

BREAKING BARRIERS

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by Bert Zwiers



Tsunami Relief

In most of the world, Christmas 2004 came and went in the usual way. Manger scenes graced some homes and churches. Christmas trees, candles, and colorful presents cheered many a living room. In some northern regions snow fell, and kids enjoyed a white Christmas. People traveled to visit family and friends. Peace, goodwill, and joy reigned in the hearts of millions.

That's how we all expected it to be. But for hundreds of thousands of people in Southeast Asia, Christmas 2004 is indelibly etched into their memories as the most horrific event of their lives.

First an earthquake began way down deep in the sea. Then a wave of gigantic proportions snuffed out more than 200,000 lives in just a few hours.

Almost immediately the cry went up, "Oh God, why? How could you let this happen?" The world was celebrating the birthday of the King, but where was He when all this was taking place?

I'm sure that many of us struggle with this question. Couldn't God have prevented such a tragedy?

And what about our own tragedies, or the destructive disability issues many of our families have to struggle with daily? God, where are you?

When the people of Israel made pilgrimages to Jerusalem, they often had to travel through dangerous country. We need only to read the story of the Good Samaritan to realize that all was not peace and goodwill on the long, dusty road. Wary travelers kept a sharp eye out for robbers or thieves and other dangers lurking around the next corner.

As they journeyed they often sang the song we now know as Psalm 121:

I lift my eyes to the hills—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD watches over you—
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

The psalm concludes with these comforting words:
'The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forever more.'

So where was God when the tsunami struck? Why all this tragedy and destruction?

He was right there shaking His head, just like us. He cried as we cried.

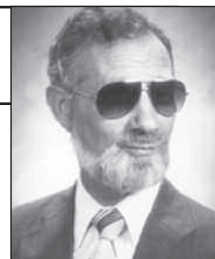
As we cry for the pain of the tsunami victims, as we anguish over the hurts in some of our families, God cries with us. He doesn't want to see this happening any more than we do. And some day, hopefully soon, He will restore all things to the way He intended them to be.

Maranatha, come quickly Lord.

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From the Director



Our Lord teaches that his church is like a body, and that all the members are essential to this body's health. None of us is quite like any of the other members, and each of us has been given something the others need. The following verses make this clear.

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1 Cor. 12:7, NRSV)

"All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses." (1 Cor. 12:11)

"For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:13)

But what about members of the church of Christ who have severe disabilities—especially mental or cognitive disabilities? If every member of Christ's body needs all the others, what exactly do we need from these people?

My work among such members has taught me that they do have unique gifts—and that their gifts stand out clearly.

I know one young man with a mental age of one year who is so full of joy when he worships that he runs and leaps about. The whole congregation is swept along by his enthusiasm. He has the gift of joy, and his disability sets him free to share it without the embarrassment that so easily constrains the rest of us.

I know a woman with mental impairments who has such unshakable faith about God's hand in the future that nothing disturbs her. It takes a very strong faith for her to believe, because she does not know how to manage insurance, trusts, savings, and the other sorts of things that we use to reassure ourselves. Still, she believes, and in this way she shows us what the Bible means when it says, "We live by faith, not by sight." (2 Cor. 5:7)

I know another young man whose mental age is perhaps three years who is so full of love for everyone he meets that the whole church misses him when he is absent. He has become the primary greeter after church services. His disabilities make his love stand out all the clearer, because he is too child-like to have ulterior motives.

People with disabilities do indeed have gifts that bless the rest of us.

There is another thing to say about such members. The Bible makes it clear that they not only have gifts we all need, but they also have a special part to play in God's master plan. God uses them to demonstrate to the world that human abilities and achievements can not win salvation. The following verses make this clear.

"Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God." (1 Cor. 1:26-29 NRSV)

I think it is deeply moving to hear this from the Lord and to know what a special place he has chosen for people with disabilities. Through them the Lord reminds us that all our intellectual strengths, all our social skills, all the accomplishments that distinguish the rest of us from "foolish," "lowly," or "weak" people will only succeed in separating us from God if we do not humble ourselves before Him.

Let us pray to God to give us this humility.

—JV

Letters are welcome in keeping with the purpose of *Breaking Barriers*. They may be edited for style and length.

—Rev. James Vanderlaan

Caregivers!

Using the following web community address, caregivers can ask and answer questions or make comments that they feel could benefit someone.

www.caregiver.guidedvision.com

Please try it out and let us know what you think.

—JV

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Letters

I want you to know how much I appreciated Lori West's personal story. I read it to the adult Bible class that I lead at my church, Roosevelt Park CRC. I also read it to 50 inmates at Riverside Correctional Facility, where I have led Bible studies for many years as a member of Prison Fellowship. Her article is beautifully written and demonstrates the kind of Christian maturity that comes only to those who walk with Jesus. Everyone was deeply touched and inspired by it. Amazing how the prisoners connected in some way with every paragraph. Keep up your good work.

—Arnie Snoeyink
Grand Rapids, MI



Just a short note. With much awe I read the story from Lori West. We have a great and powerful God of whom she gives witness. I have used this story in three different small groups. In one Alpha group where the chapter was "Does God Heal Today?" it really opened people up. People came back with their coats on to talk some more and pray. Thanks to Lori for sharing it and to you for publishing it. We all thank God.

—John Vanderkamp
Guelph



I just want to say how much I appreciated the last *Breaking Barriers*. It was an outstanding issue. Your editorial reminded me of a speech presented by Reformed Church in Japan Pastor Daiichiro Furukawa some time ago on "invisible disabilities." Pastor Furukawa has been on kidney dialysis for many years. He spoke plainly and forcefully about the attitudes he encounters, as do so many others who have these poorly understood issues, for which most people seem to have little comprehension or compassion.

I disagree with you when you say that, "there is no reason to suppose the proportion is any different for those with disabilities than those with able bodies" in the inclination to baby or pity themselves. Just as Jesus "learned obedience through suffering," I know many whose bodies are less than perfectly functioning, who, having put their faith in him, have a far deeper faith and resolve to live for the Lord than many others who haven't been faced with such suffering and have not been brought face to face with the hard questions.

I think of the deep faith of my grandmother, whose body was wracked with severe arthritis, or of a dear friend with CP whose prayer life puts most of us to shame. Somehow, I don't think these people are the exceptions. Paul says God chooses what the world looks down on as "the nothings" to put to shame those who consider themselves a cut above the rest. That's as true today as it has ever been.

As to "invisible disabilities," it is a helpful exercise to list those we often encounter but fail to treat with compassion. You list a few. I would add those who are scarred victims of various kinds of abuse, those who suffer inordinately from PMS or menopause, children from dysfunctional families, as well as those suffering from a host of medical problems that don't have clearly defined presenting symptoms.

We often have to look behind the obvious "symptoms," to see the hurting heart of that young person with multiple body piercings or anorexia. I always need to be prepared to look beyond the veneer of health to find there a fellow human being with all the same foibles and need of the Savior as I have. Nydam is right: we need the eyes (and heart!) of our Lord Jesus.

God bless your important ministry and encourage you day by day.

—Larry Spalling



I send you this short note of appreciation for your regular newsletter on a variety of disability concerns, from physical right through to issues relating to aging. I read each newsletter from front to back and select one or two [articles] to read to our young kids. I have come to recognize fully that we are each a child of God and unique for Him. Even with "disabilities," everyone can grow and serve Him.

Thanks for your efforts to help us understand the many challenges facing those with disabilities. It is so important for the "able-bodied" to keep our perspective. Blessings to you and your staff,

—Jon M.
Brampton, ONTARIO



I just read your article on autism in your Winter 2004 issue 66, by Barbara Top. I thought it might be uplifting and encouraging to know about what I heard and saw on CH TV channel 12 news from Hamilton, some weeks ago. A young man who had not yet finished highschool was guaranteed a job when he graduated, washing automobiles. It was the only thing he could do, but he could make automobiles "spanking clean" to every detail. I say what an awesome artist. Many would say his talent was discovered by chance but I say it was by the leading of our Awesome triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What a blessing, Praise God!

—David Tigchelaar
Vineland, ON

My Experience with Schizophrenia

by Michele Gyselinck

I t began in the fall of 1986, although it was not officially diagnosed until ten years later.

I remember that I started having symptoms late that summer. I began hearing voices telling me that I should eat “dog doo,” and that I wasn’t worth anything. I could not sleep at night because I heard songs played over and over in my mind like broken records. As a result, I couldn’t get up in the morning for my college classes or would arrive late, offending my teachers.

I could not concentrate, could not make decisions about term papers, started eating more to compensate for the lack of sleep and regained weight I had painstakingly lost that spring. In short, I could not function. I was totally confused and paralyzed by this illness. I would tell my family that I couldn’t concentrate on my studies, and they would tell me to try harder. Their attitude was strange, in retrospect, because when I was growing up my parents took me to see psychologists and psychiatrists to figure out what was “wrong” with me. My mom told me a few years ago that she had known for a long time that I was a special child.

But when schizophrenia came barging in my family was as completely baffled as I was.

I was 28 at the time. I was not working because I could not function. I had no money to pay my rent. I was living on my own. One day I heard a program on the radio about depression. From the symptoms they described I thought I could finally put a handle on what was happening to me. I was depressed! At last! Now I know that depression was only the tip of the iceberg, but at the time it accounted for how I felt.

I didn’t get an official diagnosis of psychotic depression for another year. I saw a psychiatrist that fall, but I felt a little bit better at the time, and I told him so. We left it at that. I didn’t know then that schizophrenia can play that sort of trick on you. On

the days you see the doctor its symptoms will ebb away, but it manifests itself again a few days later.

I remember feeling guilty all the time for not living up to the expectations of my family and my friends. In January 1988 I went back to school part time. That was all I could afford, both financially and mentally. I was on welfare again, and I wasn’t getting enough to pay full tuition.

I applied to become a language monitor because I wanted to know if I should go into teaching with my linguistics degree. I got the job and found out during my year in Kirkland Lake that I should not. I had good relationships with the other teachers and was socially included, but professionally I was very frustrated.

When the teachers went on strike after the Easter break, I started to fall apart. My illness was progressing unchecked. I could sleep well enough, but my voices harassed me. And having to see all the children in the school all day every day without breaks exhausted me and made me more vulnerable.

I often felt caught in a tug of war between God and the devil. I was taking my antidepressants faithfully again after having gone off during the Easter break (I had thought God wanted me to stop taking antidepressants, but doctor told me gently that I should not abruptly go off-or go off at all. He didn’t think God would want me to stop taking something that made me feel better.)

All through this my faithful Lord Jesus Christ stayed with me and carried me. The “footsteps in the sand” were his.

Jesus kept me from committing suicide back in the spring of 1987 when I came closest to doing it. At the time I lived on my own in Cartierville—a neighborhood of Montreal—about five minutes’ walk from the Riviere des Prairies. After supper one day I walked to the river’s edge and watched the water flow by for a while. My voices told me to



jump in, but I was afraid. The Lord held me back, suggesting I abstain from committing suicide until I had first pursued all the ways of getting help, including and beginning with the church and my family. So I walked away from the river and never went that close to it again.

I went home and called my pastor. I told him what had happened, and he showed me compassion and recommended I tell my mom about it. He thought it was important that she know—and he was right.

The church has been very supportive of me in my illness. Not once did they tell me I should get right with God by confessing my sins, as if confession could cure a mental illness. The concern of fellow Christians supported me in a diagnosis and treatment for my affliction.

According to authorities in psychiatry, schizophrenia strikes young women usually between their mid-twenties and mid-thirties. In 1986 I was 28, but I was not diagnosed correctly till 1996. This time the psychologist I was seeing for an evaluation thought the diagnosis of schizophrenia made more sense than the previous one of psychotic depression. She thought I was too fragile psychologically to describe what I was going through as depression.

Today I am living on my own in a very decent condo, writing poems, managing my budget, and paying my bills on time. My parents bought

My Experience with Schizophrenia, continued

the condo for me from my sister with part of their pension fund. That wasn't the end of their support. They still help me and take me on trips once in a while.

For my part, I take my meds faithfully, do volunteer work once a week,

and participate in other activities in church and at a day center for people with mental illnesses. Since the onset of my illness I have gone on to complete my BA in Linguistics and another in Professional Writing in English. My doctor and I feel

that I am not well enough to work professionally. But I still count my blessings and thank the Lord, because things could be much worse.

My Story

My name is Jack Beeksma. I'm 51 years old. I'm a fulltime teacher of the Grade 4 class at Cedars Christian School in Prince George, British Columbia. I am married to a wonderful woman named Mary, and have two great children: Adam (20) and Laura (22). I love sports, and regularly participate in basketball, cycling, and walking.

But that's not the whole story.

At the age of 18, I began having epileptic seizures. My first seizure was mistaken for a drug overdose. (I guess it was my long hair and beard that triggered this misdiagnosis...)

My seizures (some of which have happened in the classroom, some at home, some at school) have all been of the tonic_clonic variety. I've had an average of one seizure every two years. Medication has been part of my daily life for the last 33 years.

Choices I've Made

I know it's a cliché, but it's worth repeating: we are a product of the choices we make. I'm a living example of this truism.

When I discovered early in life that I had a stutter, I could have chosen a profession that would allow me to hide away in a back room and not speak to others. But I knew God had given me a love for children and had provided me with gifts for working with them.

I had to decide whether I was going to let my communication disorder force me into a vocation I

didn't really want, or whether I would follow my passion. Well, it's clear what my decision was.

I faced exactly the same decision with regard to my epilepsy. Should I find a low-risk vocation where I wouldn't have to deal with the potential embarrassment and humiliation of having a seizure while on the job? Or should I follow my passion and do what I really wanted to do? Again, my passion won out.

Like anyone who lives with a disorder, I have times of discouragement. But rather than wallow in self-pity and ask self-defeating questions like "Why did God do this to me?" I have made a choice to help others with the same disorders better their lives. I serve on the board of the BC Association for People Who Stutter and on the steering committee of the Prince George Epilepsy Support Group.

Lifestyle adjustments I've made

Recently I read an article that outlined some of the various "triggers" that set off epileptic seizures. As I looked at my life, I noted how my lifestyle had been adjusted—deliberately or not—to counteract these "triggers." Here are some of these:

Triggers	Lifestyle Adjustments
Tiredness	I try to get 8+ hours of sleep per night.
Lack of exercise	I stay active (basketball, cycling, etc.).
Stress	I plan well, reducing "surprises" in my life.
Hunger	I eat meals at regular intervals.

In addition, I have found it very important to be open about my epilepsy. For instance, my employer knows I have epilepsy and is prepared to deal with an "event" should it occur. Also, I have found it most helpful to speak with my class about my epilepsy on the first day of school. Being open about my disorder helps the children in my classroom open up about difficulties they experience. They see me not as some aloof being that doesn't have problems, but as a human being who experiences difficulties—just like them!

My purpose in writing this article was to tell you a little about my life and my experience in the hope that it might help others with epilepsy.

To those with any form of disability, I say this: discover how God has gifted you, and then ask Him to show you how to live a life of service to Him!

by Jack Beeksma



Walking the Way Together

by Helen Vanderark

Editor's note: Helen attended the 2004 Festival of Faith and Writing at Calvin College. She wrote "Walking the Way Together" about her experiences there.

"May I walk with you? Can I take your arm?"

At the conference, alone, with limited vision, I could not always find my way. So I asked for help. And received it.

Like Jesus joining the walkers on the way to Emmaus, I joined other conferees. I said, "Are you going where I want to go? May I walk with you? I don't see well. May I take your arm? We could go quicker that way." We walked, talked, arrived at our destination, parted, went our separate ways. We were blessed in the asking, the giving, and the receiving.

We are each being made into little Christs, as Frederick Buechner says in his book *The Alphabet of Grace*. All the people who helped me were "Christs," with names I know or do not know.

One was a young man in a supple black leather jacket—a younger version of my handsome blonde ex-son-in-law. "Are you going to the FAC?" I asked. "Yes, I'm going that way," he said, and calmly let me take his arm.

Later, as I wandered in the Field House parking lot, Mary walked toward me. "You look lost."

"Yes, I am. Is Burton Street that way?" I pointed.

"It is. I'm headed that way. May I drive you there?"

"Yes, I'd like that."

Then there was the man who answered, "Sure, I'll help you find Bellywater Press." Probably a professor, I thought. Graying hair and beard, glasses, comfy sweater. He seemed glad to be asked. He walked me to the table where I found the handmade blank-page books I had read about on Bellywater's website. I purchased several from Sarah, who had crafted them.

Jim from Colorado said he works for the International Bible Society. Young enough to be my son, he was tall, and dressed in a plaid short-sleeved shirt and khaki pants. "How is it you have trouble seeing?" he queried. I answered with my usual, "I have RP—retinitis pigmentosa. I have a very small field of vision and poor color discrimination."

"Your eyes are so pretty" he said, "that soft light green." I was surprised at his compliment. "They're like my Mom's," he added, "but hers are blue. She's lost some of her sight too—she has trouble sewing now, and reading." And I knew that for a moment he was escorting his mom, not me.

Later I met a woman on her way to The Annex to see her son who worked there. "What brings you to the conference?" I asked. "Oh, I'm just a reader," she said, "and I work in a K-8 library." She walked me into the Alumni Board Room for the presentation of a children's book reviewer. Later she saw me in the hall searching for a restroom. "It's right here," she said, offering me her arm again. Then she put herself in my shoes, saying, "This

restroom won't be good for you. It's dark and small." And she was right. But I managed fine and thanked her again.

Ruth from Minneapolis, who works for Augsburg Fortress Publishing, introduced me to Shirley. Shirley was excited to be on her way to a book-signing where she would autograph copies of her first published book—a rhymed story about Jonah for children.

A woman wearing a white short-sleeved sweater seated me in the front row in the auditorium, where I could hear author Annie Turner's every word, though her mike was not working well. My hand was the one Annie reached for and held as she talked of writers being witnesses, their words a path back into the light from dark places of remembered pain. "Yes!" my soul responded, "back to the place where we were created in light by Light. Back to the Light who waits to redeem our dark places."

A thirty-ish female, dark hair cut in a bob, observed me in yet another dimly-lit restroom as my hands followed the brick wall into the corner, then found the closed metal door of the toilet stall. She watched me step back to wait my turn. She waited as I washed my hands, searched for a wastebasket for my wet paper towel. Then she said, "May I show you where the wastebasket is? I had trouble finding it myself, here in the corner under the sink." Her smile softened my squeezed shoulders. She continued, "If I had trouble seeing, I think I'd carry a stick. . . have you thought about a dog?" Because her comments were direct without being pejorative or condescending, I felt no shame or embarrassment in not seeing well.

There was also the serious, sixty-ish man sitting at an information desk. "The stairs to the auditorium are over there," he pointed, in answer to my question.

I walked away but could not locate the stairway. I walked back to his table and smiled, "It's me again. I can't find the stairs."

He got up from his chair, walked ahead of me a few feet, pointed again to the stairwell. "Can you see it?"

"Not yet."



Walking the Way Together, continued

"There, past the brick wall where the red-shirted volunteer is standing." I sensed his exasperation.

"Sorry, I don't see him. May I take your arm? Would you walk me there?" I took his arm before he could refuse, felt it tense but didn't care. The lecture would begin soon. I didn't have time to waste. At the doorway to the stairwell, I was relieved to see it well-lit. The sturdy round metal handrail was painted bright white. "I'm okay now," I said, letting go of his arm.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Waiting in my seat for the lecture to begin, I realized his anxiety resonated with my own. Sometimes, seeing someone needing help, I tumble into the cycle of fear that begins, "I don't know what to do to help. . . I know I should. . . I want to . . .". The cycle crescendos into failure presumed, guilt assumed, blame expected.

Anxious Man, I hope you congratulated yourself for not running away. I hope you scored it as a victory over fear. I hope you know God uses us all, ready or not.

Then there was the man whose voice stopped me as my hand reached for the men's room door handle. "I don't think you want to go in there." I turned to see his smile framed by well-cut mostly white hair. Gently, he touched my shoulder, turned me to the door labeled WOMEN. He covered the WO with his hand and said, "Two times I've come around a corner, not seeing the whole name, and entered the women's room."

"Only twice?" I quipped.

"Twice so far," he chuckled in parting.

Thanks be to God. For smiles and chuckles, touch and words. For folks with generous spirits and grateful hearts who walk the way with me.

The Hush of Mental Illness

by Louise G. Fisher

Hush! say the families.
We'd be embarrassed for others
to know.

Hush! say the siblings.
We'd rather die than let anyone
know.

Hush! say the ministers.
Someone might feel uncomfort-
able, you know.

Hush! say the deacons.
We look after the physically sick,
you know.

Hush! say some church members.
I don't want anyone to know
about me or my relatives, you
know.

Hush! say the government
leaders.
There's not enough money to
go around, you know.

Hush! says society.
Cause we really don't want to
know, you know.

Pray for the mentally ill, my Lord
did say.
I died for them too, you know.

Love the mentally ill, my Lord
did say.
My grace is sufficient for the
task, you know.

Speak for the mentally ill, my
Lord did say.
For they are among the least of
these, you know.

The Accessible Congregations Campaign

No one would argue that all church members should be full and active participants in the life of their congregation. But the fact remains that most churches have barriers (both physical and attitudinal) to the full participation of people with disabilities.

The Accessible Congregations Campaign (ACC), sponsored by the Religion and Disability Program of the National Organization on Disability (NOD), seeks to gain the commitment of congregations to use the gifts and talents of people with disabilities in all aspects of church life: worship, service, study, and leadership.

The campaign is based on the scriptural understanding that all people, with and without disabilities, are created in the image of God.

Five years ago I co-signed a letter with Peter Borgdorf, the CRC's Executive Director of Ministries, that urged all Christian Reformed councils to join this interfaith campaign. Ninety CRC congregations have enrolled in the campaign to date. The NOD is now renewing the campaign, and we ask you to urge your congregation to join this effort if it has not already done so.

Joining the ACC is free. A commitment form, an introductory brochure, and an information packet are available online at www.nod.org or by contacting Lorraine Thal, Coordinator, Accessible Congregations Campaign, National Organization on Disability, 910 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20006 (phone 202-293-5960; TDD 202-293-5968).

Polio and Post-Polio Syndrome

by John Davids

In 1925 at the age of two I was stricken with polio. At that time, not much was known about the disease and its treatment. We lived in rural Iowa, and competent medical facilities were not available, so my parents and my older sisters treated me. The final result was that one of my legs was two inches shorter than the other and had very little muscle strength.

My family was poor, and we nine kids were expected to do our part. I got no special favors.

We attended a country school down the road. We walked almost a mile each way. I did not do too well in school. I had poor vision, was very shy, and was teased a lot. The kids called me "Limpy."

I graduated from the eighth grade, and then had to stay home and work on the farm. The next year I was able to go to high school, and I graduated in 1941. After graduation I worked away from home on a neighboring farm for \$40 per month.

Meanwhile, my older brother was working in an aircraft plant in San Diego. He suggested I come out there. Our country was preparing for war, and workers were needed. Even though I had just turned 18 and was handicapped with polio and bad eyesight, I was hired.

After the war I returned to Iowa. I met a beautiful young lady, and we married. We now have three daughters, 10 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. God has been very good to us. He was, and is, with me all the way. He picked me up when I stumbled and fell many times.

I had to take early retirement from work due to physical problems. Having labored with polio, my body began to

fail more and more. I had 14 operations and over 10 months in the hospital and rehab over the years to survive.

I finally learned I had post-polio syndrome (PPS), though some doctors doubt its existence. We moved from Iowa to San Diego in 1974 to get away from the cold, ice, and snow. We found warmer and dryer temperatures do help, though fatigue is always there.

I am now in a wheelchair, but still thankful for a good life, with God's promise of a better future. Thanks be to God!



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