

Forgiveness

WHY IS
FORGIVENESS
SO HARD?

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FOR THE BODY
OF CHRIST

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ishah

Woman (Hebrew *ishah*). Woman, with man, was made in the image of God. 'Male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27).

welcome...

It seems fitting, in an edition dealing with Forgiveness, to start by asking that very thing of our readers. When illness, bereavement and overwork slow our progress, it seems even more clear that we are able to publish this magazine only by God's gracious provision.

Still, it's been encouraging, despite the stress of missed deadlines, to see that the priority of each woman on the Ishah Editorial team is to produce a quality result, a magazine that seeks to glorify God and deal with our topic with both Biblical clarity and personal integrity. The choice to put quality before expediency has here resulted in our combining this Forgiveness edition into both the Summer and Autumn issues. So please forgive our lateness.

I hope you are blessed, as I have been, by these testimonies of God's faithfulness; by the reminder of Jesus' sacrificial death to bring us forgiveness and restored relationship with God, and the empowering of the Holy Spirit to enable us to forgive each other, even when it seems impossible. May these witnesses encourage you to live a life which celebrates the forgiveness we have received from God!

Can I ask you also, to take a moment to pray for the ministry of Ishah? To ask our loving Father to sustain and provide for this magazine; in particular our needs are finances and more women for the Editorial Committee.

As always, we'd love to hear your thoughts on this edition. Please write to us using the details to the right (please note our new postal address).

Rachel Lotherington

For the *Ishah* Editorial Committee



OUR AIMS

1. To value the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, through thinking hard about how the Bible applies to our everyday lives.
2. To encourage women to grow in godliness and maturity in Christ.
3. To equip Christian women to be creative, confident and effective in communicating the gospel.
4. To give women in a variety of roles and situations the forum to think about contemporary issues from a framework of Biblical theology and to articulate their thinking in a manner that stimulates themselves and others to live lives that are more faithful to God's Word.

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Why is forgiveness so hard?

BY AILSA TUCKFIELD

One of my earliest memories is being introduced with the words, 'She was meant to be a boy'. A phrase often repeated, it formed a sadness in me that I was a disappointment to my mother and—because children see God through their parents—germinated an assumption that I was a disappointment to God.

We were a credible church-going family passing through the religious rites of the local church—infant baptism, weekly church and Sunday school, confirmation in my mid-teens. I learned to serve the local church faithfully without an intimate relationship with the Lord of the Church.

I trained and worked in nursing in Australia and Britain; then followed marriage and family life. Time moved along as it does, and I was far from my Creator. I little imagined how difficult a path lay ahead before I would heed the true forgiveness and grace the Lord longed to give me.

In the winter of 1972, I received a shock diagnosis of bowel cancer, with immediate surgery the only option. There was little time to prepare our two small boys (aged 7 and 9), let alone myself and my husband. I was admitted to hospital and scheduled for surgery the next day. Much later I pondered 'the obscene haste'. Further surgery followed to deal with the spread of the cancer into adjacent lymph glands. The

statistical reality was that 60% of such cases would not survive five years.

It was September when I was discharged from hospital, and I recall the vivid greenness of the new leaves, wondering if this would be my last Spring.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said of his prison experience: 'Bless you, bless you prison, for you have shown me life'.¹ It was to be many years before I could echo those words in relation to cancer.

During the months after my surgery there was anxiety, confusion, fear, weariness, and frequent doctors' visits. I tried to teach my boys how to live without a mother—mostly practical stuff. It was during this time, when you think small children need a mother, that I discovered that a mother needs her children. I remember 'bargaining' with God—five years, maybe even ten? I was biblically semi-literate, but I knew Jesus spoke of abundant life. What was that?

Then came an invitation from a friend to attend a Bible study—I agreed to go to 'get her off my back'! I remember little of that first study except a vivid sense of 'coming home', and an urgent need to return. So I began studying the Gospel of Matthew, soaking up God's word like a sponge. We came, in time, to Matthew chapter 11.

Every Sunday of my adult life I had heard 'the comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith...'²

'Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'
Matthew 11:28–30

But on this occasion those words were spoken in a voice, not actually audible, but heard within so clearly that I turned and looked expectantly over my right shoulder.

In the paradox of those eternal moments the Lord Jesus Christ united me to Himself; I was deluged in His embracing love. I knew that I was forgiven for all the wrong I had done and in the freedom of that forgiveness I was able to forgive all who had wronged me.

The Bible speaks of this event as the new birth from above: 'For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.'
(1 Peter 1:23)

Why did it take so long to come to this place?

So what is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is the divine miracle of grace. It cost God the Cross of Jesus Christ before He could forgive sin and remain a holy God (John 3:16, Romans 3:21–26).

As Oswald Chambers wrote, 'Once you realise all that it cost God to forgive

you, you will be held in a vise [sic], constrained by the love of God'.³

Following on from the experience of God's forgiveness of us is the necessity to forgive others, and the two are intertwined. Forgiving others is a hard choice—a decision of the will. It is not forgetting. Rather, it is agreeing to live with the consequences of another's sin, acknowledging the reality of intense pain, betrayal, and broken trust, but choosing to move beyond it by God's enabling.

We have all been wounded, but suffering need not have the last word as we grieve our losses. The healing and wholeness of our Lord Jesus Christ is there to be claimed, released through His Holy Spirit to His people. To forgive from the

So why is it so hard to forgive?

If we ourselves are so graciously forgiven, and if God is sovereign over the wrongs we suffer, why is it so difficult for us to forgive others?

Viewing national and international news any night of the week, we hear and see acts of grave injustice and cries for justice. Forgiveness in these circumstances goes against what we believe to be right.

We are told never to take our own revenge (Romans 12:19). God will deal justly and fairly as only He can. This does not however mean that we are to do nothing; forgiveness does not preclude appropriate social responses. For example where a criminal action has occurred, the process of law is required,

In the course of writing this article I have revisited some painful places, and there is need for me to write at least one difficult letter. How we need to live a life of daily forgiveness!

In closing...

On a recent visit to Melbourne, Presiding Bishop Frank Retief, of the Church of England in South Africa, told of the tragic events of one Sunday evening in 1993 at St James Church in Kenilworth, Cape Town. Just before the conclusion of evening worship, a group of gunmen burst into the Church, spraying the congregation with bullets and then fleeing. The police, media and medics arrived to find mayhem. On the national news later that night a man holding his dying wife, with his children beside

“Forgiveness is the divine miracle of grace. It cost God the Cross of Jesus Christ before He could forgive sin and remain a holy God.”



heart entails visiting the core of our being. When we are open and vulnerable to receive the healing touch of Jesus, embraced in His love, we are then enabled to travel through the process of forgiveness and therefore to live a life in the freedom of forgiveness. For some it can be a long road.

The story of Joseph in Genesis 37–50 illustrates this. Joseph recognised God's sovereignty in his circumstances: a realisation that God incorporated the evil done to Joseph into His good purposes. This realisation made it possible for Joseph to forgive his brothers. The evidence of this forgiveness of his brothers lay in the fact that Joseph did not disclose to his father what his brothers had done to him in selling him into slavery:

But Joseph said to them 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.' And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. Genesis 50:19–21

God brought about His sovereign purposes from the hardships in Joseph's life, and enabled Joseph to forgive his brothers—will He do any less for us? (Romans 8:28)

and boundaries must be put in place where abuse has been inflicted.

When we are hurt by the wrongs of others, those wounds are often raw and painful. There may be occasions when we find that in a subtle way we want to withhold forgiveness, hoping the offender will acknowledge the pain they have inflicted; and in that struggle we hope they may hurt a little too. Without realizing, we are being controlled by the actions of the offender. This can be the seedbed of anger, bitterness and dis-ease, and so we need to choose the way of forgiveness for our own sakes, in order to be free from the past.

Jesus taught us this imperative of forgiveness (eg, Matthew 18:23–35), warning of the perils of unforgiveness—either we choose to live in close fellowship with our Lord, giving and receiving forgiveness, or we blockade the bridge over which His forgiveness flows to our own hearts and outwards to others. Forgiving others is not only a matter of obedience; it is part of our own healing and releasing into the abundant life our Lord wants us to experience.

We can live with sadness and loss, but we cannot live with unforgiveness.

him, was asked by a reporter, 'What would you say to the people who have done this?' His reply was, 'I don't know who you are and I don't know why you have done this, but in the Name of Jesus Christ, I forgive you.'

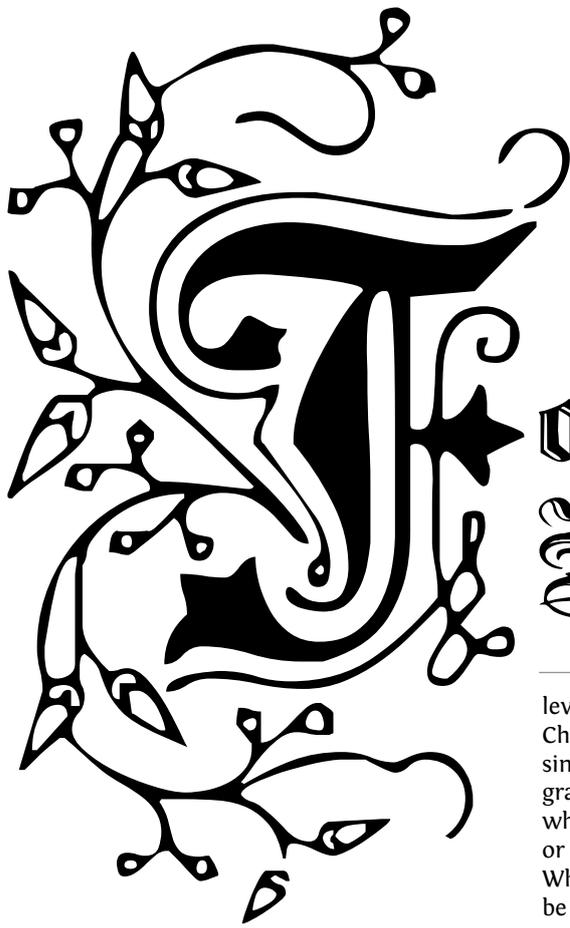
Forgiveness remains a mystery beyond understanding or reason. Within it is contained a power that releases the redemptive purposes of God in such a way as to advance His kingdom and speed the return of our Lord. Come, Lord Jesus!

¹ Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr (1974) *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956. An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, pp1-11. Collins and Harvill Press

² See 'The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion', *The Book of Common Prayer* (1891) Cambridge University Press

³ Chambers, Oswald (1935) *My Utmost For His Highest*, November 20 entry, Dodd, Mead & Company, Inc.

■ Ailsa Tuckfield worships at St Mark's Anglican Church, Forest Hill.



Forgiveness for the Body of Christ

BY AUDREY PORTER

The Church is a flawed institution. It is regularly beset by the broken individuals who are part of the body of Christ. At various times the Church has looked the other way when it should have challenged, been silent when it should have been vocal, passive when it should have been active and aggressive when it should have been gracious. At times the Church has struggled to choose the better option from a range of poor ones, and it has not always chosen well.

Often, in a Church made up of broken people, in a broken world, identifying the 'right', the 'better' or even the 'less wrong' path or action is difficult. The Church often acts or reacts in a way that seems best with the limited understanding that it has at the time.

The Church has at times acted in ways which are hard to explain or justify. Too often the Church has been preoccupied with preserving a place of comfort and security, but when the Church becomes self-focused and inward looking, it forgets to be salt and light as Christ called it to be. It has failed to be the Church.

There are also incidences in which the Church has been misunderstood, or judged too harshly, through misunderstanding or ignorance. Despite these misunderstandings, the Church cannot nurse hurts, even if the world it exists in chooses to do so.

We must remember that when the Church fails to be Church, it has not done so on some detached or anonymous

level. It has failed at the level of 'your' Church and 'my' Church. If our Churches sincerely wish to be channels of God's grace in the world, we must first ask where we have not done all we could or where we have done it inadequately. Where have we, as the Church, called to be a 'holy priesthood', ignored pain, hurt and suffering, struggles and distress in our communities? Or even worse, caused these problems by neglect, indifference or prejudice?

It is necessary for the Church to seek forgiveness for its failures, mistakes and failure to act in the past. Forgiveness, however, does not just function to make the Church feel better about its past—the act of forgiveness is a precursor for reconciliation. In the process of taking responsibility for our mistakes and brokenness, a path opens for reconciliation, which leads to the healing of broken relationships, and a strengthening of fragile ones.

Reconciliation is one of the metaphors that scripture uses as a model for our return to relationship with God. It is through the forgiveness that Christ brings on the cross that our relationship with God is restored. As we are freed from the burden of separation from God, it becomes possible to restore relationships at the horizontal level—between people. To see this model somewhat differently, scripture also reminds us that we need to be reconciled to one another before bringing our gifts to the altar (Matthew 5: 22-24).

Certainly, where the Churches we are part of have sinned against others, there is a place for the Church to confess and seek forgiveness. But should we—who represent the Church of this generation—seek forgiveness and reconciliation for the Church's sins in previous generations? If we are to take seriously the role of the community of the saints and the essential

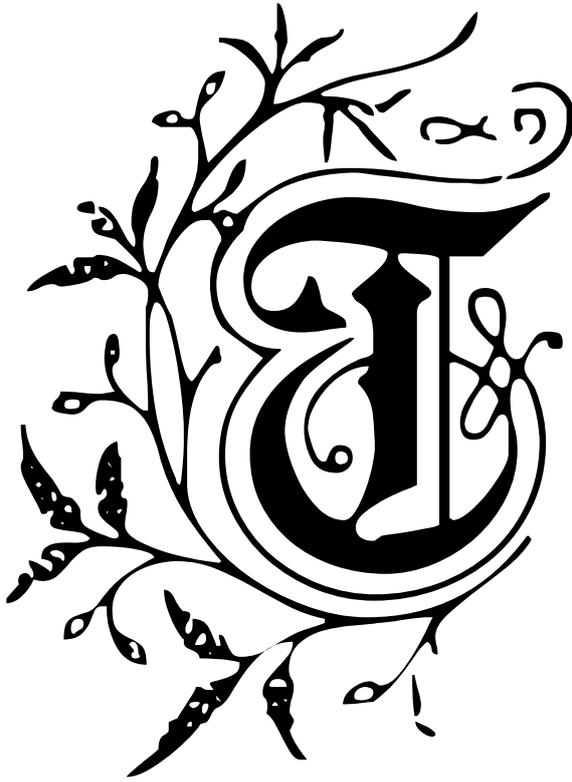
unity of the Church across all times and places, then the answer has to be 'yes'.

The Church must willingly pursue reconciliation by seeking forgiveness, remembering that seeking is not receiving, and that the greater community's attitude and approach does not determine the Church's. The Church must not only seek forgiveness, it must willingly extend forgiveness, as part of genuine lived-out Christ-likeness.

By seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, the local Church has the opportunity to refocus itself on God and its mission to the local community. It offers the potential for the local faith community to lift its gaze from its internal needs and programmes, look beyond the 'walls' and meet the community where it is, reflecting Jesus' relationship with those He met.

This allows the Church to try to fulfil a wider role in the community, and provides an opportunity for the Church to live as a model of the realities of Kingdom-living in this fallen world. This effort towards forgiveness and reconciliation is not a mere gesture but a theological reality, which the Church is prepared to live out even when it takes it into uncomfortable territory.

■ *Audrey works as Academic Registrar and teaches Church History and Theology at Nazarene Theological College Brisbane. In her spare time she enjoys reading.*



the spiralling path of forgiveness

BY MONIQUE LISBON

In my ongoing process of healing from childhood sexual abuse by my father, I am struck by the fact that I can define forgiveness mostly in terms of what it isn't, rather than what it is. As with other deep realities of life and relationships, forgiveness has no nice, neat formula.

Christians frequently stress the need for forgiveness, often before the full extent of the wrongdoing has been grasped or named. This can stem from discomfort with strong feelings like anger. I have usually found my inner pressure to 'forgive' accentuated by others' expectations that I quickly 'fix the problem'.

One especially unhelpful adage is 'forgive and forget', incidentally a phrase that never appears in the Bible. To forgive, I cannot forget. No-one can forgive what they pretend does not even exist. As I've come to work through my memories of abuse I've found that healing involves not forgetting, but remembering differently. Forgiveness does not blot out abuse as though it never occurred; forgiveness constantly changes my attitude to what has occurred. It is only in remembering what has gone before that survivors of childhood abuse can begin to recognise that the present is different from the past. Because of the traumatic nature of abuse, some survivors never remember their past in detail. Sometimes memory takes the less easily definable form of emotions or bodily sensations. Whatever the mode of memory, it is only when we remember that we can make choices which stem from our present power rather than our past powerlessness.

Anger is problematic for those who confuse 'niceness' and 'tidiness' with Christianity, and who see anger and forgiveness as mutually exclusive. In order to forgive, it is essential to have a sense of one's own boundaries, and to recognise when those boundaries have been violated. Anger is a fundamental, healthy and God-instilled response that often follows a breaching of boundaries. Without this, true liberating forgiveness can easily deteriorate into a pseudo-forgiveness which minimises, condones or justifies abuse, and can even grant a licence to abuse again.

As forgiveness and anger have danced together—sometimes uncomfortably, but in an expression of honest tension—I have found an increasing desire to be freed from the constraints

of my abuse. I do not want my life to be dominated and determined by what happened to me as a child. I thirst for the freedom to be my own person, separate from my father's control. This means that I refuse to treat anyone, including my father, as he treated me; with hatred and humiliation. Holding onto resentment of my father repeats the cycle of destruction he taught me. In learning to let go, I choose a new way to live.

Along this long path, my attitude to my father has changed. I realise now that his destructive choices spring from his own brokenness, and this has loosened his hold over me. He is no longer an untameable ogre in my story. Instead, I see his pathetic weakness, which reveals to me my own power and leads me to feel pity, and even compassion, for him.

Maybe one reason Jesus said to forgive 'seventy times seven times' is because he recognises that it can be impossible to forgive once for all time, to let go fully and never revisit the same memories of harm. Rather than being a simplistic whitewashing of my years of trauma, Jesus' ocean of forgiveness runs as deep as my hurt. It takes it seriously, calling me to look my father's abuse squarely in the face, again and again, as different experiences in the present re-trigger the same traumatic memory. I need to continually choose and re-choose how I will respond.

I wonder, therefore, if the road to forgiveness is not so much linear—a definitive single-directional movement from one point to another—but rather a spiral. Often when I revisit certain memories of abuse, I feel I am thrown back to where I was years ago. Yet the reality is that at each point along the path, when I look at the same memories anew, I have changed since the last time I visited them. I may find I have a little more perspective or a little less fear; an increasing awareness of my present choice or a decreasing sense of being dominated.

I choose the ongoing and spiralling path of forgiveness, not because I feel compelled to by discomfiting anger, but because I recognise that this path separates me from my father. Forgiveness is an internal process; not contingent upon any ongoing relationship with my father. My growing freedom comes from letting go of my own demand to forgive once for all time, and accepting Jesus' recognition that sometimes it takes addressing and forgiving the same wrongs over and over, many times, before an abiding resolution can come.

■ This is an excerpt from Monique Lisbon's book/CD, *Fragments of Home: Piecing Life Together After Childhood Sexual Abuse* (Braidwood Press: Melbourne, 2008). More information about *Fragments of Home* and Monique's other music and public speaking ministry can be found at www.monomusic.com.au



book about forgiveness

Book Review:
Redeeming Love
by Francine Rivers

BY MARYANNE PARK

her hopelessness. Her despair. And we get to see her beginning to trust.

God can tell us how much He loves us over and over, and it may never sink in. But put it in a story—in a situation we can understand and relate to—and it suddenly becomes clear. Unfortunately, it's not all that easy for us to relate to someone from millennia ago living in Israel, because most of us live in such different circumstances. It's all too simple to push it aside as something remote and not relevant. By setting the story of Hosea in a city from a closer time period—and by making it a much longer, more detailed story—it becomes much easier to understand. And much harder to dismiss.

The story of Angel is a story about someone who never had a chance. Someone who learned to survive by making herself hard and cold, and by looking out for herself and no-one else. It's a story of someone trapped in despair, who meets a man talking about hope. It's a story about finding freedom. About forgiving those who hurt you. About becoming more than you thought you could be, and learning to trust again.

It's a story about how much God loves us..

■ *Maryanne lives with her cat, who tolerates her because she feeds and pats him. She loves writing short stories, playing piano, and visiting her three nephews.*

Three thousand years ago, God decided to tell us a story about how much He loved us. He asked a man named Hosea to marry an unfaithful woman. And just as Hosea loved his wife no matter what she did that was how God loved us.

One hundred and fifty years ago, God asked a man—Mr Michael Hosea—to marry an unfaithful woman. He was a Christian; she was a prostitute named Angel. And no matter what Angel did, no matter how much she hurt him, how often she left him and returned to prostitution, Michael Hosea would not stop loving her.

Redeeming Love is a book about forgiveness. The story of Hosea is retold, set in the California Gold Rush. Hosea is now a farmer—and through his eyes, we get a glimpse of how God keeps on loving us, no matter how unfaithful we are.

But this story is not really about Michael Hosea. It's about his wife. Most of the book is told from the perspective of Angel: a woman sold into prostitution as a child, who has given up on ever finding love, hope, or freedom. The story follows her closely, as she runs, again and again, unable to believe that Michael Hosea could possibly love her without wanting anything in return. We get to see

write of reply

ishah welcomes reader responses to topics dealt with in previous issues. These should be no more than 200 words long and can be emailed to ishahmag@ishah.org or posted to *ishah*, c/- 5 Laughlin Ave, Nunawading, VIC, 3131.





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What is Friends of Ishah?

“Friends of *ishah*” will allow you a greater level of engagement with *ishah*. As a *Friend of ishah* you will continue to receive the free quarterly magazine, and in addition:

- Pay an annual membership fee to be a *Friend of ishah* (AU\$35).
- Receive an email newsletter twice a year, with information about what’s happening on the “inside” of *ishah*, things to pray for, upcoming topics, events, etc.
- Receive an invitation to an annual celebration event, and meet other *ishah* friends and subscribers, committee members and writers.
- Become part of a pool of volunteers willing to help with specific tasks in the production of *ishah* or management of the network on an as-needs basis.
- Become a resource for ideas about future topics or writers.

Why?

- *ishah* seeks to exist as a free magazine focusing on contemporary issues facing Christian women. Valuing God’s word as the ultimate authority, *ishah* seeks to encourage and equip women to live out their faith in contemporary society. “Friends of *ishah*” will complement the magazine and give you the opportunity to become more involved in this ministry.
- *Friends of ishah* will give you a chance to connect to a greater extent with the ideas in *ishah*, discussions about the ideas, and also provide greater opportunities to be involved with making *ishah* work.
- What do you value about *ishah*, how do you think we can improve it, and how should move forward? *Friends of ishah* will create opportunities for the editorial committee to be more engaged with the views of our readers. *Friends of ishah* will give you a voice and active role in the future of *ishah*.

Where to now?

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Starting Point is a regular column that aims to encourage readers to engage with a contemporary issue in the media.

WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS...

This is a story of three people.

The first was a multi-billionaire, an immensely successful entrepreneur with wide-ranging business interests throughout Europe, and far-reaching ambitions for his empire. He was in the midst of a high-risk business speculation when the global financial crisis struck. Facing the loss of around half of his fortune, he penned a suicide note and stretched himself out on the train tracks near his home.

Picture now a man whose house is razed to the ground, whose car is gone, whose means of livelihood is destroyed. Around him is nothing but scorched ground and burnt-out trees. Crouched in the ruins of his home, he squints up and says, ‘What does it matter? What does any of it matter? My wife and kids survived—that’s all that counts.’

Or consider a man who, in the devastating Victorian bushfires 26 years ago, was burnt so badly doctors gave him only a 4% chance of survival. Not only did he survive the initial trauma, but the years of surgery, rehabilitation and recovery that followed. These days, aged 87, he regularly visits the burns unit at a Melbourne hospital, taking with him the photograph of his own once-charred face, and tells other burns victims, ‘If I can do it, so can you. You will get through this.’ It is his stated belief that he was spared so that he could go on to help as many people as possible.

Despair or thankfulness, self-pity or servanthood? Suffering strips us back to the fundamentals, revealing in all its rawness what lies in our hearts.

Take a moment to reflect ... and join us in the next edition of *ishah* as we take a look at Idolatry—alive and well in the 21st century.

■ *Alison Flynn* is a member of St Columb’s Anglican Church in Hawthorn, and of the *ishah* editorial team. When she grows up she wants to be a writer.

STARTING POINT



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