

4 The worth

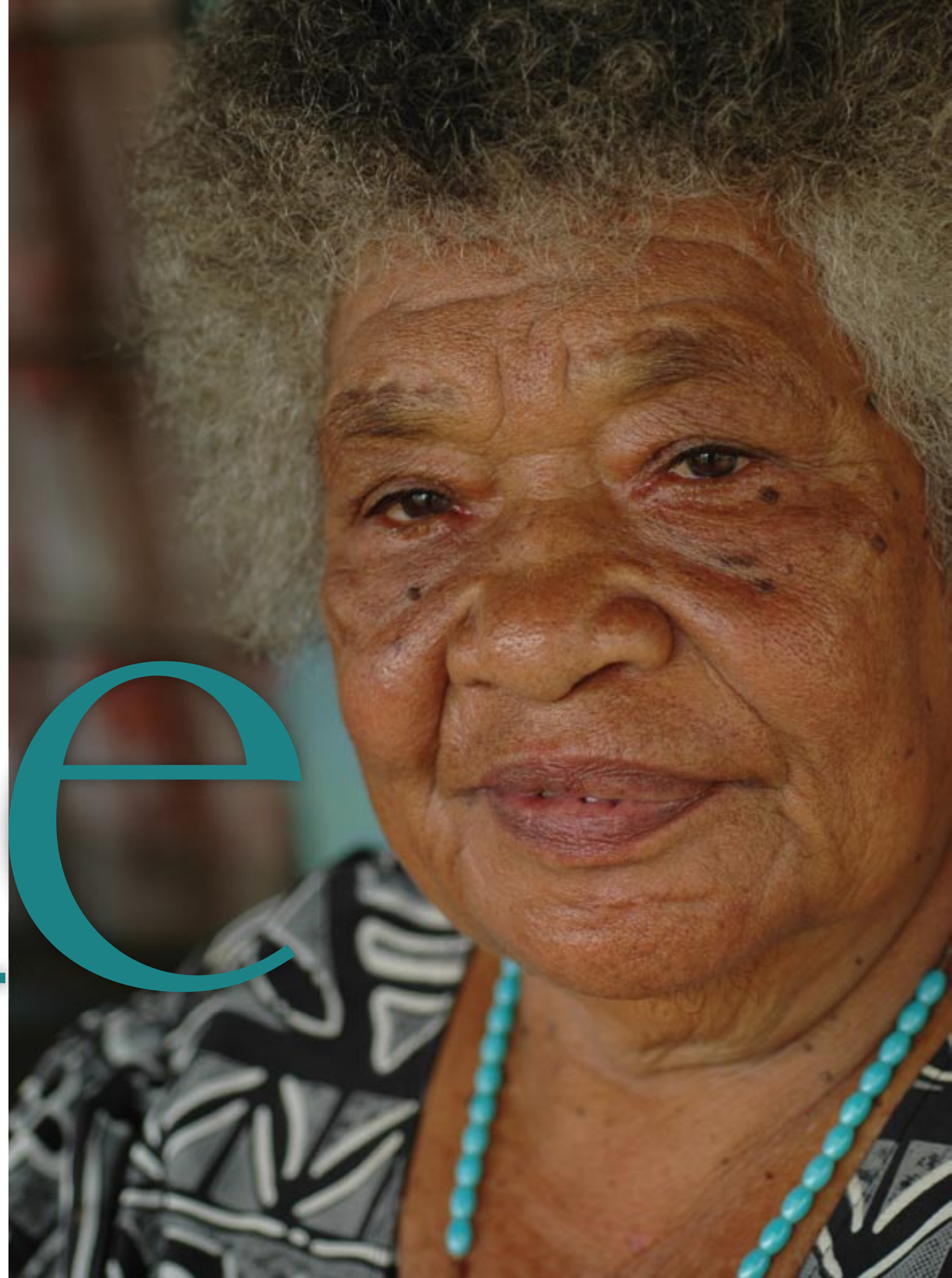
By Randy Hurst

of one

Membership in Assemblies of God churches outside the United States surpassed 50 million last year. This number increases at a rate of about 35,000 people every week.

The multitudes the Lord is adding to His church are cause for great rejoicing. But the revelation of God's Word leads us to view people as God does — one person at a time.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7





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Jesus' purpose was to reveal the heart of God and what joy takes place in heaven when what has been lost is found.

The worth of one

The priority of heaven

Jesus said, "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'

"I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."¹

Following this passage, Jesus talks about three things — the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Jesus' purpose was to reveal to the scribes and Pharisees the heart of God — how the Father feels about the lost — and what joy takes place in heaven when what has been lost is found.

Three facts are inescapable.

Humanity is lost.

Even as evil and chaos escalate worldwide, secular culture tries to explain away humanity's sin. Immorality and violence are attributed to poverty, social injustice and even genetics. People place blame everywhere except where it belongs — the sinful human heart.

From the time of the Early Church, many have wishfully speculated that all people will eventually, somehow, reach heaven. But we can only know about God's plan for eternity from what He has chosen to reveal to us. And His Word clearly shows that all people are lost.

In one of Asia's modern cities, in the midst of gleaming skyscrapers, I visited a heathen temple. Thousands of onlookers were in an outer courtyard. Unintentionally, in the press of the moving throng, I found myself standing just three or four feet away from a priest who was chanting as worshippers submitted to a demonic trance. Rows of steel hooks pierced the flesh of their backs, yet not a drop of blood flowed. Each hook was connected to a chain. The chains stretched back to a cart of rocks the worshippers pulled through the streets — trying to obtain forgiveness, healing or prosperity. Each torturous yoke bore silent but graphic witness that what I was viewing was the antithesis to God's grace.

As disturbing as these images are, we must remember that, even in America, those who claim to be Christians but do not personally know Christ are as lost as any who fit the stereotype of "heathens." A person doesn't have to be heathen to go to hell.

The worth of one

Eternity is certain.

The best-known verse in the Bible — John 3:16 — reveals how great God’s love is for a lost world. But the bright hope of everlasting life for those who believe is shadowed by those perishing in darkness. “Perish” here does not mean physical death or even the end of existence, but torment that lasts forever.

Jesus described the destiny of both the righteous and the unrighteous as “eternal” or “without end.” Once life begins, there is no end to existence for any person on Earth. The unending nature of eternity clearly explains Jesus’ words, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?”²

Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation.

The apostle Peter proclaimed clearly: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, NIV).

Modern culture seems to have designated tolerance as the primary moral virtue and accepted the idea that anything a person believes can be a pathway to eternal life and ultimate peace. According to God’s revealed truth, there is only one way to peace and everlasting life with our Creator.

Jesus is both the door and the way. He said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”³

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11



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God is not only aware of our individual existence, but He also is 'intimately acquainted' with everything in our lives.

The worth of one

The perspective of heaven

The priority of heaven is the lost. The perspective of heaven concerns the value of just one person. The parable of Luke 15 focuses on one coin, one sheep, one son. So, unlike the world, in God's economy every person has value. Each individual really matters.

Many nonbelievers are skeptical about what Christians believe — that God knows each of us personally and listens to everyone's prayers. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, King David wrote, "O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways."⁴

God is not only aware of our individual existence, but He also is "intimately acquainted" with everything in our lives.

In Matthew, Jesus asked, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father."⁵ With His question, Jesus affirmed what His hearers already knew — the going rate in the marketplace at that time for sparrows. Luke records a similar incident, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God."⁶

Not only do the sparrows worth half a cent each receive the Father's attention. The going rate in the market was that, if you buy four, you get one free. Even in Jesus' day merchants offered a quantity discount.

The fifth sparrow wasn't even worth half a penny to its owner. But Jesus taught that even the sparrow that has no value on Earth has value in heaven. That's the worth of just one — any one — to God.

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The worth of one

On more than one occasion I have personally experienced how far God will send one of His servants for just one person.

I was invited to Auckland, New Zealand, to preach just one weekend. At the conclusion of the service, I extended a salvation invitation. In an audience of more than 1,200 people, only one man came forward to receive Christ. I confess I was disappointed. I had flown a long way to preach there.

Two years later I returned to New Zealand. This time I was preaching in New Plymouth, a city I had never visited. After the service a woman came up to me. "I want to meet you," she said. "You were a real blessing in my life a couple of years ago."

I was puzzled. "I've never been to this church," I told her. "I've never even been to this town."

"No, it wasn't here," she explained. "It was in Auckland. I was a new Christian, and I was visiting a married couple who were friends of mine. I was trying to share my new faith in Christ with them, but I wasn't getting anywhere. The husband, who was an agnostic, was even hostile.

"On Sunday morning we were driving down the freeway to have a late breakfast at a restaurant. Suddenly, the man turned off the freeway, onto the off ramp and into the driveway of an Assemblies of God church. He turned to me and said, 'Let's forget about breakfast. Instead, let's go to church. I will listen to whoever this preacher is. If I do that, will you leave me alone?' It was the morning you preached, and in your sermon you answered most of the questions my agnostic friend had asked me. Do you remember a man going forward to receive Christ that day?"

"Yes," I replied, "he was the only one."

She said, "That man was my agnostic friend."

"Thank you," I said, "you've made my day."

"Oh, but I'm not finished," she said. "The next day my friend was on his way to work on the same freeway when an oncoming car had a blowout on a front tire and swerved across the median, hitting his car head-on. My friend was instantly killed and went to be with the Lord."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15



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The bright hope of everlasting life for those who believe is shadowed by those perishing in darkness.



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If we will reach people as Jesus commanded us, we must value them as He did.

The worth of one

A couple of years later my wife, Ruth, and I were in London. I was scheduled to preach at a church. The small congregation of about 80 met in a basement on Sundays. I had preached there the year before as the new church was getting organized.

But after we arrived in London, I realized I had a problem. When I called the phone number I had for the pastor, the man who answered had never heard of the pastor or the church. (I learned later that when my secretary recorded the pastor's phone number, she had typed an 8 instead of a 0.) Neither the church nor the pastor was listed in the telephone directory. I couldn't remember where the church was located, so I had no way to know how to reach the pastor.

It was Saturday, so Ruth and I went to an antique market on Portobello Road. On the way back to the subway, we saw a church — Kensington Temple.

"Since we can't get to the church where I'm supposed to preach," I said, "let's come here tomorrow morning."

The next morning we went to Kensington Temple. At the conclusion of the service, I stood and turned around. In the back of the auditorium, I noticed a man looking at me and trying to get my attention. I went to him and said, "Do you know me? What's your name?"

"My name is Frank," he said. "Last year you preached at Star Street. God really blessed my life that day."

Star Street! That was the same place where I was supposed to be preaching! "Do you know how to get to the church from here?" I asked.

"Sure," he replied, "I'm going there right now." He was on his way to the church when he decided to stop off at a little café across the street from Kensington Temple for something to eat. He had never been to Kensington Temple. After he finished his meal, he heard the singing at the conclusion of the service, crossed the street and stepped into the church. As I turned around, he saw my face and recognized me. With his help, we caught the subway and arrived at that little basement church on time.

At the conclusion of the service, I extended a salvation invitation. Only one person responded — a dignified woman in a business suit. I had invited people to come for prayer for other reasons, so I asked the pastor to counsel her about her decision to receive Christ while I prayed for the others before returning to pray with her.

At the end of the prayer line was a student of psychiatry studying at a university. "Pastor Hurst, do you know who that woman is?" he asked excitedly. "I've been witnessing to her for months. She is a professor at the university. I invited her to church again and again, but she wouldn't come. Finally, I told her an American guest speaker was coming today. She told me she would come — just this once."

God, who sees and knows every lost person, will send one of His messengers across the world — for one person.

The worth of one

In Jesus' teaching, both the priority and perspective of heaven reveal to us the incalculable value of one person.

If we are to follow in Jesus' steps, we must care about people as individuals, knowing that each is known and loved by our Heavenly Father.

Jesus always had time for people. No one was beneath His notice. He had time to go with Zaccheus to his house ... time in the heat of the day to converse with the woman by the well in Samaria. And He had time for children. He had time to rescue the woman caught in adultery. Even in His hour of suffering, He had time, as the rooster crowed, to give Peter a look — not an "I-told-you-so" look, but one that conveyed love and forgiveness.

On the cross, Jesus bore pain none of us will ever know. But He still had time to forgive a dying thief and ensure that Mary, His mother, would be cared for.

John 3:16 is not found in one of Jesus' sermons. It was spoken softly in the night during a conversation with Nicodemus, as Jesus responded to the Pharisee's searching questions. Jesus gave His best to just one person.

If we will reach people as Jesus commanded us, we must value them as He did.

Every person in every people group and in every tribe and nation — our friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers and every person we meet — will spend eternity in heaven or hell. And everyone should be given the opportunity to make a decision concerning Christ's offer of salvation.

In each of our lives God has placed people who need the message of Jesus. Through this missionary Fellowship we all have the opportunity to affect the eternal destinies of people all over the world.

May we comprehend the worth of just one person and see people as God does — each a creation of our Heavenly Father — each a person for whom the Savior gave His life. **tpe**

¹ Luke 15:4-7, NIV

² Matthew 16:26, NASB

³ John 14:6, NIV

⁴ Psalm 139:1-3, NASB

⁵ Matthew 10:29, NIV

⁶ Luke 12:6, NIV



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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

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