

August 2025

MISSIONS

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A Commending
Assembly Visits
Its Missionaries

Hogar de Esperanza
Hope in Peru's Desert

Morning Star
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Seeing God's Hand in Each Story

MOP 2025
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THINKING IT THROUGH

BY T. J. MARINELLO

Let's Do Theology!

If a Sunday morning's host wants to empty an auditorium in many Brethren assemblies, he need only announce that the day's speaker is a professor of theology. Given what often occupies a theologian, however, this reaction perhaps is understandable. Since the 19th century, theology has presented as a science much like any other that gathers material, orders it, and expounds it. The expectation thus can be a lecture comprising tightly argued points about matters of little interest or seemingly modest usefulness. Further, many theologians in the modern era begin their inquiries with a cultural insight, a personal experience, or a novel methodological process drawn from the social sciences instead of an investigation of Scripture. They begin outside the Bible to interpret what may or may not be found inside. So is the issue theology or a pale imitation of what theology should be?

The early leaders of the postapostolic church era were great theologians. During that period, for example, explications of the biblical teachings of the Trinity and the Lord Jesus as fully God and fully man were developed. What does the Bible mean when it speaks of one God in three persons (1 John 1:5 NKJV; 2 Corinthians 13:14)? What does it mean where it is written, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"? (John 1:10) The early leaders strove to make the sure teachings of Scripture in these and other areas understandable to the people of their age. Further, these explanations have stood the test of time. But what motivated their profound and detailed theological conclusions?

Survey texts describing the controversies that rent the unity of the body of Christ for hundreds of years can leave a reader with the impression that politics, and perhaps sophistry, were at the heart of these ferocious discussions. But is that a fair appraisal? What motivated the early leaders, and why were they so passionate about their beliefs? Robert Wilken states it clearly

in his book *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*: "Their intellectual work was always in service of praise and adoration of the one God. . . . They wished not only to understand and express the dazzling truth they had seen in Christ, by thinking and writing *they sought to know God more intimately and love Him more ardently.*"¹

So then, what is theology? Theology begins with the proper knowledge of God in His person and work; theology begins with a study of and meditation on God's self-revelation in the Bible. Who is the Lord God we serve? What has He done for us? What can we learn of the unfathomable depths and riches of God as revealed to us in the Scriptures? Even the greatest creaturely minds can barely come to grips with the knowledge of our God in His person and work (Psalm 145:3; Romans 11:33). As many have noted, we can know Him truly but not completely.

But what are we to do with what we learn about God's person and work, His attributes and actions? What is the purpose of grasping, in part, one of the many mysteries associated with the Lord? Wilken notes that the goal of the early church's leaders was a more ardent love for God—for themselves and those they led. Quite simply, then, theology done rightly, done as the early church, is a spiritual exercise of worship: that we might know God more completely and love Him more deeply. We don't study for mere knowledge; we don't study only as an intellectual exercise or a science. That's bad theology. We study with the goal of knowing God more deeply and loving Him more profoundly. But it doesn't stop there.

Should we know the Lord better and love Him more earnestly, we will serve Him more faithfully (John 14:21). That's good theology. ■

Dr. Marinello serves in the Netherlands.

¹ Robert Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 25–26. Emphasis added.

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FRONT COVER: Pátzcuaro, Mexico—Photo courtesy of Sam and Anila Yohannan BACK COVER: Janitzio Island, Mexico—©iStockPhoto.com/agcuesta





SERVANTS' HANDS AND UNITY IN THE SPIRIT

A Chapel Visits Its Missionaries in Mexico

Since 2020, the Lord has been building a special relationship between Luke and Emily Rathke (*Missionary Prayer Handbook* Day 16) and their commending assembly, Cedar Rapids Bible Chapel in Iowa. It started when newly married Luke and Emily began fellowshipping with the 50 believers. As one elder reflected, "We saw them as a young couple with hearts already burning for Mexico." Over the following year and a half, the believers helped the Rathkes prepare for missions and then joyfully commended them in 2021.

Four years of regular communication and prayer followed. Then, in 2025, seven believers visited the Rathkes in Mexico: Nickie Biegler, Jesse Coughlin, Chloe Tuecke, and two elders and their wives, Drew and Beth Tuecke and Sam and Anila Yohannan. Their base was Pátzcuaro, where Luke and Emily live, but they made trips to Uruapan and nearby Janitzio Island, the focus of the Rathkes' ministry.

After, *Missions* spoke with Sam and Anila Yohannan, who discussed the team's experience and insights into visiting missionaries on the field.

How did the Lord prompt you to visit your missionaries?

Sam: The Rathkes came on furlough in December 2024, and we invited them to our house. As they were tying their shoelaces and walking out, they said, "Now, it's your turn to come to our house." We, the elders, had already been thinking about visiting, but their invitation was a big prompt. We didn't want to be a distant commending church; we wanted to walk on the roads in Janitzio with them.

It's amazing how CMML played a part in all this, specifically Jim and Sharon Fleming (CMML missionary care). They visited the Rathkes earlier this year, and we elders received a positive report, which further sparked our interest. An article in *Missions* came out in March 2025, which was another affirmation.

Anila: I appreciated the article because the authors, the Flemings, gave the history of the work in that area of Mexico.

It gave us a larger scope: This is what the Lord is doing! Luke and Emily have been there for about four years, but the work is multigenerational and across various cities.

What did the planning process involve?

Sam: The first step was a lot of prayer. We bathed this idea in prayer as a chapel. Then, we had discussions during our elders' meetings to set specific goals. The two main goals were to learn about the Lord's work that the Rathkes are doing and how we, as a sending church, can pray for and support them. So we set up objectives: to participate in their evangelism and discipleship. Through discussions with Luke and Emily, we gathered some ideas about what might be effective, like sharing testimonies, spending time with the believers, participating in Bible studies, and encouraging the new church plant in Janitzio.

We also planned logistics like timeline, cost, safety, an itinerary, and how to be an encouragement. Then, a big part was team meetings with interested people and Luke and Emily, which helped us shape content around the spiritual context of their ministry. We did prayer calls, too, and Anila and I would meet with the Rathkes on WhatsApp to say, "OK, this is what we're thinking. Are we on the same page?" Then, we relayed that information to the team that had formed.



Above: Prayer formed a big part of each day. **Right:** The team included (L-R) Jesse Coughlin, Anila and Sam Yohannan, Luke and Emily Rathke with Clay and Gavin, Drew and Beth Tuecke, Chloe Tuecke, and Nickie Biegler.

Was traveling internationally with a team manageable? How did it encourage unity?

Anila: It's easy to travel with this group. They're people with servants' hearts and willing to do whatever is needed. They have great insights. They're well versed in the Bible. So I enjoyed being around them and being encouraged by the things they said and did.

Sam: We helped each other navigate cultural barriers and encouraged each other in the ministry. We shared in joys and challenges. The Rathkes were incredible hosts. They set up every detail with care and integrated us deeply into the community.

Once in Mexico, what were you involved in?

Sam: The overarching thing was supporting the Rathkes and their ministry through prayer, evangelism, discipleship, and fellowship. We started with an extended time of prayer in the home with Luke and Emily. Prayer was an integral part of our daily regimen.

Anila: For the women, we hosted a conference. There's a church in Pátzcuaro that's established; it has over 100 people. And there's a church on Janitzio that's forming. So we had ladies from both Pátzcuaro and Janitzio. Beforehand, Emily gave us some Mexican context and asked that we integrate the Gospel into each of our sessions. There were three speakers—Nickie, Beth, and me—and Chloe did fun activities. The first session was on resisting temptation; the second was on honoring your husband and the Lord through your marriage; and the third was on winning the hearts of your children. Emily and Christine Pillette (MPH Day 16) worked hard to put everything together. When we landed in Dallas on the way home, Emily messaged us, saying a woman had placed her trust in the Lord that evening. That was nice fruit to see and an answer to prayer.

Sam: The men had a conference, and while planning it, Luke gave us a template of topics. The theme was freedom from life-dominating sins. Drew, Jesse, and I spoke and shared our testimonies. I think those connected us to the people of Janitzio, showing that sin is universal—similar for men in Mexico and men in America. We related on the level of combating sin and walking in the Spirit. We learned some culturally specific challenges and temptations, especially with family and community. Not participating in certain things would create social repercussions for them. A lot of that came out through dialoguing and Q&A times.



Luke also took us on two discipleship visits. Both times, the men welcomed us and put out chairs. One man's mom



was there, so she cooked us some snacks. As we sat there, we saw the man's eagerness. He took out his New Testament. Then, Luke did a Bible study with him. I saw the heart the Lord has given Luke for discipleship and evangelism, and I saw the impact not just on the person he was discipling but on Luke too.

Tell us about your experience on Janitzio.

Anila: Lake Pátzcuaro sits between Pátzcuaro and Janitzio Island. As we took the boat across, I saw the island's many steps, jagged levels, and rooftops patched together. One building stood out as bigger, wide with a nice red roof. I asked Luke what it was, and he said, "Oh, that's the Catholic church." There's a huge Catholic population on the island, though attendance is sparse. There are about 4,000 people on the island, and you can walk around it in about 30 minutes. Janitzio's population, unlike Pátzcuaro's, is made up of the Indigenous Purépecha people. They're more traditional. They're very warm and family oriented.

Sam: Luke has formed some gospel relationships with the shopkeepers and families on the island. The church plant meets in the home of a generous couple. The men held their conference there one night, but then, all of us went there for Sunday morning worship. We sang in Spanish. The men on our team shared during the Lord's Supper. Luke preached. We broke bread together. Then, we had this wonderful meal of *carne asada* and cactus. Acts 2:42 came alive for us that day.

How did this trip affect your relationship with the Rathkes?

Sam: We appreciate even more that missionary work is hard work. It requires a lot of prayer, focus, and listening to follow the Spirit and Jesus's footsteps through those streets and into the people's homes. This trip deepened my admiration and love for the Rathkes. We appreciate their strength to see God's visible and invisible work. We witnessed firsthand their sacrificial obedience to their calling. They've left comfort, conveniences, and family for a land they now call their home. It moved my heart to see that. They are running the race with endurance. I'm very encouraged as an elder and friend.

Left: Anila and a conference attendee enjoy making cute crafts. **Right:** Several Purépecha men attend a conference on Janitzio.

Did the Rathkes offer feedback about your visit?

Sam: They expressed appreciation. Luke also mentioned that our visit probably made a statement to the people they interact with. A trip like this adds more validity to the work missionaries do because the people see the sending church there. It gives them an idea of the missionaries' backgrounds, church life, and relationships back in the United States.

What advice would you give to another assembly interested in visiting its missionaries?

Sam: Bathe your idea in prayer. Plan in advance because you want time for prayer, foresight, and communication. Communicate with the missionaries beforehand to get a sense of their vision because you might have your own idea of what's important. It requires a good sense of what they would like out of the trip—how they want you involved. And consider those whom you would like to encourage to join the trip. Everyone comes with different talents and gifts. We invited everyone at Cedar Rapids, but we prayed that the people the Lord wanted would join us. He orchestrated testimonies and spiritual backgrounds.

Anila: I'd add two more things: First, the church should pray about whether they should go as a team, like we did, or as an individual or family. They all have different pros. As a team, you bring different testimonies and skill sets, as Sam was saying, and you can do spiritual projects with men and women. On the other hand, if you go as an individual or couple, you get to know

more about the missionaries and their work—from a different perspective. Second, go with a teachable spirit, to learn about the ministry. Of course, you want to encourage the missionaries, but you're also there to do what they do. A lot of times, we're the ones encouraged.

Sam: And observe the practical needs. We tried to address those things and give more practically.

How can we pray for your assembly and the Rathkes?

Sam: Pray for next steps. We don't want this to be a one-and-done situation. Our trip gave us insight. Now, what are the next steps? Pray, too, that we, as a church, would be the fragrance of Christ even here. I was in the grocery store yesterday and had a tract in my wallet. The cashier asked what it was. It was such an encouragement to think, *This is what Luke does day in and day out.* It's an extra push, for me, to encourage our chapel to do those things daily in the mission field the Lord has placed us in.

Anila: Pray for the Janitzio church plant to continue growing—not just in number but in strength. It would be nice, at some point, if the local believers could take over some of the ministry activities. The first part of the island you see from a distance is this staggering 130-foot statue. There's a light beam that goes straight up from it to the moon. It reminded me of all the prayers that could be going up to God. Pray that the whole island would bring glory to God, like a light beam pointed to heaven. ■



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Top row (L-R): The church plant on Janitzio Island meets in this couple's home; Janitzio is home to 4,000 people; Drew shares a laugh with a few of the island's youngest residents. **Bottom row (L-R):** Clay, Luke and Emily's oldest son, hands a tract to a woman in Uruapan while Anila watches; Luke chats with a man selling churros in Janitzio.

Hope in the Desert

THE LORD'S WORK AT HOGAR DE ESPERANZA

BY PABLO & SARAH CENEPO-TORRES



We inhabit a place located in the desert, but really, we live in a small piece of heaven. God is here; He offers His love and grace. And, with Him, everything is possible in Hogar de Esperanza.¹

An artistically gifted former volunteer at Hogar de Esperanza (Home of Hope) used the preciously captured words above to describe what this home has meant to many children since its inception in 2001.

It all began when Dave Miller, an American believer, went on a morning jog during one of his trips to Peru and stumbled across several children eating from trash bags while looking for food. Moved with compassion and obedience to the Lord's teaching in James 1:27, Dave and his late wife, Vickie, worked tirelessly with a few fellow believers from the Christian community in Trujillo to form a home for children in need.

They built a beautiful facility in the middle of Peru's coastal desert. It included a chapel, a spacious dining room, adequate administrative offices, and second-floor rooms where volunteers and potential adoptive families could come, stay, and be with the children. But, most importantly, the installations were crafted so four homes could focus on different age groups. The youngest would lodge in Chispas de Amor (Sparks of Love). Then would come Tesoros del Rey (Treasures of the King), followed by Amigos de Jesús (Friends of Jesus). The oldest children would stay in Luces de Esperanza (Lights of Hope). Hogar de Esperanza received its first orphan in early 2002, and

it didn't take long for children to fill the newly built facility to maximum capacity.

God's call to care for orphans

Sarah and I arrived in Trujillo in early November 2002. We immediately learned of the commendable job Dave Miller and his staff were doing. As teams from the USA and Canada periodically came to see our ministry, we asked Dave to allow them to help with projects at Hogar de Esperanza (HdE) and get to know the children. He gladly agreed and even requested our support with interpretation whenever needed.

The complexity of HdE's ministry was breathtaking from the moment we saw the daily logistical needs coupled with even greater spiritual needs. A series of challenges contested its authentic vision—to offer comprehensive care in the name of Jesus to the most vulnerable in society. Nonetheless, the lines were never blurred in its premier commitment to love the children and help them come to know the Lord Jesus as their personal Savior. That remains the sole mission of this institution, which is approaching its 24th anniversary.

After we were commended to serve in Peru, Sarah kept adoption in mind, but we never imagined being involved in a

ministry of this nature. We longed to establish our efforts, and later did, around evangelism, discipleship, leadership training, and church planting alongside the tender guidance of the late CMML missionaries Bert and Colleen Elliot (who were parents to Pablo in his youth). But, circumstantially, God called us to step up when HdE's beloved founder, Dave Miller, left the board in 2012 and graciously handed the direction of the orphanage to a new board, which we joined. This transition allowed our local assembly and believers fellowshiping with us from abroad to take a preeminent role, and the Lord immediately provided a partnership with Orphanos to facilitate their input.²

A watchful eye

It certainly didn't take long for the home Chispas de Amor to melt our hearts. As the youngest, most vulnerable children in our care (around age four), they are the object of close monitoring, primarily because large coal storage facilities surround our compound. Unsafe, rudimentary methods of treating and containing the material have stained the area with an almost imperceptible layer of soot since 2006.

Within the last few years, and mostly due to public pressure, the authorities demanded that coal storage and processing installations be roofed. The neighboring company complied somewhat, but in 2016, a bigger, unroofed storage facility opened, causing a major uprising in the adjacent community. The owner of the facility, which borders HdE, usurped part of our property in 2023, resulting in a court case that is currently being litigated.

A home for siblings

Tesoros del Rey typically houses middle siblings. Since its foundation, HdE has become known for welcoming sibling groups. Though our bylaws state we receive only children ages

God, in His grace, has blessed our efforts, and many siblings have been adopted

4-10, we have made exceptions to keep families together. God, in His grace, has blessed our efforts, and many siblings have been adopted, primarily into families in North America, Europe, and Peru. We have noticed that Peruvians' interest in adoption has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Currently, two of the five groups of siblings in our homes are awaiting adoption. We celebrate this opportunity to see the Lord provide for them and pray the local authorities will step up their efforts to promote other siblings to the same status.

Christ-saturated days

When the children transition to Amigos de Jesús in their preteen years, we pray they will acknowledge their need of a personal Savior and develop a conscious relationship with Him. Our staff, under our director's guidance, wisely infuse spiritual



Above (from top, L-R): The staff loves the 16 children at Hogar de Esperanza; HdE's board members, which include Pablo (center), faithfully serve the Lord; On Easter Sunday, Pablo rejoices with a teen who was baptized; On a sunny, summer morning, kids gather for devotions; An outing to a nearby pool is a welcome diversion on a hot day; During an excursion, the children and staff enjoy a meal of rotisserie chicken; Kids celebrate the first day of school this past April. **Page 6:** HdE has made its home in the middle of Peru's coastal desert.

meaning into their daily responsibilities. The children begin each morning with devotions and Scripture memorization. Then, we transport them to the public school in the seaport of Salaverry. They return for lunch, rest, play, and homework before beginning their nighttime routine.

They look forward to Sunday morning as it is a precious opportunity to go into the city, attend the local assembly's Breaking of Bread and Sunday school, and mingle with other children and believers. We have seen the Lord move marvelously in the children's lives during the preteen stage. In recent years, many have opted to follow the Lord in baptism.

Support no matter the age

The home for the oldest in the group is Luces de Esperanza. It comprises two orphaned brothers, the first residents HdE received. They carry evident side effects of fetal alcohol syndrome. We had always hoped they would be adopted. Now that they are in their 20s, we are seeing a sharp increase in their biological development. Few institutions in the nation are equipped to look after them. We continue searching for openings at a place where they can receive more specialized care, but until that happens, we are doing our best to love and encourage them.

Soli Deo Gloria

Presently, 16 amazing children (from ages 6 to 25), a devoted staff, and several board members form the Hogar de Esperanza family. Although some of the children are true orphans, most were rescued from neglect, abuse, or abandonment. Many have not had any formal schooling, so during the summer and school year, the staff pays much attention to helping them reach their educational goals. Some favorite activities that distract from their daily routines are birthday celebrations, holiday activities, visits and outings with mission teams, and excursions to a nearby beach, lake, or pool.

Living in the middle of a desert, sandwiched between neighbors committed to their own causes and eager to expand their territories has been an incredible opportunity to testify of God's steady grace and loving provision before the community and the authorities. In recent years, and mostly because of land disputes, we have been stretched thin and pushed to the wall. We have called on the Lord to intervene. He has faithfully watered our desert-like experiences, not like a flowing river but steady enough to quench everyone committed to this ministry in Jesus's name. We desire to remain faithful to the New Testament principles we have cherished and lived by all these years in our personal ministry. Glory to God alone! ■

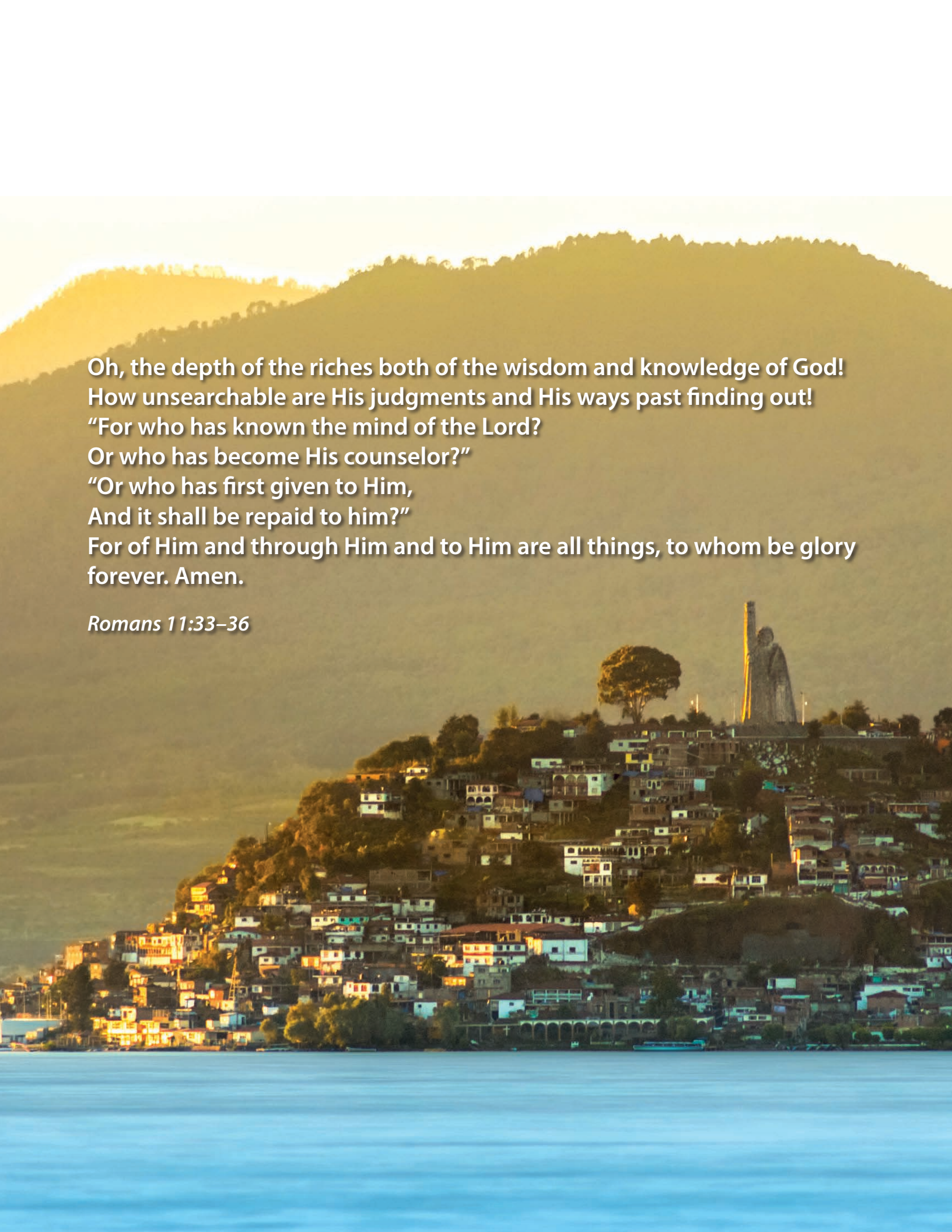


Pablo and Sarah Cenepo-Torres are commended from Grace Bible Fellowship in Portland, Oregon.



Above (from top, L-R): These boys love Hogar de Esperanza's playground; One girl enjoys a workshop on marinera, Peru's national dance; A mission team from Lancaster Bible College leads a vacation Bible school; On Easter, HdE celebrated Jesus's resurrection; Birthdays are a time to celebrate each child.

¹ Matt Bednarsky, "Hogar de Esperanza," 2011. ² Orphanos (Orphanos.kindful.com) is a Christian organization that helps orphan-focused ministries thrive.

A scenic view of a hillside town at sunset. The foreground shows a calm body of water reflecting the golden light. The middle ground is a densely packed hillside town with many small, colorful houses. At the top of the hill, there is a large, dark monument or statue. The background consists of rolling hills under a bright, hazy sky.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!
“For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has become His counselor?”
“Or who has first given to Him,
And it shall be repaid to him?”
For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory
forever. Amen.

Romans 11:33–36