our politics and decision making? If one reads through the Old Testament, it seemed God was often manipulating nations to do his will - or at least to work things out so his will was ultimately done. Even in the New Testament,

many read in the gospels and Epistles that God was working things out so the New Testament church could begin. Did God organize things so Brexit would occur? Is he a master chess player moving pieces into position before Christ's return? The answer is yes, and no.

God has already made his will clear by sending his Son to us and for us. For God so loved the world, that he sent his Son (John 3:16-17). He did not come to condemn, but to save. His will is to bring many sons to glory, in hope for none to perish, but for all reach a change of heart, for all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, (Hebrews 2:10, 2 Peter 3:9, 1 Timothy 2:3-4). God's will is for you to know his Son and to live in Christ for eternity. Through Christ, we've been adopted, we have been atoned, we are forgiven (even while still sinning), we are loved.

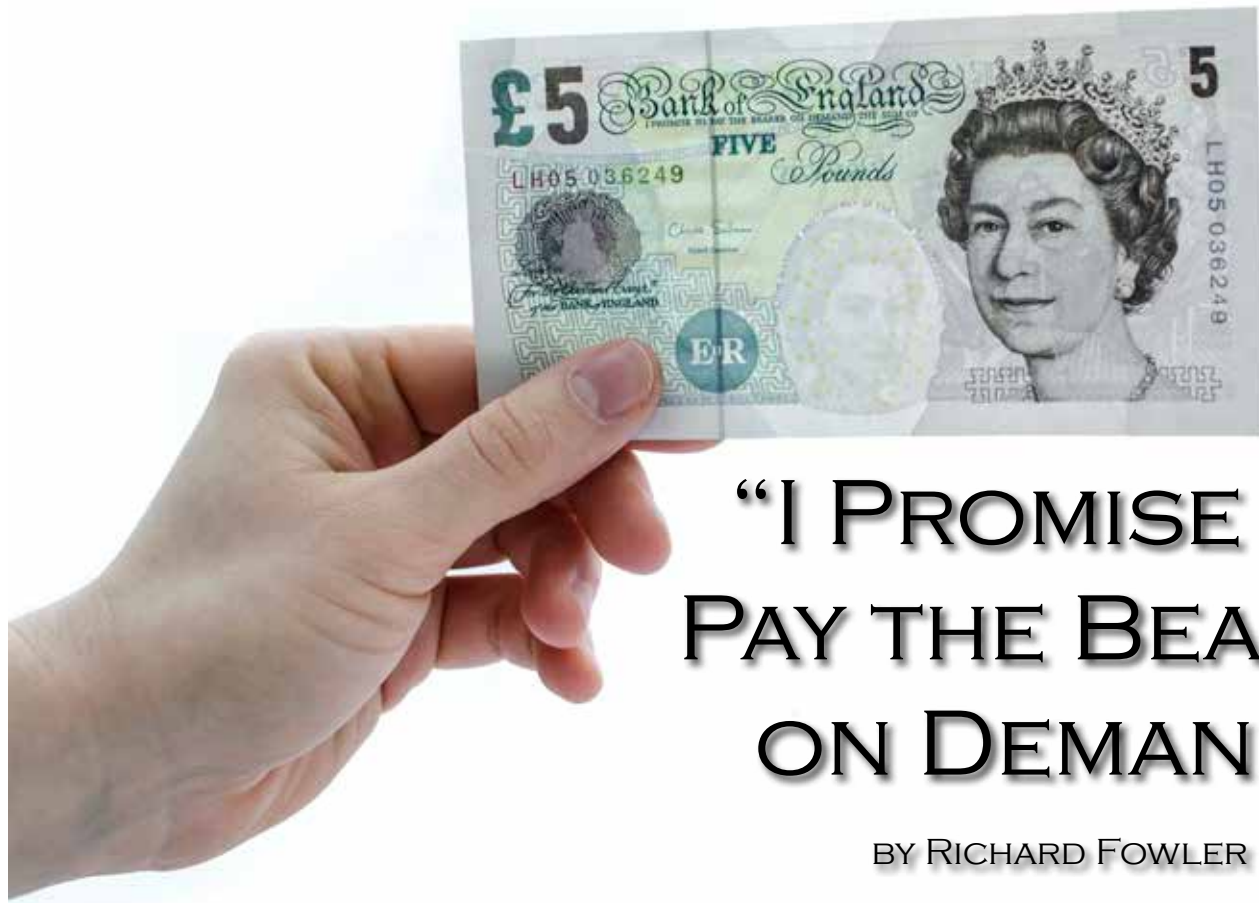
It is not God's will to influence people to vote one way or another - especially against our will. God's will is for us to know Christ and to make him known. God's will is for us to share his love and his life with others. God's will is for all to know his Son so that one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess because we know how good God is. His will is not to stir up nations and cause suffering for his beloved. We do enough stirring up on our own. Brexit is a good case in point. Just as many people were praying for Brexit as were praying against it. That's something to consider.

God is with his beloved children in Great Britain, in Europe and throughout the world. He is with those who voted for Brexit and he is with those who voted against it. He would be faithful regardless of which way the vote went. We don't want to make a false assumption that God is for one outcome and against another. Neither do we want to conclude that God is manipulating things (people's votes) in order to see his will accomplished. God's will is not dependent upon our voting. What God wills, happens. It's that simple.

The citizens of Great Britain need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. They don't need to fear that Brexit is the beginning of some prophetic end of the world and that God manipulated things against their will. They need to know God is for them. Whatever future Brexit brings, God is still for his children. Things are going to change in Britain, that's for sure, but God does not change in his will, his purpose, or his love for his people.

The central prophecies in the Bible have come true already - Jesus was born to a virgin, He was born in the town of Bethlehem, he did perform many miracles, he was crucified, and he did rise from the dead. And he will return again - whether or not Britain is part of the European Union. Our votes don't change God's will. That's truth we can count on.





“I PROMISE TO PAY THE BEARER ON DEMAND”

BY RICHARD FOWLER

Have you ever asked yourself what these words mean?

We all pay a lot of attention to money (pardon the pun!) We think about it, talk about it and, for many of us, we want a little bit more of it. It seems that these rectangular shaped cotton pulp notes permeate every aspect of our human existence.

But with such universal attention on our beloved bank notes, we may have missed the small print...

“I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of...” to be precise.

You will find it just under the extravagantly, curvilinear words ‘Bank of England’, but what, you may have pondered, does it mean?

Before we answer that, I would like to ask you another question: how much does money mean to you? Now, let’s face it, we all need money, right? Without it, it would be hard to live in today’s society. And this has been true for every civilisation before us: we have had, by virtue of necessity, the need to use a material form of exchange (often gold) for the purchase of goods, whether those goods be animals, land, or buildings. Because of this, as civilisation developed, it became easier to use notes (instead of the gold) as the form of material exchange – the note was used in place of the gold: the value of a note matched a certain value or gold

– in fact, the first recorded use of paper money was in China in the 7th century AD. I guess, ultimately, you could say, money was, and still is, a social relationship – one that only holds true when two people agree that some material commodity, like gold, or form of exchange, like notes, holds an agreed value between the two parties. And that’s where, ‘I promise to pay the bearer on demand’ comes in...

You see, back a few centuries ago, when people deposited their gold at the Bank of England, the bank issued them with a note which matched the equivalent value of gold they had just deposited – the note was effectively an ‘I owe you’ (IOU); the person with the bank note could go back at anytime and exchange it for the equivalent amount of gold. And therein lies the answer to the words, ‘I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of...’ It was a promise that the bank would pay the bearer of the note the equivalent amount in gold when he or she wanted to exchange it.

Now before you start making a dash for the door with a hand-full of well-worn notes, ready to be brandished in front of the cashier at the Bank of England, in the hope that they meet the sight of your notes with the equivalent value in gold, there is something else you need to know!

And it’s this: that promise is totally redundant! In other words, “you ain’t gettin any gold!”

In fact, if you went to the cashier and asked them to fulfil their promise, the only thing you would get would be the equivalent amount of money in notes of less value than the note you had given them.

So the million pound question is: what gives bank notes their value then?

And the answer to that question is summed up in one word: trust. When you or I go into a shop to buy something, we are trusting that the person we are buying from will accept the face value of the note we give them – we trust that our notes will be accepted as a means of payment. Therefore, it is our collective faith (our agreement) that then gives the note its value.

Now, I don't know about you, but looking beyond the surface of this trust, I don't see anything that reassuring about it! If the value of a note is only determined by people's trust in its 'made up' value, then some may say that, actually, money has no value at all! It is strange to think that our whole global financial means of exchange is built on something so uncertain, something subject to change; a promise that is not permanent.

I guess we would all like a more stable form of currency; one which really did have value. A form of exchange that was backed by a rock solid promise that meant we could really rely on it – an unchangeable promise that the bearer could always be paid the value of what they wanted to exchange.

But will that ever be a reality? Well, yes actually, it is!

Because there does exist a form of exchange that will never fail – that never loses its value. A form of exchange that is backed by a rock solid promise – a promise that you can always rely on. An agreement that will be met fully...a payer who will always exchange more for less!

You won't find this payer down at the Bank of England, nor at the stock exchange. This certain promise of exchange is not even found in the ledger books of accountants. But, rather, this promise of exchange is found in another book, a book that identifies both the payer and bearer. It says...

“...and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20.)

And that payer is someone called Jesus Christ! And the bearer, you ask? Well, actually, it's you!

So what are you bearing and what is He paying? What is the promise?

In short, what we bear is our lives and everything in them. So much of our existence is defined by money and the pursuit of material possessions – we are driven by material pursuits and find purpose out of them. However, there is a certain futility and emptiness that comes with them...ultimately, we can never be satisfied with material things because, by definition, material commodities are consumed. And also, I guess, we can take nothing to the grave. Money and materialism can never be exchanged for something past the grave.

But God, the payer, on the other hand, decided to set up an exchange system to free us from the materialistic 'rat race' and the empty pursuits and promises on which we inevitably find our lives built. God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, as the payer – to pay for all the things that have gone wrong in this world, which included my sins and yours. His sacrifice was so great, so valuable, that it meant that He could make humanity a promise! And the promise is this: 'I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of my life for theirs!' So great was this sacrifice that it was enough to guarantee a new and purpose driven life for all who want to 'cash' their lives in.

This agreement to 'cash' in our lives is a guarantee for a better one; a renewed life lived on spiritual, not material, principles, with the freedom that comes with knowing why you were born and where you are heading in life. It is not like a material transaction; it is much more than that. It is one that changes us on the inside: as the bearer of your own life, when you decide to 'cash' it in, the payer – Jesus – promises not only to give you His life, which means the forgiveness of your sins and eternal life, but He promises to exchange your hurt, frustration and empty purpose for love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self-control...and that's a currency that you can use anywhere in the world; a currency that will never lose its value.

Remember, Jesus promises to pay the bearer! Are you willing to exchange your life?

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Speaking of Life:



WANTED: Christ and Us

Yesterday, I saw a “Wanted” poster for a 33-year-old man with long hair and a beard. The poster said he was wanted for leading an underground liberation movement. They listed a couple aliases – “Prince of Peace” “Son of God” and “Messiah” – and warned that he’s still at large. See if you recognize him,

It’s Jesus. But you probably don’t think of him as someone who would end up on a “Wanted” poster. But to many during his time on earth, that’s exactly who he was – an outlaw, someone shaking up the traditional norms. But to many more who saw him for who he really was, he was the answer to a prayer. To those who had studied the scriptures and searched the text for clues to the Messiah’s identity – Christ was the World’s Most Wanted Man.

But there’s another “Wanted” poster that I wanted to share with you. See if you recognize this person,

Not a bad looking guy. But what am I “Wanted” for? And who “Wants” me? It turns out, to our Triune God, we’re all on his most “Wanted” list. I don’t mean that God is some kind of old Western Sheriff in the sky. Instead, his love is what is behind his wanted posters.

Our Lord of Grace loves us and wants us so much that he has sent out notices in the scriptures. His purpose to bring many sons and daughters to glory led the Father to send the Son to come after us in time and space, in flesh and blood. Far beyond what any bounty hunter has ever done, he joined himself to us, becoming one of us, fully human. And because his desire for our good is so great, he has broken the chains of pride, distrust and death to bring us back into communion with him.



As strange as it may sound, remember that you are “Wanted” – by a loving God who will, is, and has done everything to bring us into right relationship with him through our savior Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. And that’s a “Wanted” list I don’t mind saying that I’m on.

I’m Joseph Tkach, Speaking of LIFE.

***Speaking of Life* is now on TV! It is used by UCB (United Christian Broadcasters) in between longer programmes and is aired on UCB on Thursdays and Fridays between 7.15 - 7.30 am and between 1.45 and 2.00pm, on Saturdays between 6.45 and 7.00 am., and on Sundays between 1.45 and 2.00 pm. These timings may vary.**

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