



Publishing venture  
keeps rolling out  
books and resources

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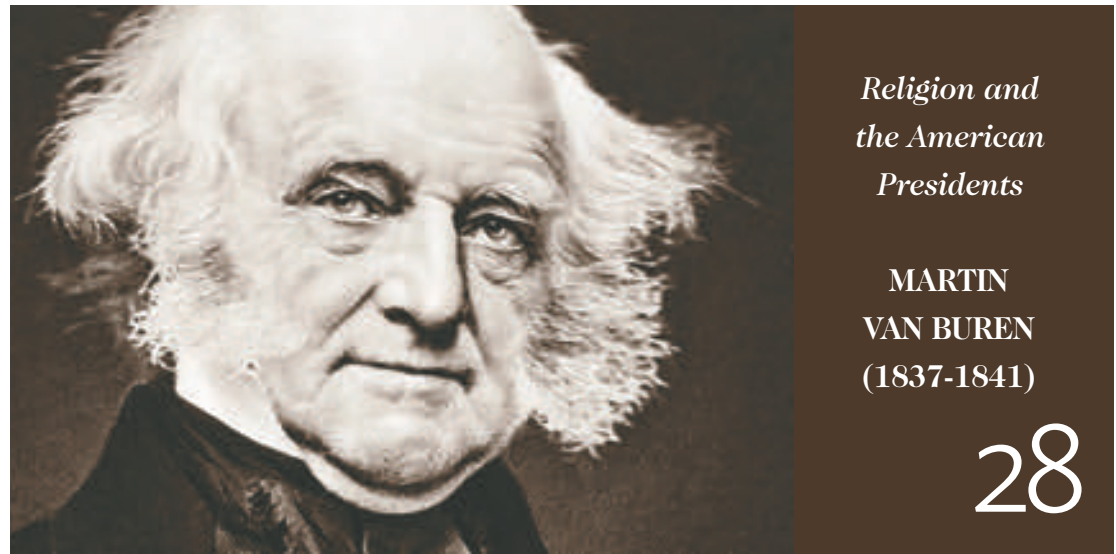
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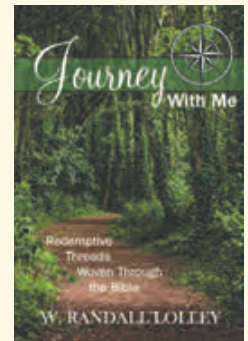
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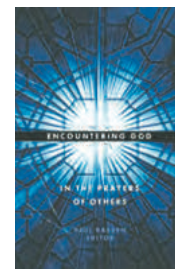
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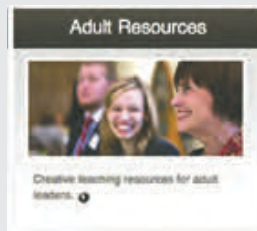
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*“Unity isn’t something we create. God has created unity in the forming of the church. It’s divisions we create, and it’s our task to try to bring down those divisions.”*

# ‘Rascally Baptists,’ Interfaith relations

A conversation with American Baptist leader Roy Medley

A. Roy Medley retired Dec. 31 as General Secretary of American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA), a post he had held since Jan. 1, 2002, covering four terms.

**H**onored as General Secretary Emeritus, his 14 years of service make him one of the longest serving ABCUSA general secretaries. He previously served as Executive Minister for the American Baptist Churches of New Jersey and as national director of the Neighborhood Action Program of American Baptist National Ministries.

Medley serves on the Baptist World Alliance General Council and Executive Committee and is chair of the BWA Commission on Interfaith Relations and the Membership Committee. He recently represented BWA at the Synod of Bishops on the Family in Rome. He is also chair of the National Council of Churches, USA.

During his final days of leading American Baptists, he talked with editor John Pierce about his experiences. This conversation is adapted from that interview.

**BT: As your long tenure representing and leading American Baptists comes to an end, to what are you giving the most time and energy?**

RM: You always want to make sure you’re transitioning well, and Susan Gillies was just named to succeed me as interim.

We’re in the third initiative with the



Baptist-Muslim dialogue here in the U.S., and it’s shaping up a little differently than the first two, which were primarily academic — talking about the basis in scripture for the common ground we have in our understanding of love of neighbor and love of God.

For this third one we want to do a conference for Baptist and Muslim religious leaders who are 40 and younger — and hopefully bring them in as pairs from the same area so we might create a covenant with one another and between their congregations and the mosques in terms of building understanding and working for the common good in their own communities.

So, making sure things are in place for that to move forward has been a big part of closing down right now for me.

**BT: There was a lot of hostility toward Muslims following the Paris attacks. How does that impact this process?**

RM: I think that it’s even more important. We started these dialogues several years ago. We encouraged several of our seminaries to hold regional dialogues. The one Central Seminary held in Kansas City came the weekend after the bombing of the Boston Marathon.

The things we had anticipated they’d talk about weren’t on the table. It was: “What are you telling your children as Christians about what happened?” And Christians asking the Muslims: “How are you talking to your children?”

“How do our children live together in these same schools and not have this become a divisive thing?” Very practical things like that.

The way in which many Muslim youth are radicalized means that it’s all the more important that we engage our religious leaders — particularly younger ones — with one another so that we can work together to help stymie some of the radicalization that takes place, but also to build a sense in which we really do learn to love our neighbor as we love ourselves and express that in very concrete ways.

These attacks, not just in Paris but in Beirut and elsewhere, signal the importance of the Christian community living as a community of Shalom. I’m so impressed with the Lebanese Baptists in the midst of all of this strife as they are taking in countless thousands of refugees from Syria into Lebanon.

The Baptists there have said: We’re not going to live out of fear. We’re going to live out of love. They’ve been providing clothing, housing, whatever [the refugees] need.

That's such a critical witness to the churches here in America as we hear so much anti-Syrian immigrant rhetoric and the fear that is just gripping so many people. Now it's an opportunity for the Christian community to live out of a sense of hope and love and redemptive purpose rather than fear.

These dialogues help bring us into a place with our Muslim neighbors where we can talk about those things that really are scary to us, but are scary to them too.

I was at the Islamic Society of North America gathering over Labor Day weekend. They had invited me to receive an award for the work we have been doing, but I was amazed at the number of workshops offered on helping their young people see the dangers of radicalization — working with parents on that.

We don't begin our American Baptist biennial meetings with the trooping of the colors. But they did — and the Pledge of Allegiance.

The Islamic Society of North America and other Muslim entities here in the U.S. are working very hard against the radicalization of youth and for the rights of Christians as minority communities in predominantly Muslim communities as well as in Muslim countries.

All those are really important reasons for us to make common cause with Muslims who value peace, who prize religious liberty and pluralism in a common setting, and for us to continue to build relationships with them.

**BT: Are you saying that by fostering personal relationships it becomes harder to generalize?**

RM: Exactly. When you have a relationship with someone, the stereotypes begin to fall away. My goodness, people visit doctors who are Muslim all the time. They are throughout medical practices in the United States. We put our lives into their hands every day.

Personal relationships bring down the barriers and stereotypes that we have of each other. And they have many stereotypes of us as Baptists. It helps to break down stereotypes on both sides.

**BT: Most stereotypes of Baptists probably come from the ones who get the most press.**

RM: Well yes, unfortunately, yes.

**BT: How do you explain Baptists to those unfamiliar with or misinformed about this branch of the Christian faith?**

RM: That's interesting. I was just in Rome for three weeks and stayed at a Jesuit center and had opportunities to talk with a lot of the priests there. They came from around the world and were curious about who Baptists are.

When they heard "American Baptists," they thought that's all the Baptists in America — so explaining about who we are as American Baptists was interesting.

Many years ago when I was first working at Valley Forge, we had an Episcopal laywoman helping us develop our ministry with the aging.

One day she said: I'm Episcopalian. If you think of us in terms of the Trinity, we are really big on God the Father, God the Creator. I have Pentecostal friends, and they're really big on the Spirit. But you Baptists are really Jesus people.

That has always stuck with me. I think the easiest way to describe us, as Baptists, is people who love Jesus and want to follow him in our lives — and in that relationship to give our lives to others.

There are distinctives about us within the Christian community. We're a believers' church, and that is so important in our understanding of the way faith is formed. Personal commitment to Christ is central.

There are other distinctives as well in terms of our commitment to religious liberty. It's one of the greatest gifts that we have given the world. It's enshrined in the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights now.

That commitment to conscience: you can't make a free choice for Jesus if you don't respect the conscience of people. If you constrain people to believe, there is no belief. That commitment to religious liberty comes out of our understanding of the nature of faith and the importance of each person's choice in that.

Those are some of the ways I describe us. I talk about us being a people who want to invite others into that love, but we also want to serve others because of that love whether they become Christians or not. We want to serve them because they're beloved of God and because Christ gave his life for them as much as he gave his life for us.

We have a long tradition of concern for the poor, for those who are marginalized — because we began not as a community of those who are wealthy or those who are in power, but very much people who were on the fringe.

I often refer to us as being rascally Baptists because early leaders like Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were oppressed because of their faith and driven out of Massachusetts, yet were scrappy people who believed in religious liberty and the right to conscience so deeply that they were willing to be exiled for that and went to create places where people could live their faith.

That's the stock we come out of: people who haven't necessarily been at the center. I think that gives us a different perspective as a people.

**BT: What about American Baptists in particular?**

RM: What drew me to American Baptists was that here are people who truly love Jesus — and how that pietistic, evangelical sense also has a social justice sense. Christ calls us to be a voice in the world and not to pull apart in a sectarian way, but to really be embedded in the life of the world and in our communities.

American Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch of the social gospel movement was a pastor in Hell's Kitchen in New York City and saw what child labor was doing. He felt the church ought to have a word to say about that and a way of helping to redeem social institutions that were crippling people's lives. That's a rich tradition in ABC life.

Joanna P. Moore was a scrappy woman who after the War Between the States petitioned American Baptists to be appointed to work among the newly freed slaves in the South, and they wouldn't let her. It was all men making this decision.

So she created a Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society, was named their first missionary and they appointed her to the South where she lived among former slaves. She was buried in a segregated cemetery in Nashville. Her will stipulated that she be buried in the "colored" part of the cemetery because those were her people.

That history of witness for social justice runs strong and deep in ABC life — not just in words, but in deeds. That really drew me to ABC. It's in the motto of Eastern Seminary: "The whole gospel for the whole world."

It's a commitment to seeing life in Christ lived more broadly than just a personal transaction between me and God. Faith is never private; it's always public. That is what I love about American Baptists. That's been a rich gift to me.

**BT: Diversity takes more than a large dose of idealism. Is it possible to have authentic diversity within congregations and denominations and, if so, what does it take?**

RM: Yes, I think it is. But bringing down walls is always difficult. When Paul, in Ephesians, talks about the Spirit creating a new humanity he gives three great divisions that characterized the world of his era: Jew and Greek, male and female, free and slave — and how in Christ those divisions no longer were to be barriers in the life of the church.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 36

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

—Martin Luther King Jr., in his 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

“ISIS is slick and effective. It has a well-run propaganda machine and an ideology compelling to disaffected Muslim youth persuaded of Western perfidy. The combination of medievalist literalism and technological prowess has produced a fanatical army of borderless appeal.”

—Roger Cohen, columnist for The New York Times

“Unity will enhance our efforts to fend off any violent extremism and preserve the values of our society. To mitigate any attempt by ISIS in their recruiting efforts in the U.S., we are promoting programs to build resilience against their terrorist ideology.”

—Salam Al-Marayati, president of the Muslim Public Affairs Council based in Washington, D.C.

“It is with a great joy and praises to the Almighty God that Sierra Leone ... has been declared Ebola-free by the World Health Organization.”

—Samuel Conteh, coordinator of social ministries for the Baptist Convention of Sierra Leone, writing to the Baptist World Alliance

“The fact that this one came to light on the Internet speaks to the reality for all of us who deal with manuscripts and antiquities.”

—Geoffrey Smith of the University of Texas, speaking to The New York Times about a rare Greek New Testament papyrus fragment, dating to AD 250-350, that he persuaded a seller to withdraw from eBay ([christiantoday.com](http://christiantoday.com))

# quotation remarks

“Churches have a tendency to be judgmental, but I think that’s above my pay grade... Jesus caught heat in his day for including people in his inner circle the religious authorities considered to be sinners.”

—Bob Shrum, who retired after 32 years as pastor of Oakland Baptist Church in Rock Hill, S.C. (The Rock Hill Herald)

“It’s a matter of giving up some of your self-will, some of your selfishness in order to be a part of a group. To me there’s many, many benefits.”

—Alvin Miller of Shippshewana, Ind., on the growing appeal of Anabaptist faith traditions (Voice of America)

“White Christians now make up less than half of the U.S. population...”

—Reporter Nick Gass on a recent Pew Research survey showing the percentage of American adults who are white Christians dropped from 55 in 2007 to 46 (Politico)

“It is impossible to be grateful and hateful at the same time. We have to have an attitude of gratitude.”

—Actor Denzel Washington, son of a pastor, speaking to a Church of God in Christ gathering in St. Louis (RNS)

“Essentially, they gave me the freedom to follow my convictions, which is a very Baptist thing to do. I did not expect or ask everybody else to agree with me.”

—Pastor Greg Dover on Augusta Road Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C., deacons allowing him to perform a same-sex wedding for friends away from church, an action that resulted in the congregation’s expulsion from a Southern Baptist association and state convention (Greenville News)

“It’s getting harder and harder to love all people and still fit into what has become American Christianity...”

—Blogger John Pavlovitz ([johnpavlovitz.com](http://johnpavlovitz.com))

“While the Vestry does not believe that St. Paul’s should attempt to remove all symbols reflecting St. Paul’s past during the Civil War, the Vestry is united in agreement that it is not appropriate to display the Confederate battle flag in the church.”

—Richmond’s St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, known as the “Cathedral of the Confederacy,” announcing plans to remove plaques and other décor with the controversial image (Richmond Times-Dispatch)

“The conference is divided between those who eagerly support Pope Francis and find his approach compelling and hopeful, those who consider this papacy a patch of bad weather that can’t pass soon enough, and those in the middle who are unsure which narrative is right.”

—Michael Sean Winters, writing in The Tablet of London about the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (RNS)

By John D. Pierce

# There is no risk-free way to follow Jesus

**C**risis do strange things to us. But the teachings of Jesus cannot be set aside just because we feel threatened.

If the faith we claim is not for the most challenging times, it is for no time at all.

It is understandable and acceptable that political thoughts vary among Christian believers. None of us has all the right answers to the complex social problems we face in a fast-changing and often troubled world.



It is our natural response to be deeply concerned, even fearful and angry, when violence and disrespect for human life seem to abound. The constant news of destructive behavior digs into our hearts and souls.

We can feel helpless and at times hopeless.

However, we must always avoid letting fear become the driving force in our lives. It casts out love in the same way Jesus said that love casts out fear.

Wisdom and reasonable precautions have their rightful place. But a crisis should bring out our best attributes (modeled after the life and teachings of Jesus), not our worst.

If the gospel teaches us anything, it is that there is no risk-free way to follow Jesus. A life of self-interest and self-preservation simply does not resemble Jesus' clear and bold calls to deny self, pick up a cross and follow.

In fact, our faith is best tested in times of trials. Overreaction by many — who claim the Christian faith — to the critical resettlement of beleaguered refugees is one clear, recent example.

What it revealed about American evangelicalism is one of failure. But it's a good lesson nonetheless.

Perhaps we can reset our spiritual default from one of fear and self-focus to one of compassion, hope and even a bit of risk. Those are the ways Jesus showed and taught us to live through life's up-and-down journey.

We must live out what we claim. And there is simply no way to read the Gospels, say "yes" to the compelling words of Jesus, and then embark on a way of living that is easy, safe and sure. It is not the route he took or offered to his followers.

Following Jesus is not fatalistic, but faithfulness to living beyond one's own comfortable ways — in good times and in challenging times. Such commitments come with risk, yet are full of love, grace and mercy — that which our world and our souls so desperately need. **BT**

## Thanks for your good response

By John D. Pierce

In the November editorial I shared — with hesitation and hope — about the cash flow concerns of Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith. You responded generously with new first-time gifts, increased giving and monthly pledges that allowed us to finish the year well.

Thanks for being a vital part of this realized hope. Continued giving throughout this year is needed, however, to buoy this unique voice of freedom and hope.

This ministry's faithful friends have been nothing short of heroic in responding with gifts and pledges while sharing the need with others. There has been some wonderful creativity, for example, such as members of a Sunday school class honoring their teacher with a gift.

Promises of monthly giving are crucial to our ongoing operations, and estate gifts can ensure long-term stability.

Our Board of Directors and staff are committed to the best practices of stewardship. We have a lean and effective organization.

The good work of an Envisioning Committee, approved by the Board, has led to some creative steps to addressing both cost savings and reaching a broader audience while staying true to our principles and purpose.

Please review the upcoming changes as detailed on page 8. And then look for something new yet familiar in your mailbox next month — along with the additional resources that will become available online and through social media.

Again, thanks for your support and encouragement as we move forward in some good, hopeful ways.

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# Changes coming

*Baptists Today* to become bimonthly *Nurturing Faith Journal*

There is a slight change in this issue of *Baptists Today*. There will be significant change in the next one that will hit mailboxes by mid-February.

Perhaps you noticed the slight change: the simple dating of this issue as “January-February 2016.” That small change helps us reset the publication schedule for some major changes that have been cooking for a while and will be implemented soon.

Last fall, an effort by directors and staff to explore cost-saving measures moved quickly from crunching numbers to some wonderful creative thinking. The work of an *ad hoc* Envisioning Committee was an engaging, invigorating experience.

The emerging plan — shaped in consultation with clergy and lay leaders of varying ages and experiences — was fully embraced by the Board of Directors’ Executive Committee. It sets a new course that we believe will strengthen and broaden our mission while reducing costs.

## What is changing?

The short answer is the size, look, frequency and name of the publication.

*Baptists Today* — which has experienced a name change, multiple redesigns and adjusted publication schedules over its 33-year history — will become *Nurturing Faith Journal*. It will have a fresh, upgraded, expanded look and, as a bimonthly, contain two months of the *Nurturing Faith Bible Studies*.

And the dates of the lessons will match the dates on the cover! That is, the March and April Bible studies will be in the March-April issue.

We’ll be adding new features to the journal along with an upgraded web presence with more content available to subscribers. However, familiar features in the news journal will remain.

## Nurturing Faith/Baptists Today Envisioning Committee

William Neal, Chairman

Kelly Belcher

Frank Granger

Bill Ireland

Roger Paynter

Kathy Richardson

Don Brewer, ex officio

John Pierce, ex officio

## What is NOT changing?

The purpose, principles and people behind this mission remain the same. We are simply embracing fresh, cost-saving and wider-reaching ways to address the issues of faithful Christian living in a fast-changing world.

Consolidating the brand — *Nurturing Faith* — enables better marketing of all that we produce: news, journal, books, Bible studies, experiences and other resources.

All of these endeavors are deeply rooted in an unwavering commitment to historic Baptist freedoms and the strong belief that unrestricted, thought-provoking, and inspiring information and analysis are welcomed by those seeking to learn, grow and serve as people of faith.

## Why are we doing this?

There are practical and philosophical reasons. Changing times — including changing technology — call for rethinking and redirection.

This new approach is not a tossing-aside of what has been done in the past, but a deliberate and timely effort to bring needed freshness to a mission that is highly valued. As all of this unfolds, our hope is that you too will see the many advantages of these changes, including:

- A more cost-effective approach makes us better stewards of financial resources.
- Consolidation of web sites offers a stronger online presence.
- The new publication will be of higher quality and better size — with consistent dating of the journal and Bible studies.
- Having one brand for everything produced — journal, Bible studies, books, resources and experiences — will improve marketing.
- The *Nurturing Faith* name allows for reaching Baptists and beyond more easily while retaining long-held principles and partnerships.
- Freshness comes from updated products and the increased engagement of creative thinkers and new voices.

## What else?

In addition to changes to the journal and web site, other plans are emerging for *Nurturing Faith* to solidify and magnify the brand, to expand the influence of these resources, and to make fuller use of innovative technology. Look for these unfolding plans next month and throughout the year.

William Neal, a former Baptist editor and member of First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga., chaired the committee charged with envisioning innovative new directions.

“The *Baptists Today* staff and board members are pursuing every initiative available to assure the long-term financial viability of this ministry and to make sure we are relevant to the needs of our expanding constituency,” said Neal. “I am excited about the changes that are coming and very optimistic about our future.”

We welcome your questions and suggestions along the way. Our work is always improved by the creative input of many who share in and support this mission.

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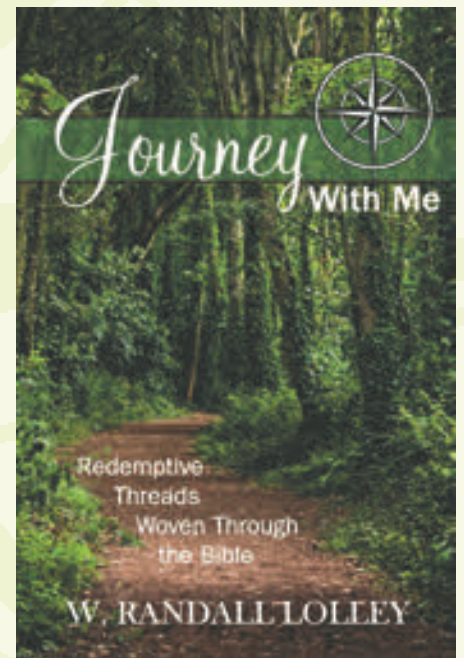
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# From collard greens to scholarships

**D**ALTON, Ga. — Tuesday nights are a happening time at the First Baptist Church in the “Carpet Capital of the World.” A growing Hispanic presence in the northwest Georgia town of Dalton led the congregation to begin Soul Food more than seven years ago.

The program began as a simple way to provide a good meal and hospitality to new neighbors who might be seeking both. Relationships grew quickly and closely.

The shared experiences led to greater engagement and expanded ministry over the years — including watching children grow up and face decisions about the future.

As a result, the congregation — combining the resources of Soul Food leaders, the Mission Committee and the First Foundation scholarship program— created a new First Opportunity Scholarship Fund to assist first-generation, college-bound students with ties to the Soul Food ministry.

The first two recipients — Carmen Torres and Bryan Lopez — are now enrolled in college thanks to this important assistance.

Carmen, a bilingual volunteer in Soul Food ministry and other good causes, attends Georgia State University in downtown Atlanta. Her goal is become a criminal psychologist.



Left to right: Gail Duke, Angie Morgan, Carmen Torres, Bryan Lopez and Chip Sellers celebrate the presentations of the initial First Opportunity Scholarships at First Baptist Church of Dalton, Ga.

Bryan, who came to the U.S. six years ago and became a citizen in 2012, is a native of Guatemala. With support of his family and others he faced many cultural challenges to become an accomplished high school student, winning many awards especially for volunteer service.

A math tutor and Sunday school teacher, Bryan attends Dalton State College with plans to go on to dental school.

Church leaders hope this is just the beginning of expanding the church’s ministry from a weekly meal to life-changing support for those they’ve come to know and love. **BT**

## Bread for the World puts price tag on hunger: \$160 billion in health care

By Adelle M. Banks  
*Religion News Service*

**W**ASHINGTON — Hunger and food insecurity are so widespread in the United States they add \$160 billion to national health care spending, according to a Christian advocacy group.

David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, said hunger is a key factor in the U.S. having the worst infant mortality rate among developed countries.

The annual report, titled “The Nourishing Effect: Ending Hunger, Improving Health, Reducing Inequality,” notes that the U.S. also ranks at or near the bottom for other indicators such as obesity, lack of access to food and maternal mortality.

The report says that as many as 50 million people — approximately 1 in 6 Americans



Workers fill carts with food for the poor at the Foothill Unity Center food bank in Monrovia, Calif. Photo courtesy of REUTERS/David McNew

— live in a state of sustained hunger or food insecurity, defined as not having adequate access to food to keep them healthy. It says the figure has remained “stubbornly high” at the same level since 2008, despite the recovering economy.

John T. Cook, an associate professor of pediatrics at Boston University School of Medicine, who helped prepare the report, said the figure of \$160 billion in health care costs is “probably an underestimate.”

But doctors are increasingly recognizing the connection between health and hunger, experts said.

Acacia Bamberg Salatti of the Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said hospitals are partnering with church groups to help patients translate their doctor’s instructions and connect them to healthy meals.

“At the end of the day, health care and hunger are very much linked,” she said. “You can’t be healthy, you can’t be able to stave off chronic diseases if you’re not eating healthy food.” **BT**

# Megachurch boom rolls on as big concerns rise

**C**hange is coming to American megachurches — those behemoths for believers that now dot the religious landscape. However, there are more participants in megachurch worship than ever.

“Last weekend 1 in 10 adults and children who went to a Protestant church went to a megachurch — about 5 million people,” said Warren Bird, director of research for Leadership Network and co-author of a megachurch study released in December.

But individual attendance is down to once or twice a month — or less.

“They think ‘regular attendance’ is ‘I get there when I can,’” said the second co-author, sociologist Scott Thumma, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. The study examines megachurches (2,000 people in weekend attendance is the basic qualifier) in comparison with other, smaller congregations.

“We found many of these large, successful congregations still have many of the same challenges of smaller congregations. They are not immune to the cultural dynamics in society,” said Thumma.

“Everyone is trying to attract new people and hold on to them and make them disciples. But, today, people are seekers and shoppers looking for a temporary experience of worship, not a long-term commitment,” said Thumma.

Megachurches, many launched a quarter century ago by baby boomers, now see slippage in the younger generations. Participation by millennials, ages 18-34, has flattened out at about 19 percent since 2010. But Gen-X attendees, ages 35-49, are drifting out the door — down from 28 percent in 2010 to 23 percent today.

The fickle, fast-moving faithful have prompted other changes.

Megachurches are still being built. Indeed, the study finds those established since 1990 are growing at more than double the rate of older megachurches. But the study, funded by the Beck Group, which builds megachurches, finds the new churches are constructed very differently.

Congregations are “getting bigger by getting smaller,” said Bird. They’re building smaller main sanctuaries (median down from



1,500 seats to 1,200 seats) but holding more services on more campuses.

Five years ago, 46 percent of megachurches had multiple locations. Now it's 62 percent. And the number of their sites bumped up, too — from an average of 2.5 sites to 3.5.

Older megachurch congregations have a more diverse age range, higher member involvement in programming and \$500 more in per capita giving than the big churches founded since 1990, the study finds.

The report, based on a survey of “key informants” — senior pastors or executive staff of congregations — also found a shift in how these churches describe their religious self-image.

Every year since Thumma and Bird began studying megachurches in 2000, the percentage that describe themselves as “evangelical” has gone up. Now, it's 71 percent, no matter what their denomination, said Bird.

About 40 percent of megachurches are nondenominational, and for those that do have ties, “it's not really a draw.”

“God and Rick Warren know Saddleback Church is Southern Baptist,” said Bird, but most people who worship there don't. Most pastors said denominational ties were unimportant or not very important to their congregation.

What is increasingly important is service to others outside their own congregations.

Thumma said that “for a very long time, the focus of megachurch programming was inward — taking care of our own people. Now there's a huge shift to outreach: 43 percent said global missions were a specialty of their congregations, and 44 percent said one of their specialties was community service and helping those in need.” **BT**

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## Survey: Women distrust churches for abortion advice

**F**ear of gossip and judgmental reactions routinely prevents churchgoing women who are considering an abortion from first seeking the counsel of pastors or others in their church, according to a new survey by an evangelical polling group.

The survey was conducted by LifeWay Research, associated with the Southern Baptist Convention, and sponsored by the Care Net network of anti-abortion pregnancy centers. California recently passed a law, following a

campaign by abortion rights groups, to regulate such centers, which seek to prevent abortions.

The survey of 1,038 women who have had abortions, released earlier this week, asked respondents about their church attendance, who they talked to before they made a decision, and their perceptions about church attitudes concerning abortion.

While other polls have shown a strong correlation between church attendance and anti-abortion views, the LifeWay survey found

that 36 percent of the women were attending a Christian church once a month or more at the time of their first abortion.

More than three out of four told LifeWay that their church had no influence at all in their decision to terminate pregnancy, and 65 percent said they felt church members are judgmental about single women who are pregnant.

Catherine Walker, who runs the Chicago-area Life After Decision, a church-based outreach to women after abortion, recognizes such sentiment.

"I have (counseled) over 30 women in my ministry. None of them ever mentioned talking directly to any church staff or minister," said Walker, who had four abortions herself starting in 1979.

"Their shame and guilt is so strong."

Scott McConnell, vice president at LifeWay Research, conceded that the numbers of church-attending women who have had the procedure is "sobering," but said there was a silver lining for people who want to see fewer women ending their pregnancies.

"The biggest thing is to see the opportunity," he said, adding that if pastors "can change the culture in the church to make it safe, six times more women will have that conversation at church before they make the call."

In the U.S., there are about 1 million elective abortions per year and 85 percent of women who have abortions are unmarried, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The survey found that seven in 10 women who had an abortion identified themselves as Christian. Breaking that down, Catholic women represented 27 percent; Protestant, 26 percent; and nondenominational, 15 percent. Among Protestants, the top three denominations represented among women who had abortions were Baptist (33 percent), Episcopal (6 percent), Church of Christ (4 percent).

McConnell acknowledged that church staff may think they are offering help, but the message is not getting through to women facing unplanned pregnancies.

"There hasn't really been a lot of conversation or preaching or anything about Christians having abortions," said Roland Warren, the new president of Care Net, the national network of crisis pregnancy centers that sponsored the survey.

"We talk about defunding Planned Parenthood and all these other things. We can defund Planned Parenthood if we just stop having abortions ourselves." **BT**

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Congregational life is always in focus as Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith seeks to provide helpful, informative, inspiring resources from this news journal with excellent Bible studies to books, experiences and a daily web presence.

In turn, many congregations are faithful in providing group subscriptions and helping support this ongoing mission through annual gifts.

Director David Hull is leading an effort to encourage more congregations to become “Freedom Churches” that provide annual support through budgeted or mission gifts.

We want to take this moment to say “THANKS!” to the congregations who’ve made significant gifts to Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith thus far in 2015. We are grateful for your shared ministry.

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# Healthy Church

## It's time to get well

By Terry Ellis

Addiction is a heavy, loaded and often frightening word. About 24 million people in the United States are addicted to drugs and alcohol according to Partnership for Drug-Free Kids ([drugfree.org](http://drugfree.org)).

That is nearly 10 percent of all Americans over the age of 12. Yet, in my 35 years of being a pastor, I can count on one hand the number of people who came to me about a problem with drugs and/or alcohol.

I was never a fire breather as a preacher. Grace was, and is, my theme. I even write a blog about grace ([gracewaviestoday.com](http://gracewaviestoday.com)). I was approachable.

But if the statistics about addiction are correct, then I was pastor to hundreds of addicts during my pastoral career. Yet almost none of them came to me about this problem.

All that changed on Feb. 16, 2014, when I stood in the pulpit of Broadmoor Baptist Church in Baton Rouge and said, "I'm Terry — and I'm an alcoholic."

The people in the congregation were not surprised, though the words probably jarred them. A little more than three months earlier I entered Palmetto Addiction Recovery Center in Rayville, La., for treatment of alcoholism after a caring member came to me and said, "It's time to get you well."

After I entered treatment, I asked our trustees to be clear about what was happening, fully expecting my ministry to be over. The church, however, possessed a rare and beautiful grace. They welcomed me back, and that led to my odd sermonic opening.

In the succeeding days and months, a very unexpected thing happened. People began coming to me to say that they were alcoholics or drug addicts. More common were those with someone

in their family struggling with addiction.

Then calls came from members in current and former congregations concerning a family member who clearly had a problematic relationship with drugs and/or alcohol. I led interventions (not the kind you see on TV!), and helped people get the treatment they needed.

None of this took place before I became an alcoholic. Why? Some reasons are obvious. An addict often has an exaggerated sensitivity to judgment.

We see it where it is not. Of course, sometimes censure is real. We can always find someone who condemns and then uses that as an excuse to stay away from a place (the church) that is likely to give grace if we give it the chance.

A more common obstacle is the very real sense that few people really understand what an addict is experiencing. Before I became an alcoholic, I had little conception of the agonizing mystery of addiction. The physical craving combined with the mental obsession is maddening and miserable.

That certainly doesn't mean you have to be one to understand one. My therapist was not an addict, though many in this field are in recovery themselves. For someone who isn't, I can only say don't eat for three days and then try not thinking about food. You'll understand better the everyday life of an addict.

Of course, the main reason addicts don't come to us is because of self-imposed exile. An addiction fights for its life. It speaks to us in a reasonable voice, and that voice is our own.

It tells us that no one understands, and that we therefore should avoid every

encouragement to change. The addiction isolates us. And so we slink into the oily shadows of denial and shame.

The church, God bless it, is seldom equipped to deal with this disease of the brain and spirit, and that is absolutely no indictment of the church. Bringing light to this kind of darkness requires either careful study and prayer or walking in the darkness personally.

I would not recommend the latter. It nearly killed me, and certainly dragged me through a black depression in which I cursed every dawn.

Today I welcome the dawn. I'm in recovery, and the screeching voices of fear and doubt are still — one day at a time.

I recently left the pastorate to found Chrysalis Interventions, through which I help people get into recovery. Frankly, I love alcoholics and addicts.

I can say to them, "I've never met you, but I understand you."

That creates a trust that leads to the possibility of a whole new life. I have the blessing of saying, "It's time to get you well."

I also go to churches and tell my story, and then present a seminar on addiction in the family of faith.

The addicts are among us, in the pews and sometimes in the pulpits. They're confused and confusing, and desperately in need of grace. Chrysalis is one bucket of water in the middle of a raging inferno that we can no longer neglect.

The chorus is growing, and the church must find its voice to proclaim the good news: "It's time to get well." **BT**

—Terry Ellis directs Chrysalis Interventions ([chrysalisinterventions.com](http://chrysalisinterventions.com)) based in Baton Rouge, La.



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By Brett Younger

## Why Baptists should celebrate Epiphany

Most Baptist churches are done with the wise men after they make their appearance at the end of the Christmas pageant. We do not often sing “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” This may be, in part, because many of us grew up with the heretical version:

*We three Kings of Orient are,  
Trying to smoke a rubber cigar.  
It was loaded and exploded! Boom!*

*We two Kings of Orient are,  
Trying to smoke a rubber cigar.  
It was loaded and exploded! Boom!*

*I one King of Orient are,  
Trying to smoke a rubber cigar.  
It was loaded and exploded! Boom!*

(pause) *Silent Night.*

The rock ‘n’ roll version never caught on:

*We four Beatles of Liverpool are,  
Paul in a taxi, John in a car,  
George on a scooter, beeping his hooter,  
Following Ringo Star.*

When we skip Epiphany, we miss the party the rest of the world is having. Epiphany has been a Christian feast day since at least 361 C.E., observed on January 6 or the preceding Sunday. (This year it is January 3.) Epiphany, from the Greek for “striking appearance,” celebrates the adoration of the magi.

Epiphany is about presents.

In Argentina, children leave grass and water for the camels and get presents in return. (It is unclear whether the camels pick out the presents.)

In the Netherlands, children dress as the wise men and go house to house singing and receiving candy and money.

Children in Slovenia work the neighborhood for almonds, dried figs and nuts



— which makes children in Slovenia wish they were in the Netherlands.

Epiphany is about food.

In Finland, they make star-shaped gingerbread cookies that they break while making a wish. If the star breaks into three pieces, the wish will come true. (That’s how the cookie crumbles in Finland.)

In England, whoever finds the bean in the cake is king. Whoever finds the clove is the villain, the twig is the fool, and the rag is the tart. (Whoever cooks a cake with a twig and a rag in it is committed to this custom.)

Epiphany is about fun.

In India, three boys in robes and crowns ride horses to church along a route decorated with streamers and balloons — just like the wise men, sort of.

In Ireland, Epiphany is called Women’s Christmas. Children bring their mothers gifts while the women get to rest after the hard work of Christmas. (Irish women should consider celebrating Epiphany on December 25.)

Romanian folk wisdom holds that if a girl slips on ice on Epiphany, she will marry before the year is out. (Perhaps her orthopedist will propose.)

In Portugal, men dress as women for the traditional Epiphany dance for reasons that are not immediately obvious.

When we skip Epiphany, we miss a story that is worth celebrating. We do not know much about the wise men, but we have gotten good at making stuff up.

One early tradition is that there were

12 magical magi, but that made the nativity scene crowded, so since there were three gifts — shaky evidence though it is — we went with three. We gave them names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. Since they stop to ask for directions, there may have been women in the group.

With their star charts and whatever passed for telescopes 1,500 years before telescopes, the magi come to the peculiar conclusion that a new king has been born in Israel.

One legend is that the journey took 30 days. A trip like that was uncommon — such a long distance, temperamental camels, unfriendly towns, robbers behind the next sand dune.

They finally arrive in the capital city, and ask, “Where can we find the newborn king? We saw a star that signaled his birth for educated people who understand such things.”

Herod gets nervous, and when he gets nervous the whole town gets nervous. Herod is worried enough about his job to ask the reference librarians for help.

The scribes are smart enough to remember that the prophet Micah gave directions to Bethlehem, but not wise enough to look for the child themselves.

The magi leave, the star appears again, and they throw the most famous baby shower ever. The magi are out of place in this humble village. The wise men showing up in Bethlehem is like the Dalai Lama visiting a Waffle House in South Georgia.

Matthew does not give us details. The magi’s visit lasts all of one verse. We are not told if they stayed for dinner, what they thought, what they felt, or if Mary traded the myrrh for more swaddling clothes.

The wise men’s unreasonable trip could not have a reasonable beginning. Some unexplainable longing led them to follow a light without knowing where it would lead them. Epiphany reminds us that we have a desert to travel, a star to discover, and a hope to find. **BT**

—Brett Younger is associate professor of preaching at Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology.



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### Season of Epiphany

Feb. 7, 2016

Who Needs a King?

Psalm 99

### Season of Lent

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Who Needs a Rescuer?

Psalm 91

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# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 99

Feb. 7, 2016

## Who Needs a King?

The book of Psalms consistently ranks as the most-read book in the Bible, but some psalms are easier to love than others. We like warm and fuzzy psalms like Psalm 23 and others that offer comfort or assurance. We like wisdom psalms such as Psalm 1 that offer sage advice for the faithful life. We like celebratory hymns such as Psalm 100 that exalt God as Lord of all.

Other psalms don't connect as well: imprecatory psalms such as Psalms 69 and 109 may offend us, while royal psalms like Psalms 2 and 18 may seem alien to us. This month we'll be studying four psalms, some of which are easier to connect with than others. In the process, we'll look for ways in which we might convert archaic imagery into a meaningful message to us.

### A God who reigns (vv. 1-3)

As you think about God, what images occur to you? "Father" comes quickly to mind, as do words like "Master" and "Lord." Did the word "King" occur to you? We don't live under a king, so the term may not come naturally to us, but it was typical for ancient folk who lived under monarchs to use royal terminology when thinking of God.

Today's text is the last of a group of six psalms (47, 93, 96-99) that focus on God's kingship over the earth, the universe, and all peoples, not just over Israel. The psalms would originally have been sung in worship at the temple in Jerusalem, and all of them include the happy affirmation "Yahweh reigns!"

Additional background information online where you see the "Digging Deeper" icon



Psalm 99:4 –  
"Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob."

While all six psalms recognize God's universal sovereignty, each has a different emphasis: Psalm 47 celebrates God as the king of all the earth, Psalm 93 praises God's kingship over chaos, and Psalm 96 emphasizes God's kingship over all peoples. The manifestation of God's kingship through earth-shaking theophanies is at the heart of Psalm 97, while Psalm 98 speaks of God's manifestation in deliverance.

Psalm 99, our text for today, commemorates various ways in which God's holiness is revealed, with a three-fold declaration of divine holiness in vv. 3, 5, and 9.

The first section leaves no doubt as to the subject of the psalm: it opens with the stirring shout "The LORD is king," or more literally, "Yahweh reigns!"

God rules, the psalmist claimed, with such power and magnificence that all peoples should tremble and the earth should quake at the very thought of Yahweh's presence "enthroned upon the cherubim" (v. 1). The reference is to the

"Holy of Holies," where the Hebrews imagined God sat upon an invisible throne above the twin cherubim atop the Ark of the Covenant, which served as a divine footstool (Exod. 25:22, 1 Sam. 4:4, 2 Kgs. 19:15).

The temple was in Jerusalem, alternately known as "Zion." Thus the psalmist declared "The LORD is great in Zion," where "he is exalted over all the peoples" (v. 2). This leads into a call for all to render praise to God's "great and awesome" name, for "Holy is he!" (v. 3).

What do you think of when you hear the word "holy"? Typical answers might include piety, purity, an absence of sin, or a life of total devotion to God. The Hebrew concept of holiness was not so much one of purity or sinlessness, however, as it was of separateness or distinctiveness. For Israel to be holy was primarily to be "set apart" as God's special people. The Hebrews considered God to be beyond sin, of course, but the prime significance of "holiness" is

that Yahweh was unique, apart from all others, not just at the top of the created order but above it and responsible for it.

### A God of justice (vv. 4-5)

Israel's holy God could be praised for many reasons. What comes first to the psalmist's mind is that God's power is expressed in justice and equity for God's people. The first few words of v. 4 are difficult to translate. A literal reading would be "and strength, a king, justice he loves." Changing a single vowel – not part of the original text – would turn "strength" into the adjective "strong," an option chosen by most translators. The NRSV renders it "Mighty King, lover of justice," while NET has "The king is strong; he loves justice."

In either case, the meaning is clear: the psalmist hails God as one who not only loves justice, but also has established it: "you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob" (v. 4b). Jacob is used as a symbolic name for Israel. He is remembered as the father of 12 sons who gave rise to the 12 tribes of Israel, and indeed, his name had been changed to "Israel" (Gen. 32:28).

Although Jacob clearly represents Israel, the psalmist's use of his name Jacob is a bit surprising in this context, for Jacob was known as a conniving cheat who fast-talked his brother into surrendering his birthright (Gen. 25:29-33), and later deceived his father Isaac into giving him the blessing that was due to his firstborn brother (Genesis 27). Some model of justice! That God could use such fallible people to establish a nation founded on principles of equity and justice for all people – including the widows, orphans, and immigrants who lived on the margins – is worthy of considerable praise. 🇺

As in the first stanza, the psalmist turns from his own praise of God to calling on others to join in the hallelujahs: "Extol the LORD our God; worship at his footstool." Worshiping at God's "footstool" is yet another reference to God's imagined enthronement above the Ark of the Covenant in the

Holy of Holies – an apt image for the closing cry in v. 5: "Holy is he!"

### A God who relates (vv. 6-9)

Having praised God's power and justice, the poet reminds worshipers of how long God's blessings have been evident. He recalls how Moses and Aaron led the people as priests. Even though Aaron was known as the first priest and Moses as the lawgiver, Moses also exercised the priestly functions of interceding with God on behalf of the people, which seems to be the psalmist's concern. Samuel, a priest who also acted as the last of the judges, is also remembered. "They cried to the LORD, and he answered them" (v. 6).

We might expect the cry and response to be for deliverance or vindication for Israel, but the psalmist recalls something more basic: "He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them" (v. 7). This is the root of the justice the psalmist had mentioned in v. 4 and the holiness he has called to mind throughout: God's gift to Israel of the law. God did not impose justice in the sense of forcing people to do what is right: that would violate human freedom. Rather, in the Torah God gave to Israel the basis for a society built on justice and equity. The people did not always obey the commandments, as the Hebrews' narrative theologians and prophets often reminded them, but the gift of a just system was in place.

Moses, Aaron, and Samuel are named as examples of the type of life God's people should live. They were not perfect, and their faults are chronicled along with their victories. Yet, their lives were characterized by faithfulness, and when they fell short, they turned to Yahweh for forgiveness. God answered them, the poet declared: "you were a forgiving God to them." But, God also

disciplined them when they sinned: "but an avenger of their wrongdoings" (v. 8). [See "The Hardest Question" online for more.]

As we have come to expect, the psalmist concludes his third section as he did the first two, by calling on the Israelites to praise their holy God: "Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain" (v. 9a). The holy mountain, of course, is another reference to Jerusalem, or Mount Zion. As he had closed the two previous stanzas, so the psalmist ends the psalm with a call to remember God's unique nature: "for the LORD our God is holy."

So much and so good for Israel, but what might this text say to contemporary Christians whose relationship with God is not based on obedience to the covenant law given to Israel? First, we should acknowledge our debt to the law: the moral principles found in the Ten Commandments and further elaborated in directives to love one's neighbor and care for the marginalized are at the heart of our modern understanding of personal morality and social justice.

Second, we who come to God through Christ may recall that Jesus demonstrated a constant concern for justice. Luke suggests that Jesus adopted as his mission statement a text from Isa. 61:1-2 that spoke of justice for the oppressed and comfort for the brokenhearted (Luke 4:18). In his ministry on earth, Jesus healed the sick, showed special care for the poor, and taught his disciples to love God and to love others as they loved themselves (Luke 10:27). "I give you a new commandment," Jesus said, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34).

As the psalmist praised Yahweh as the king of all, Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God – or rule of God – in which God's people are called to practice love for God and justice for all. Like Israel, we may also fall short of our calling, but our failure does not diminish the praise due to the powerful, just, and holy God who is king of all. **BT**

# Bible Study

Psalm 91

with Tony W. Cartledge

Feb. 14, 2016

## Who Needs a Rescuer?

**D**id you ever wish you had a magic cape, something like Harry Potter's invisibility cloak, that would protect you from the world's harms?

Through the years, many people have read Psalm 91 in precisely that way, reciting it as a comforting mantra, believing (or at least hoping) that God will surround them with protective angels. We know, however, that such a belief flies in the face of reality: trouble comes to everyone, no matter how pious or trusting. Sickness, accidents, and heartache may affect us all. What do we do with a psalm that appears to promise more than it delivers?

### A trustworthy claim (vv. 1-2)

Few people in ancient times could have read the psalms for themselves. An average Hebrew would not have known how to read, nor would he or she have been able to afford a handwritten parchment scroll. While we may read and ponder the psalms at our leisure, the Hebrews of antiquity may have heard psalms only when they came to worship, or if a singing priest happened by. It was important, then, that psalms be memorable.

Psalm 91 was almost certainly used in Israel's temple worship, a psalm of trust and assurance for those who faced difficult days. Some writers have argued that it may have been used in a special service focused on the king as he prepared to lead the nation into war or during troubled times. In that sense,



Psalm 91:14 –  
"Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name."

it would have served as a combination worship liturgy and pep talk to raise the king's confidence as a leader.

Others imagine that it could have been read as a psalm of assurance for anyone in need of courage, or used as an instructional psalm, similar to a sermon, calling worshipers to confidently put their lives in God's hands.

The psalm appears to have a liturgical form, with multiple speakers. The first two verses would have been spoken by the worship leader (or perhaps a worship leader and an individual testifying of his trust in God), followed by a choral or congregational response in vv. 3-13 (possibly spoken antiphonally), and concluding with a divine oracle that could have been pronounced by a priest or cultic prophet who spoke for God (vv. 14-16). ⚓

The first two verses set the theme: one who intentionally dwells in the divine shadow finds God to be a refuge and a fortress. Four divine names appear in the first two verses, including 'Elyon

(Most High), *Shaddai* (the Almighty), *Yahweh* (the LORD), and 'Elohim (God). 'Elyon and *Shaddai* are old divine names that may originally have been used by other cultic groups and only later identified with Yahweh, possibly attesting to the psalm's antiquity. ⚓

The key to understanding these verses is found in the first two verbs, "dwells" and "abides." The psalm is not addressed to part-time believers, to persons who pray only when in trouble, read scripture when fearful, or practice ritual aspects of religion with little reference to faith in their daily life. Rather, it concerns those who consciously seek God's presence all day, every day.

The psalm's location in the temple might lead one to think the poet was encouraging people to live in the sanctuary, but that would be impractical. While Israel thought of God as being "enthroned above the cherubim" in the Holy of Holies, the people understood that God's presence was not limited to the temple.

Additional background information online where you see the "Digging Deeper" icon



## Amazing promises (vv. 3-13)

The response in vv. 3-13 cites a number of specific situations in which the one who lives in God's presence could survive dangers or overcome obstacles. Verses 3, 9, and 11 all begin with the Hebrew word *ki*, which is normally translated as "for, because, or since." It could also be used as a positive asseveration, however, leading some translators to render it as "indeed," or "truly."

While some of the situations may be understood literally, others are metaphorical. The promise in v. 3 that God would deliver the faithful "from the snare of the fowler" does not speak to the danger of traps set to catch birds, but of any danger that springs up unawares. "Deadly pestilence" literally means "destructive thing," a translation that forms a better parallel to the snare of a fowler.

The image of escaping a trap for birds surprisingly morphs into a metaphor of finding shelter beneath the divine wings, as chicks might seek shelter beneath the mother hen's wings when danger lurks (v. 4a). The psalmist may have had in mind the wings of the cherubim atop the Ark of the Covenant as a symbol of God's protective mercies. In either case, the image speaks of intimate care, in which God's faithfulness "is a shield and a buckler." **U**

The imagery of vv. 5-6 emphasizes God's power to protect at any hour, day or night: the faithful one need not fear terrors by night, arrows by day, pestilence that stalks the dark, or trouble that strikes at noon. Notice the alternation between day or nighttime dangers. The words used could suggest epidemic plagues, famine, hail, fire, or enemy attacks: God is on guard, as we like to say, 24/7.

Verses 7-8 up the ante, at least in terms of numbers. Pestilence or war might strike 1,000, even 10,000 neighbors, but the one who dwells in God's care will remain untouched. The implication is that those who fall belong to "the wicked" who do not trust in God

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and thus receive punishment rather than protection.

The assertion of vv. 9-10 recalls the opening verse: it is because the person in question has made Yahweh a refuge and "the Most High" (*'elyon*) a dwelling place that "no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent."

The picture that comes to mind with vv. 11-12 is a familiar one, the promise that God will send angels to protect and guard the faithful, to the point of preventing even a misstep that would lead to a stumped toe. With such protection in place, the trustful one could confidently walk through the dangerous wilderness, not only avoiding unmoving stones but also trampling confidently upon all dangers, from crawling snakes to pouncing lions (v. 13). **U**

## A word from God (vv. 14-16)

Could the promises of vv. 3-13 be real? A priest or cultic prophet who speaks for God insists it is so. Note the first-person pronouns: "Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name" (v. 14). The oracle appears to promise answered prayer: "When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble; I will rescue them and honor them" (v. 15).

If that is not enough, the final verse adds "With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation" (v. 16).

But we know good people who loved God but died young. We know people who have prayed for physical healing or financial help and didn't find it. How, then, should we read this psalm?

On the one hand, we might read it as a source of encouragement for those who face times of trial. From this perspective, we can recognize the promise of perfect protection as hyperbole – an overstatement for effect. God may not in fact protect us from all danger, but

those who choose to dwell in God's care can be sure that God is present with them through all things.

Consider this: if the psalm truly promised a long and trouble-free life in return for loving God, any "love" for God would be selfishly motivated: we would be in it for what we could get out of it. Such an approach does not love God for God's sake, but seeks to use God for the person's sake. **U**

We note that when this psalm is quoted in the New Testament, it is on the lips of the devil, who tempts Jesus to throw himself from the highest point of the temple, trusting angels to catch him (Matt. 4:6, Luke 4:10-11, quoting from Ps. 91:11-12). Jesus, however, recognized the temptation for what it was. Gaining popularity and influence through angelic deliverance was not Jesus' way: he would experience human life even as we do, complete with suffering.

Jesus' rejection of a literal reading of the psalm suggests that we should also approach it, not with an expectation that God will give us all we ask for or keep us from all harm, but as an assurance that in all the ins and outs and ups and downs of life, God is with us, and that remaining within God's will is more important than living in a protective bubble.

Indeed, if we go back to the beginning of the psalm, the challenge and promised blessings are for those "who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty." Abiding in God is more than seeking protection: it is a surrender of life that changes our priorities. Jesus made it clear that those who follow him should not be after personal gain, but are to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," adding "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25).

Reading Psalm 91 through a New Testament lens helps us to understand that the end of being faithful is not to avoid all present danger, but to serve a Lord whose care extends far beyond the pitfalls of our earthly life. **BT**

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 27

Feb. 21, 2016

## Who Needs a Light?

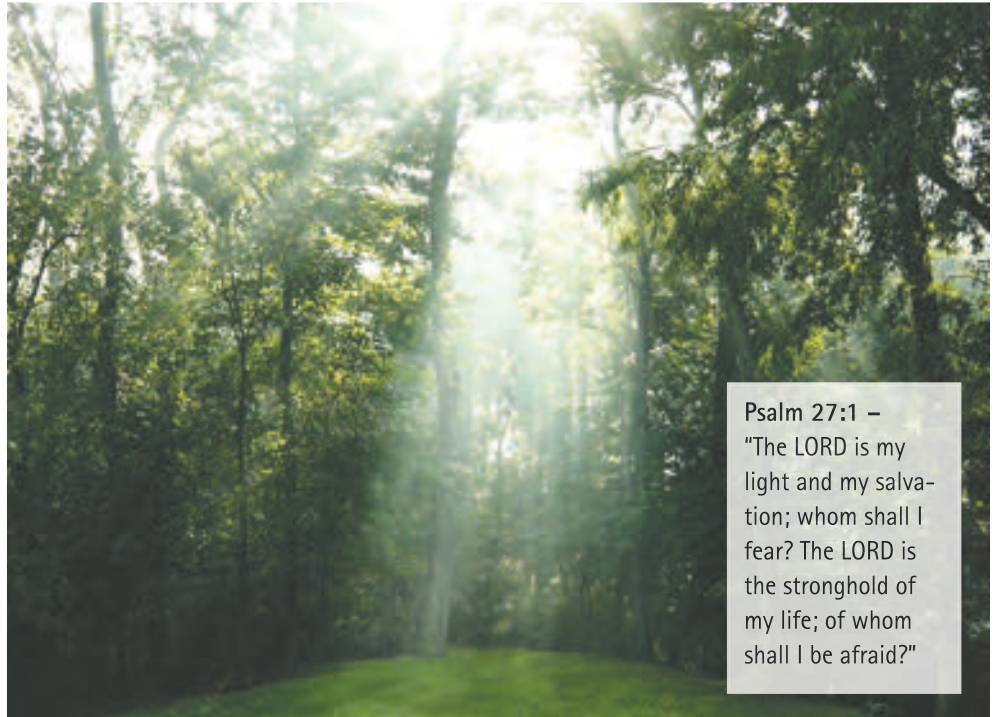
**D**o you remember the old TV commercials for Certs? They were marketed as a double value: twin teenage girls were featured in one ad, arguing over whether Certs was a candy mint or a breath mint. An announcer interrupted to insist “It’s both!” Certs, the commercials were prone to intone, was “two, two, two mints in one!”

Today’s text calls to mind that old commercial because Psalm 27 appears to be two, two, two psalms in one. Verses 1-6 appear to be a joyful psalm of trust, while the following section (vv. 7-14) has the characteristics of a lament. Some commentators argue that these must represent psalms written by two different people, or by one person at different stages of life. Others argue that the psalm should be read as a unity. After reading the psalm for yourself, what do you think? [Further discussion of this topic can be found in “The Hardest Question” online].

A superscription to the psalm attributes it to David, and there are hints that the protagonist could be a king, but there is not sufficient evidence to identify either the author or the date of the composition.

### Praising God (vv. 1-3)

How confident are you in God’s care? How assured are you that God will respond to your prayers? Whether we’re dealing with one psalm or two, the first six verses of Psalm 27 form a two-part celebration from the lips of one who



Psalm 27:1 –  
“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

expresses total confidence in God as the source of all things good. Countless believers have memorized these words: “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” (v. 1).

God’s beneficent care is described in three ways. First, “light” is an appropriate metaphor for confidence in God. Darkness conjures thoughts of hidden threats, fears, enemies, or evil, but light dispels the darkness with the assurance that God is with us.

“Salvation” renders a Hebrew word that primarily means “deliverance,” and in this context it probably refers to a warrior facing dread enemies with confidence that God will grant victory, no matter what the odds.

“Stronghold” might also be translated as “refuge,” a place of such security that the psalmist could portray himself as fearless against all enemies or dangers: “of whom shall I be afraid?”

The terminology of v. 1 suggests a military context, with the protagonist of the psalm likely to be thought of as

Israel’s king, who was expected to be a commander-in-chief not in name only, but also in the forefront of the battle.

The military metaphors continue in vv. 2-3, where the psalmist expresses confidence that any adversaries who might assail him would stumble and fall: he could face an entire army with confidence.

### Living with God (vv. 4-6)

From the aggressively confident image of a heroic warrior, the poem turns the page to show a softer side to the psalmist, the inner source of his outward courage: his one plea is to dwell always in the presence of God.

A surface reading of v. 4 suggests that the poet wanted to move into the temple and stretch out his bedroll beneath the wings of the cherubim upon the Ark of the Covenant and never leave. The psalmist would have known better than to think such an arrangement would be practical, however, especially for a king whose business is necessarily a public one.

Additional background information online where you see the “Digging Deeper” icon



We read the verse as a metaphor, then, the symbolic thinking of one who longed for God's presence to infuse his life. Verse 5 shifts back to the hope of protection while engaging the world, that God would shelter him in a day of trouble, hide him from enemies when necessary, and set him "high on a rock," out of reach of his foes, or possibly standing in victory over them.

In a similar way, we might recall happy times at church where we sensed God's presence during worship in the sanctuary or felt so at home during fellowship meals. In times of struggle or uncertainty, especially when far from home, we might long to be back in the church where we have found safety and security – but we know that it's really God's presence we need, and that is not limited to the church building.

Verse 6 combines thoughts of victories on the battlefield and worship in the temple: as a victor, the psalmist declares "I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD" (v. 6).<sup>U</sup>

Note the references to God's "tent," as a place of refuge in v. 5 and as a place of sacrifice in v. 6 (though v. 4 speaks of dwelling in the "house of the LORD"). If indeed the psalm originated with David – or if a later psalmist wanted to make it appear that it did – "tent" would be the appropriate term. David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and installed it in a tent, according to 2 Sam. 6:17, where he was prone to pray (2 Sam. 7:18). The temple would not be built until the reign of Solomon.<sup>U</sup>

The first part of our psalm, then, begins and ends with happy praise from a joyful and confident worshiper. When we come to v. 7, we wonder: "Could this be the same person?"

### Longing for God (vv. 7-12)

In vv. 7-14, assurance is but a memory and God's presence a distant dream. In the classic form of a lament, the psalmist longs for a sense of God's presence and pleads for God not to turn away,

as if he or she feels abandoned by the same God who once had seemed so close.

Heart-full of desire, the psalmist pleads to see God's face (v. 9a). Why might the poet believe that God had turned away? Our only clue is the psalmist's plea "Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!" (v. 9b).

Why would God be angry? Hebrew theology did not consider God to be capricious or easily provoked. Rather, the classic understanding of God's temperament was Yahweh's self-revelation to Moses in Exod. 34:6: "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness ..."

Generally, one who feared God's anger did so from an awareness of personal sin, of having turned away from God first. But, the Bible also contains accounts of people who felt abandoned by God for no good reason. Job is the classic example, and this poet might be another.

The psalmist was convinced that God, even more faithful than one's parents, would not forsake forever (v. 10) – but that did not prevent the fear of being forsaken in the meantime.<sup>U</sup> Enemies were about (v. 11), false witnesses who were "breathing out violence" (v. 12). If we are to think of vv. 7-14 as deriving from the same postulant as vv. 1-6, who may have been a king, vv. 11-12 summon visions of palace intrigue or propaganda campaigns from neighboring nations.

Such speculation is not necessary, however. The psalmist, like many of us, could have experienced the cold shoulder of former friends who turned against us, or jealous competitors who sought to elevate themselves by bringing us down. Those are times when we might wonder where God has gone, and why such trouble has come to us. Dealing with people

who actively oppose us or make our lives miserable can be difficult, and calls for a special measure of God's leadership if we are to respond with wisdom and care. Thus, it is in the context of enemy opposition that the psalmist asks "Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path" (v. 11).

Can you recall times when someone criticized your performance or opposed what you were doing? We can respond in ways that make the situation worse, or exhibit more positive behaviors that bring grace into the picture. The psalmist's practice of pausing to pray and seek God's leadership before going forward offers a word of wisdom for all.

### Trusting God (vv. 13-14)

As is common in the laments, the psalmist concludes with an expression of trust that God will indeed hear the prayer and respond positively: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living" (v. 13). In other words, the poet – whether king or commoner – expects to survive the crisis, remain "in the land of the living," and experience God's goodness again.

Some interpreters read v. 14 as a priestly oracle of assurance that responds to the postulant's prayer by counseling patience and trust. It is just as likely, however, that it could be the psalmist's own reflection. God had been present in the past (as expressed in vv. 1-6) and could be trusted to bless the psalmist again: he or she needed only to wait and trust in God's deliverance. The reminder to "be strong, and let your heart take courage" is reminiscent of Moses' charge to Joshua as he assumed leadership in Moses' place (Deut. 31:7, 23), a charge reiterated by Yahweh in a personal vision to Joshua (Josh. 1:6, 7, 9).

As Joshua trusted God and led Israel to many victories, so the psalmist sought to be strong and courageous as he maintained trust in God for help that was yet to come.

If God seems far away, perhaps we need to hear what this psalm has to say. **BT**

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 63

Feb. 28, 2016

## Who Needs God?


**H**ave you ever been so thirsty that you could think of nothing else than finding a drink of water? What led you to such a thirsty state? A long hike on a hot day, or a surgical procedure that required you to forego water from midnight until mid-afternoon?

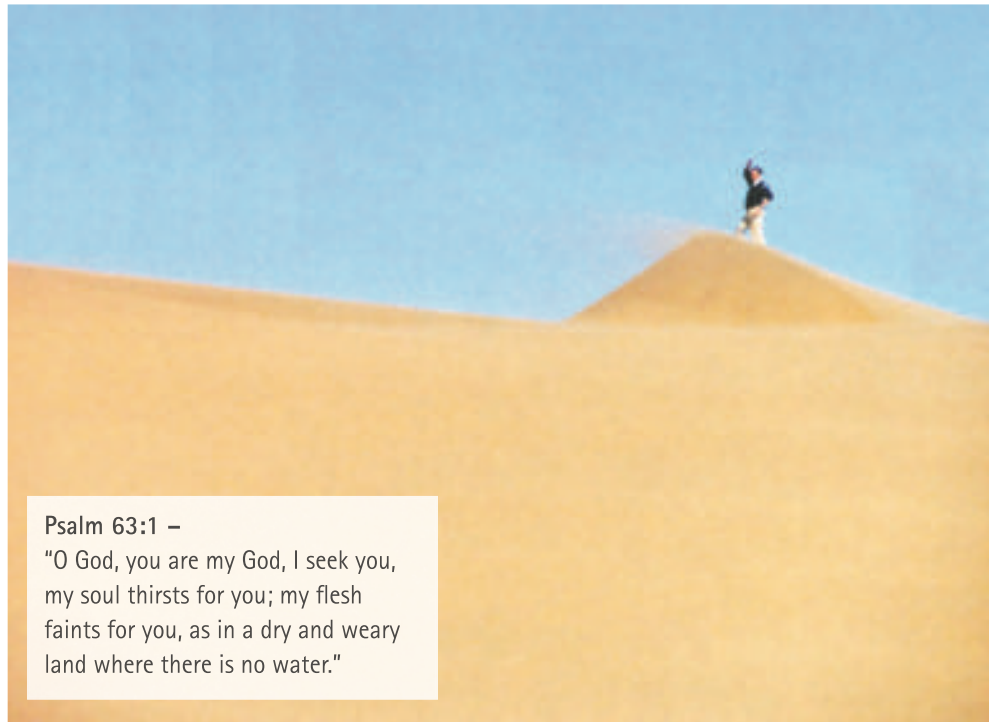
I will never forget my first day of football practice as a high school freshman. Modern coaches are sensitive to concerns about heat stroke or dehydration, and water is often available whenever an athlete feels the need for it. In the old days, however, a three-hour practice might have only one water break, and one's ability to overcome desperate thirst and keep running hard through summer two-a-day drills was considered a sign of toughness.

On that first day, I wasn't so tough. I'd been forced to lay off running for six weeks due to a knee condition, and had joined practice nearly a week after the other players. I was out of shape, but determined to keep up. I couldn't. I became so ravenously thirsty that I told the trainer my stomach was upset just so he would give me a swallow of Pepto Bismol. Then I really was sick!

Serious thirst is no picnic.

### Searching for God (vv. 1-4)

In today's text, the parched thirst of a desert traveler serves as a metaphor for a worshiper's longing for the presence of God.  A scribal superscription to the psalm – not part of the original text – identifies it as a Davidic psalm,



Psalm 63:1 –


"O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you; my flesh  
faints for you, as in a dry and weary  
land where there is no water."



suggesting that the psalm was either written by David, or dedicated to him.

Unlike most such psalms, marked with the simple *ledawid* (to/for/by David), this one goes on to imagine how David might have uttered such a psalm "when he was in the wilderness of Judah." Readers familiar with the David story recall how he served faithfully in the court of Saul until the paranoid king turned against him and tried to kill him. David was forced to flee into the wilderness areas of southern Judah (1 Samuel 23-24, 26), where a band of outcasts gathered to him and became the nucleus of a future army. David might have felt abandoned by God during such a time, knowing that he had done nothing to deserve Saul's wrath.

We have no way of knowing if David actually had anything to do with this psalm, of course, but the later scribes did us a favor in ascribing it to him. An anonymous psalm may or may not speak to us, but the scribe's association of the prayer with David makes the psalm more accessible to all believers.

We can imagine ourselves in David's sandals, for we all have known what it is like to experience wilderness days when God seems far away.

We have also known spiritual thirst, a longing for something bigger than ourselves, for a sense of meaning in life, for the fulfillment of an empty spot in our hearts that only God can fill. 

The prayer begins with the psalmist's acknowledgement of a relationship with God: "O God (*'elohim*), you are my God (*'el*)." It's likely that the divine name *'elohim* was originally Yahweh, but the psalm came to be located in the "Elohistic psalter," a collection of psalms in which Elohim is favored as the divine name. 

"My soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you," the psalmist wrote, "as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (v. 1). We don't know what led to the psalmist's sense of distance from God, but he dealt with it by drawing strength from a past experience of spiritual closeness.

"I have looked upon you in the

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sanctuary” (v. 2) employs a verb for “seeing” that commonly refers to a theophany or vision in which God appears or speaks to an individual, usually a prophet. The psalmist, who speaks of witnessing God’s “power and glory,” calls to mind a similar experience in which the prophet Isaiah, while praying in the temple, saw an overwhelming vision of the Lord, “high and lofty,” enthroned in the temple (Isa. 6:1).

Can you imagine what it would be like to see God, even in a vision? Many people in our own day believe that God has spoken directly to them. Even if we cannot make that claim, those of us who persist in following Christ do so in part because we can remember times of worship or prayer when the presence of God seemed real enough to touch, and that memory of divine intimacy continues to resonate within. We hunger to experience it again.

“Because your steadfast love is better than life,” the psalmist sang, “my lips will praise you” (v. 3). “Steadfast love” carries the sense of a faithful love that will not quit, like the love of a mother who never abandons or gives up on her children, no matter how far they stray.

Echoing God’s persistent love, the poet pledges to bless God through a lifetime of faithful prayer with uplifted hands, a physical sign of spiritual supplication to God (v. 4, compare Ps. 28:2, Lam. 2:19). The poet’s unqualified dependence on God in this section calls to mind Ps. 73:25: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.” Could we recite those words in truth, or are we more likely to give up on God when things go sour?

### Celebrating God (vv. 5-8)

Modern churchgoers often speak of choosing a church where they are “fed,” usually meaning that they find the sermons to be personally appealing and spiritually fulfilling. The psalmist also favored metaphors of eating, but in a different sense. His spiritual food was

the presence of God: “My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast” translates a phrase that contemporary readers might find less appealing: “As with fat and fatness my soul is satiated” – rich food indeed!

The terms used in v. 5 are surprising, for Lev. 7:23 taught that humans were not to consume fat because “all fat is the LORD’s” (Lev. 3:16). Certain types of fat were burned on the altar, but that did not stop people from enjoying fatty portions of meat.

The richness of God’s presence inspired the psalmist to joyful praise, to the point that even his nighttime thoughts were preoccupied with prayerful meditations on the beneficent grace of God, in the shadow of whose “wings” the psalmist had found refuge.

Some scholars suppose this suggests that the psalmist had actually spent the night in the temple. The Hebrews, like other ancient Near Eastern counterparts, sometimes practiced “incubation,” sleeping in the temple in hopes of receiving a dream vision from God. 📖

Whether he had slept in the temple or not, the psalmist understood that living in an intimate relationship with God is a two-way process: “My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me” (v. 8). As Ruth clung to Naomi (including Naomi’s God, Ruth 1:14), so the psalmist clung to God. In Deuteronomy, the same word is used when the faithful are instructed to “hold fast” to God as they live obedient lives (4:4, 10:20, 11:22, 13:5, 30:20).

As the psalmist clung to God, so he could trust that God was also holding onto him. The Hebrews, like most people, were mostly right-handed. Thus, they considered the right hand to be stronger and better. The metaphor carries over: to be held by God’s right hand is a sign of special favor. God was said to have taken Cyrus by the right

hand in leading him to victory over the Babylonians (Isa. 45:1), for example. More pertinently, Isa. 41:10 speaks for God in assuring Israel’s exiles that they need not fear, because “I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.”

Are you prone to stick with God, holding fast to promises made on both sides, or do you find it easy to slide away from daily fellowship with the One who can give you strength for every day?

### Trusting God (vv. 9-11)

The psalmist’s spiritual satisfaction contributes to the fortitude needed to face difficult days. In v. 9 he speaks of unnamed persons who seek to end his life, but expresses confidence that the tables will be turned: they will “go down into the depths of the earth,” that is, to *sheol*, the world of the dead. They will fall prey to the sword, he says, and their corpses will become food (literally, “a portion”) for the jackals (v. 10).

With the final verse, we find the first indication, other than the superscription, that the psalm purports to have a royal connection. That the poet speaks of the king in the third person suggests that the psalm may have been used in ritual ceremonies for the benefit of the king, perhaps at the time of his coronation.

“The king shall rejoice in God,” the psalmist insists, as do all who trust God enough to swear by him. 📖 Those who had opposed him, here described as “liars,” would be silenced, he said, using an emphatic word that can mean “stopped up.”

Some readers may find the psalm getting away from them here. We’re not kings. We don’t have enemies trying to kill us, but we’ve probably felt like victims of untruths, half-truths, or other attempts to damage our reputations. We’ve had good days and bad days. Whether our troubles are royal or pedestrian, we can recall with the psalmist how God has been present to us in the past, and trust that we do not face our trials alone. **BT**

## Classifieds

**Senior Pastor:** Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston, N.C., seeks a full-time senior pastor with vision and energy for revitalization who will serve as a spiritual leader and able administrator for a church with many ministries and mission fronts in the community. A master's degree from an accredited seminary or divinity school is required, with at least 10 years experience as a senior pastor preferred. Spilman is affiliated with CBF and SBC, has both women and men in leadership roles, and has traditional and blended worship styles. Submit a cover letter and résumé to bobgaddis16@yahoo.com or to SMBC Pastor Search team, 601 Madison Ave., Kinston, NC 28501 before Feb. 1.

**Senior Pastor:** Walnut Hills Baptist Church, a moderate Baptist church of 410 active members in the heart of historic Williamsburg, Va., is seeking a senior pastor. Submit inquiries and résumés to pastorsearch@whbconline.org by March 1. Information is available at whbconline.org.

### Classifieds

\$1.25 per word (one month web)  
\$2.00 per word (two months web)  
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Contact: jackie@baptisttoday.org

## In the Know

**Greg DeLoach** is president and CEO of Atlanta-based Developmental Disabilities Ministry of Georgia following a 10-year pastorate of First Baptist Church of Augusta, Ga. He succeeds William T. Neal who is retiring from DDM.

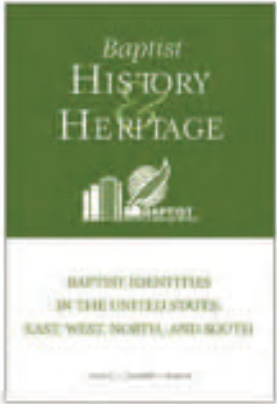
**Jimmy Gentry** is pastor of Garden Lakes Baptist Church in Rome, Ga. Previously he served Tabernacle Baptist Church in Carrollton, Ga.

**Paul H. Gibson** is executive minister of the Great Rivers Region of American Baptist Churches, based in Springfield, Ill., coming from the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Bismarck, N.D.

**Ernest H. Jones** of Brooklyn, N.Y., is the new executive minister for the American Baptist Churches of Ohio. He has served as pastor of Brooklyn's Greenwood Baptist Church since 1998.

**Terry Maples** is field coordinator for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia effective Feb. 1. He comes from a similar position in Tennessee.

**Julie Pennington-Russell** is pastor of First Baptist Church in the City of Washington. Most recently she served First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga.



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# A new release

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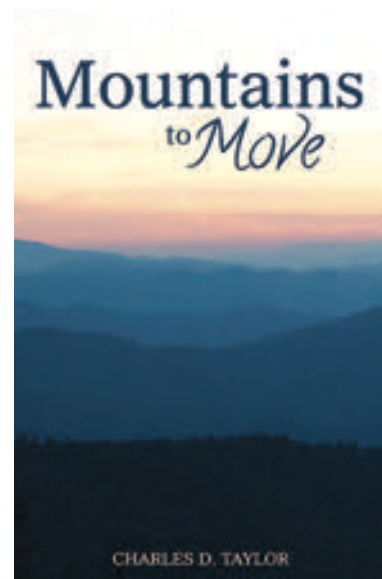
Jesus told the apostles that if they had faith as great as a mustard seed, they could say to a mountain, "Get up and be cast into the sea," and it would be done. What did Jesus mean by this?

Charles Taylor contends that Jesus was talking about the great hindrances, the almost impossible barriers that would confront the apostles and others in the early church. Some were external; others had to do with internal attitudes.

About 120 individuals were being

asked to go out and conquer the world, a seemingly impossible task. They faced much opposition and many racial, cultural, and religious obstacles. But with faith and the empowering of the Holy Spirit, they did move mountains as Jesus had promised.

In his narrative study of the book of Acts, Taylor explores how the early Christians dealt with their challenges and how the gospel message overcame all hindrances and moved on unhindered.



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# To welcome what's coming, to let go of what's gone

In the timeless pause immediately following a baby's birth, the attenders wait with held breaths for the wee one to draw her first. A lusty wail signals the greedy gulping and successful filling of little lungs, and there is a collective sigh of glad relief.

Every first breath is an inhale: a filling, a receiving. And every last breath is an exhale: an emptying, a releasing. It turns out that the four days spent in the sacred cocoon, the grace-insulated space of my mother's dying, has become my soul's ground zero.

Everything that matters now was distilled there, where there was no awareness of time, worry or fear. In Mama's dying place there was only family and love, friends and fellowship, gratitude and peace.

Mine was a front-row seat to mortality's march on my Mama. Over the course of those days her respiration went from measured and deep to raspy and shallow until it was, in the stillness at the end, merely an occasional, dainty sipping of air.

Death chased Mama's breath up from her feet into her mouth and, finally, out of it. At the last, I held in my arms the woman whose arms had first held me.

My mother had become my daughter. She'd given me my first bath; I gave her her last. She'd brought me home from a hospital; I walked her Home from a hospital. She'd released me to live; I released her to die.

It is the way of life: roles reverse, seasons change, time's river rolls forever along with little fanfare or flash. "There is a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a

time to die" (Eccl.3:1-2a).

Every first breath is an inhale. And every last breath is an exhale.

And every breath in between — every cycle of inspiration and expiration, of oxygen received and released, of filling and emptying of lungs — is a reminder to welcome what's coming and to let go of what's gone. We receive to release, and we release to receive.

The rhythm of respiration is the rhythm of life. And the art of life is just to keep breathing through the receive-release rhythm. Refusing to release obstructs the reception of fresh intake, and respiration is arrested: indeed, life is suffocated.

We've all seen it: parents who refuse to let go of grown children, thereby crippling the development of dignity and independence; grudges that are allowed to ferment rather than be forgiven; accomplishments that are lauded but never re-imagined as launching pads; roles that are not relinquished, preventing fresh voices from contributing to the conversation; losses that are allowed to define rather than, in time, become fertilizer for new growth, hope, ministry compassion.

During Mama's dying time my husband brought a mattress into her room so that I could rest and still be close. Early in the morning of her death day, Mike lay beside me on that mattress, holding me as we listened for changes in Mama's breathing.

The three feet of open space between the mattress and her hospital bed reminded me of the gulf ever expanding between us. A wave of panic hit, consuming me with the urge to cross the divide and rescue Mama and myself from the inevitable; to hold fast against letting go.



Rising from the warmth of my husband's arms, I crawled in mother's bed and cradled her cool, stiffening frame. Maybe I thought I could go with her, or at least find a way to bring her back.

But the divide was ever widening and would, painfully soon, be uncrossable. Reluctantly I released her, and moved back to the mattress where I spooned with Mike while crying my eyes out. I chose to cling to my living husband rather my dying Mama; chose to be embraced by my future rather than stubbornly clutching to a fast-fading present.

Mama would have approved, for it was she who'd spent the respirations of her life teaching me when and how to release what could not be held. My mother understood: loss is not only the way of life; it is also the way to life.

Early January provides a calendared pause between the expiration of the old year and the inception of the new one, an opportunity to reflect upon and then, perhaps, gently and gratefully liberate a role, identity, loved one, long-cherished notion, assumption of rightness, wound, or way of life that no longer works.

The pause of January provides a moment for excruciatingly intentional finger-prying and fist-unclenching in order to produce hands finally fully opened and exquisitely softened to receive the seeds of what's next from the One who never releases the grip on us.

Breathe in; breathe out. Receive; release. And may every respiration cycle of the new year be an inhale of trust and an exhale of thanksgiving.

*—Haven Parrott lives in Anderson, S.C., where she and her husband, Mike, will soon open a barbecue restaurant. She formerly served as minister of spiritual formation at First Baptist Church of Kannapolis, N.C.*

*"At the last, I held in my arms the woman whose arms had first held me."*

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the eighth in a series of articles by historian Bruce Gourley on the religious faith of U.S. presidents. Gourley is online editor and contributing writer for *Baptists Today* and executive director of the *Baptist History & Heritage Society*. His latest book, *Baptists and the American Civil War: Crucible of Faith and Freedom*, a compilation of articles from the recent series on *Baptists and the American Civil War*, is now available from *Nurturing Faith*.*

## Religion and the American Presidents

# Martin Van Buren (1837-1841)

Born in 1782 in Kinderhook, N.Y., Martin Van Buren entered a sheltered world in a Dutch household in a small Dutch village. Learning English as a second language, the young boy attended the village schoolhouse and sometimes worshiped with his family in the community congregation, the Dutch Reformed Church.

**H**is father, a farmer, inn owner and slave owner, fought in the American Revolution and afterward served in local politics and government, his sentiments those of a Jeffersonian Republican.

Young Martin, evidencing little if any interest in religion or farming, turned toward law, beginning his studies at the age of 14 under a local attorney. Upon the advice of his tutor he cultivated fine taste in clothing, a helpful trait in business and politics.

His political leanings gravitated toward Democratic-Republicans, and at the age of 20 he moved to New York City to finish his law internship. Admitted to the bar in 1803, four years later he married Hannah Hoes, his childhood sweetheart and first cousin once-removed. The couple raised five children.

A lucrative law practice and good connections led to state politics and service in the state Senate from 1812 to 1820. During this time the 5' 6" Van Buren engaged with "machine politics" and became known as the "Little Magician" for exploiting the "spoils system." Slavery emerged as a nationally divisive issue during this time, and Van Buren opposed the admission of Missouri into the Union as a slave state.

National politics came next with his election to the U.S. Senate in 1821, and re-election in 1827. Allying with Andrew Jackson, Van Buren worked to garner support for the



Tennessean in the North. Immensely popular in his home state of New York, the senator in 1828 ran for governor in an effort to help Jackson win the state.

Van Buren won the governorship, Jackson the presidency, the latter the first Democrat to hold office. Following three months in the governor's mansion, Van Buren resigned to accept the position of secretary of state in the first Jackson administration, thereafter serving as vice president during Jackson's second term.

Positioned as Jackson's successor in the 1836 presidential election, Van Buren, long ambivalent regarding slavery yet ever politically adept, courted Southern votes by voicing opposition to abolition. With Southern support he easily defeated four Whig Party candidates, becoming the first president with no personal memory of the American Revolution.

Recognizing the milestone he represented, the new president in his inaugural address declared: "Unlike all who have preceded me, the Revolution that gave us existence as one people was achieved at the period of my birth; and whilst I contemplate with grateful reverence that memorable event, I feel that I belong to a later age and that I may not expect my

countrymen to weigh my actions with the same kind and partial hand."

In the same address Van Buren touched on religion, a subject largely foreign to him. Recognizing that many citizens expected a reference to religion, he obliged, albeit ever so lightly in his closing comment:

Beyond that [the justice and kindness of country] I only look to the gracious protection of the Divine Being whose strengthening support I humbly solicit, and whom I fervently pray to look down upon us all. May it be among the dispensations of His providence to bless our beloved country with honors and with length of days. May her ways be ways of pleasantness and all her paths be peace.

Retaining all but one of Jackson's cabinet members, the new president's prospects looked bright. Within weeks, however, an unexpected financial panic swept across the nation. Banks collapsed, businesses failed, and unemployment soared as high as 25 percent in some locales. A divided Congress and inadequate

financial safeguards protracted a deep depression, but the public blamed the president.

Apart from economic travails, Van Buren gamely continued Jackson's policies. Perhaps most notably, he executed his predecessor's plans for removing southeastern Indian tribes to Oklahoma territory, and continued the Second Seminole War in Florida.

Personally opposed to slavery, he nonetheless deemed it constitutionally fixed and politically toxic, and thus resisted mounting abolitionist calls to interfere with the practice in the Southern states and abolish the D.C. slave trade.

Although fervent Christian convictions growing out of the Second Great Awakening fueled the abolitionist movement, Van Buren's back-and-forth regarding slavery remained a matter of politics rather than faith or morals.

Rarely turning to religious language or imagery, in his annual address to Congress in 1838 he nodded to religious freedom, noting that in America "All forms of religion have united for the first time to diffuse charity and piety, because for the first time in

the history of nations all have been totally untrammelled and absolutely free."

Van Buren's vice-president, Kentuckian and Baptist layman Richard M. Johnson, embodied religious liberty. Earlier in the decade as a congressman and U. S. Postmaster General, Johnson, allied with the nation's Baptist leaders, successfully rebuffed a campaign by conservative Christians to transform, in their minds, the secular government into a Christian nation by forcing Congress to declare the Christian Sabbath a holy day.

Otherwise, religion rarely emerged during Van Buren's presidency. Instead, the floundering economy consumed the president, mocked by his critics as "Martin Van Ruin." Defeated in his attempt to win a second presidential term, Van Buren afterward declared "As to the presidency, the two happiest days of my life were those of my entrance upon the office and my surrender of it."

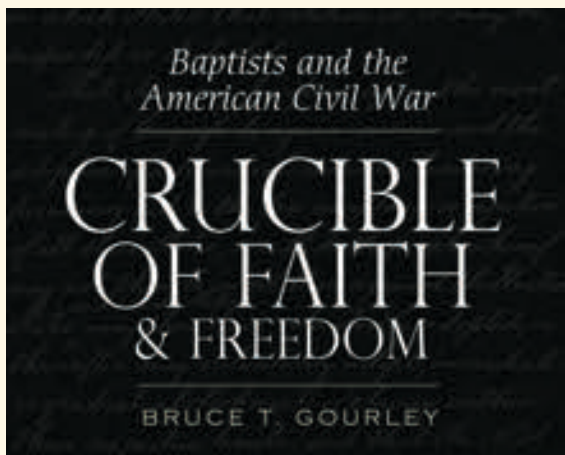
Returning to his hometown of Kinderhook, the former president remained a part of the nation's political scene. A campaign for the

presidency in 1844 ended in failure as Van Buren, increasingly more vocal in his anti-slavery views, mustered no support from the Southern states.

An 1848 nomination for the presidency by the abolitionist Free Soil Party garnered no electoral votes. While many abolitionist Democrats defected to the upstart Republican Party in the 1850s, Van Buren held to his views but remained Democratic. Opposed to Southern secession in 1860, when the Civil War began he publicly threw his support to the Union and, finally, to Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party.

Throughout his life in public and private, including in his autobiography, Martin Van Buren rarely referred to God, and never in a personal manner. At his estate in Kinderhook, Van Buren died of bronchial complications on July 24, 1862, six months prior to the Emancipation Proclamation.

His burial in the cemetery of the Dutch Reformed Church of his childhood brought to a close the life of a man and a politician largely void of religious influence. **BT**



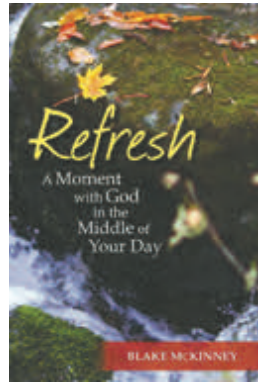
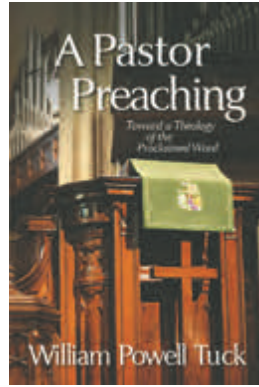
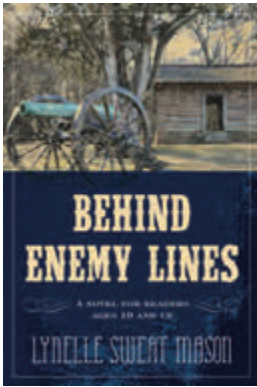
## Good reading

The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the American Civil War provides a grand opportunity to consider precisely what Baptists — North and South — were saying from their pulpits, in the press, and through official resolutions from that time. Bruce Gourley brings such perspectives to life by making good use of careful and significant research, creatively taking a chronological approach using primary sources.

He highlights the role of various kinds of Baptists, for example: Robert Smalls, Thomas Hill Watts, Basil Manly Sr., Gov. Joseph Brown, Gov. Sam Houston, Isaac Taylor Tichenor, Crawford H. Toy, and Frank and Jesse James — most of whom went on to great prominence in politics, religion or education.

Gourley's firsthand accounts of how Baptists on both sides sought and claimed divine favor and righteousness provide lessons as plentiful as the statues and markers that dot the many battlefields where the devastation has given way to peaceful fields and quiet woodlands.

[nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net)



# Innovative Approach

Publishing venture keeps rolling out books and resources

MACON, Ga. — More than 40 books bearing the Nurturing Faith imprint have been published since 2013, with many more moving through the innovative process.

It all started with a casual conversation over coffee — surrounded by books at a Barnes & Noble store in 2012.

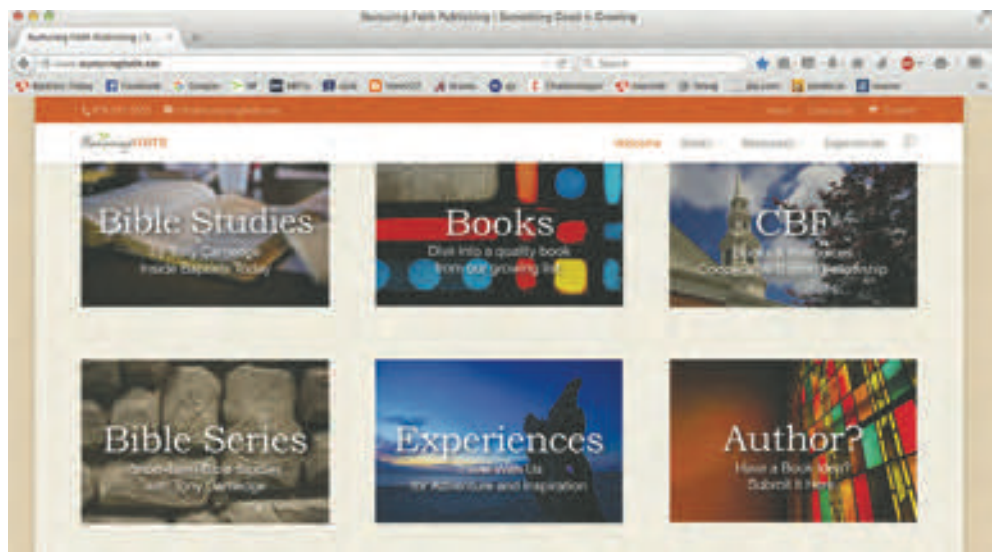
## PLAN EMERGES

David Cassady of Faithlab, a creative services firm that works closely with congregations, and John Pierce, executive editor of *Baptists Today* news journal, were discussing the emerging trends and fast-changing technology in the publishing industry.

It dawned on them that, together, their organizations had the highly experienced personnel in every area needed for innovative book publishing. That discussion quickly became a plan — first sketched out on a napkin.

After seeking counsel from Mercer University Chancellor Kirby Godsey, a longtime director and supporter of *Baptists Today*, the plan was presented to an attorney who advised them to form a subsidiary for this purpose.

In September 2013 the Board of Directors of Baptists Today, Inc., approved the proposal that would lead to publishing books and other resources under the Nurturing Faith brand — for which they acquired a trademark.



Already, the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge were appearing in *Baptists Today*. It was a name destined to grow.

## UNIQUE APPROACH

“The innovative approach to book publishing taken by Nurturing Faith avoids some of the limitations and pitfalls of traditional publishing,” said Cassady, who has spent his career in publishing and Christian education.

In just a few years, the nonstop venture has published a variety of books — including devotionals, autobiographies, fiction, Bible studies, theological reflections, congregational health, histories, worship, humor, leadership and Christian education — available in print or as digital downloads at [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net).

“Since our process is largely focused on editing and design rather than on printing and warehousing thousands of copies, niche books that would otherwise not likely be published are made available to readers, widening the discourse around matters of faith,” David added.

One of the first and most popular books published by Nurturing Faith was Lynelle Mason’s remarkable autobiography, *Tarnished Haloes, Open Hearts*. Her youth-oriented, historical novel, *Behind Enemy Lines*, was released this year and another work of fiction, *Where the Rabbits Dance*, will be released in 2016.

“I find them to be trustworthy, reliable and helpful,” said Lynelle. “They patiently see you through the final editing process and assist in a variety of ways in marketing your books. I love the Nurturing Faith staff!”

## AUTHOR FRIENDLY

Treating authors as valued and respected participants in the publishing process is a mark of Nurturing Faith, said both authors and editors.

“My experience with Nurturing Faith has been better than I had ever anticipated,” said Carol Boseman Taylor of Rocky Mount, N.C., author of *I Promise. Rejoice!*

“From the first moment they got my draft, I felt as if I had a partner in this publishing effort,” added Carol. “They were responsive and more than helpful... I am so pleased.”

Julia Ledford, author of *Savoring the Sacred, the Real, and the True*, said she learned about Nurturing Faith Publishing from Jim Dant, pastor of First Baptist Church of Greenville, S.C.

“One of the special blessings in my life has been the connection with Nurturing Faith publishers,” said Julia. “From the beginning and throughout the publishing process, they were patient, caring and professional. I have appreciated their publishing approach that brought my work to light.”

Lex Horton, also a longtime publisher and Christian educator, handles author relations to keep the communication lines open and to ensure a superb final product.

“From authors to the organizations that sponsor good writing, the Nurturing Faith experience is driven by deep thinkers and dedicated servants,” said Lex. “We’re better because of them.”

## COLLABORATION

Books have been published in collaboration with partnering organizations including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina and the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. A history, in collaboration with the Alliance of Baptists, will be out soon.

Also, Nurturing Faith is publishing resources for spiritual development in

collaboration with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Recently, Nurturing Faith published William E. Hull’s final book, *Conservatism and Liberalism in the Christian Faith: Toward a Moderate Approach*, with support of the Hull family and Mountain Brook Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala.

Other sponsorships — from Bob and Pat Barker and the Bob Barker Company, and Gene and Linda Pleasants — have enabled the publication of Tony Cartledge’s ongoing Nurturing Faith Bible Studies Series.

Many individual sponsors made possible the publication of Bruce Gourley’s book on the American Civil War, titled *Crucible of Faith & Freedom*, and Randall Lolley’s collection of sermons, titled *Journey With Me: Redemptive Threads Woven Through the Bible*, released in December 2015.

## LOOKING AHEAD

“We are so pleased by the excellent response to our Nurturing Faith publishing venture,” said publisher John Pierce. “We have a great team of editors and designers, and we have built-in marketing to give these books the visibility they deserve.”

Nurturing Faith, he said, is expanding into publishing attractive, tabletop quality local church histories with the first one — on the First Baptist Church of Griffin, Ga. — nearing completion.

Whatever the title or topic, Nurturing Faith books is focused on providing intelligent, reflective, and challenging books and resources that address issues of spiritual growth and understanding.

“Responses from our growing audience of readers,” said Cassady, “confirms that the thoughtful voices of Nurturing Faith authors are making a difference in lives and churches.” **BT**

*Editor’s note: Nurturing Faith, Inc. is a wholly owned subsidiary of the publishing ministry Baptists Today, Inc.*

## Thanks to these authors and organizations for partnering in the successful Nurturing Faith book publishing venture!

Alliance of Baptists  
Dennis Atwood  
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty  
Bob and Pat Barker and the Bob Barker Company  
C. Lynn Brinkley  
Claude Douglas Bryan  
Tony Cartledge  
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship  
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina  
Jennifer Harris Dault  
Jayne Davis  
J. Daniel Day  
Bruce T. Gourley  
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# Prayers of others helpful in continuing to learn to pray

Often I find myself wanting to talk and listen to God but unable to find words for what I want to say. I'm out of sorts with God or myself about something. My "regular" way of framing words in prayer just won't do.

Then there is the day-by-day puzzling over the meaning of life. Bad things keep happening, and once again I'm not sure why I'm here or what I should be doing with my life. When I find myself in that place, reading the prayers of others helps me.

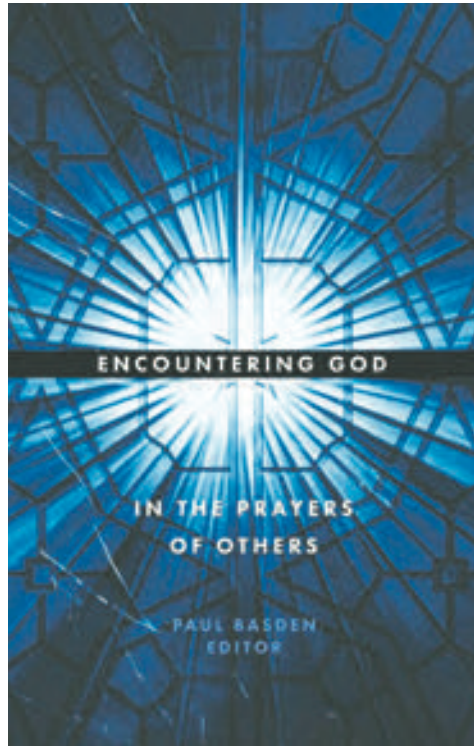
*Encountering God in the Prayers of Others* is a wonderful source of prayers written by Christians across the centuries. It is a collection of the favorite prayers of seven Baptist ministers. Among the ancient prayers are some from Ephraim the Syrian, St. Patrick and St. Augustine. There are words from the *Book of Common Prayer* and the monastic orders.

American hymn writers and poets such as John Greenleaf Whittier and Georgia Harkness are included. There are verses from the great British poets John Donne and George Herbert.

Readers will discover selections from Reinhold Niebuhr, John Henry Newman, Howard Thurman, Søren Kierkegaard, Anne Lamott, Mark Twain, D.L. Moody, Robert Frost, Peter Marshall and C. S. Lewis as well. Included are interesting historical tidbits about the authors of the chosen prayers and the period in which they were written.

Paul Basden is the editor of the book and one of the authors. The other contributors are R. LaMon Brown, Brad Creed, Gary Furr, Fisher Humphreys, Dwight A. Moody and Richard Francis Wilson. They are members of The Trinity Group, begun in 1990 to read and discuss Christian theology.

The name reveals the importance to them of the Trinitarian understanding of God. Over the past 25 years the group has continued to meet.



The initial idea of reading and discussing theology broadened to include consideration of theology's implications for church life, educational institutions and personal matters. This volume focuses on the discipline of prayer as a part of the life of all who try to think about God and follow the way of his son Jesus with the help of the Holy Spirit.

It was written out of the desire of the authors to commend the practice of letting the prayers of others help us as we continue to learn to pray.

For many with roots in the Free Church tradition, the idea of praying another person's prayer doesn't seem right. The editor addresses this concern in the introduction by pointing out that we regularly pray the Psalms, picking up on the words and phrases that fit our particular needs on that day and passing over the words that are less meaningful to us. In the same way we can read the prayers of others, and as God leads we can latch on to the parts that attract us.

Accompanying each prayer is an auto-

biographical essay in which the author explains why that prayer is important to him. These essays are mostly stories.

They are a broad mix of thought-provoking, funny, winsome, heartbreaking and wise words about the incongruities of living as a follower of Jesus. You will find yourself smiling and nodding in approval at the rich connections and artistic images described by these authors.

You will be troubled by some of them. Not all prayers are comfortable. Some remind us to pay attention and not pray in self-righteous ways or let our prayers become weapons.

It can be hard to wrap your mind around some of the essays. But in the end you will find yourself identifying with the writers in their joy and in their pain.

*Encountering God in the Prayers of Others* is available from Amazon, Parson's Porch Books and elsewhere. A three-hour audiobook is also available at Amazon.

Nancy McLemore Womble, a professional voice-over artist, is the narrator. She gives a brief biographical description of the writers before they read their chosen prayers and personal essays. So you hear the authors' words in their own voices.

I downloaded the book to my phone and listen while I walk. There are 53 short tracks, and it's easy to listen to as many as you would like and then pick back up another day.

Although the seven authors have earned doctorates in theology, New Testament or church history, this is not an academic book. It is very readable, but that does not mean it is an "easy" book. They write honestly about their personal experiences and struggles to understand life. In the end, however, they find a world and life filled with promise and beauty — made so in great part because of the hope found in praying the prayers of others. **BT**

—Cynthia Wise Mitchell lives in Birmingham and Alpine, Ala., and is a member of Alpine Baptist Church.



# A new release



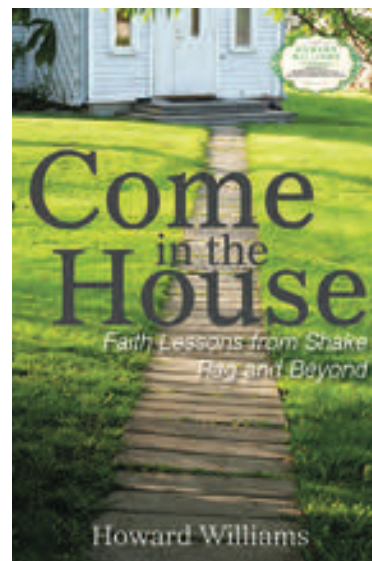
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Howard died in 2013 at age 56. His wife Jana and friends at Weatherly Heights Baptist Church in Huntsville, Ala., where Howard served as minister of spiritual formation, made possible the publication of this reflective and inspiring book.

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# Q&A

*“Part of what claims me at this point is the need to prepare ministers for the kind of intercultural and interfaith work our religiously plural world requires.”*

## with theologian Molly Marshall

**S**HAWNEE, Kan. — Molly Marshall has seen and experienced remarkable changes in theological education during her career that took her from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., where she taught theology, to Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas.

After two years as a visiting professor at Central, she was elected professor of theology and spiritual formation in 1997 — and then in 2005 as president of the more than a century-old seminary. Recently she was feted for a decade of leadership during which time significant changes have occurred.

She describes Central as “a hospitable, diverse and progressive seminary” that seeks to become “the most creative and effective expression of leadership development for ministry locally and globally.”

At this juncture in her leadership as president, Marshall was asked by Editor John Pierce to reflect upon experiences of the past and to consider the possibilities ahead in theological education and congregational ministry.

**BT: What are the three biggest changes at Central since you became president, and what has resulted from these changes?**

MM: The three biggest changes are: a new location, accessible delivery and innovative curriculum.

We moved the seminary in 2006 to a vibrant new location (in Shawnee, Kan.) that is much better suited for faculty and learners. We changed the schedule for classes and developed nine new sites for face-to-face classes, as well as technologically enhanced classes.

And we have developed curriculum that is competency-based, entrepreneurial, and focused on leadership development.

**BT: How is a current seminary student’s experience different from your own experience as a seminarian?**

MM: My experience as an M.Div. student (shortly after the earth cooled) was residential,



President Molly Marshall was honored in November for 10 years of innovative leadership at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. At the celebration, Vice President for Advancement John Gravley announced \$6.1 million in gifts and pledges for Central’s endowment as a tribute for her service. (CBTS photo)

with a full week of classes, and given to “mastering the body of divinity” more than focused on the practice of ministry.

At that time, we did not see the cultural marginalization of churches and [we] thought that full-time, lifetime employment was the calculus.

We now know that the economics of ministry are very different, and it is getting more difficult for the minister and congregation to afford each other.

**BT: What’s the “next thing” calling for your attention?**

MM: The next thing calling for my attention is long-term financial sustainability for Central. I believe this is possible as we articulate a compelling and relevant sense of mission for the seminary.

Part of what claims me at this point is the need to prepare ministers for the kind of intercultural and interfaith work our religiously plural world requires. Cultivating respect for the lived religion of others is essential.

**BT: Theologically, what does the church and its ministers need to be grappling with now?**

MM: Churches and ministers must engage their contexts in creative ways.

What needs doing in their particular community that is left undone?

What are the rising needs that only their congregation can address?

How can facilities be deployed as community hubs rather than insular fortresses?

When churches show real hospitality to immigrant communities, a renewed sense of mission and relevance can occur. Being self-protective ensures dwindling significance, and it denies the urgency of what faith communities can offer on the social landscape.

A richer liturgical life will provide for the sacramental hunger so many express; longing for transcendence in our worship is rampant.

Engaging current issues like care for creation, welcoming sexual minorities, and non-violent practices will enhance the witness of congregations. **BT**

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## THE GREATER GIFT

*Jennifer Kinard Wylie*

“All of us who recognize the authority of God upon our lives, and choose to live under it, have experiences worth sharing. They are like pathways that help to lead others safely across the pitfalls of life. In this way, our lives are like bridges, and, when we share them and the things that God has taught us through them, we are like bridge builders.” With these words, Jennifer Wylie, introduces readers to her personal story of servant leadership.

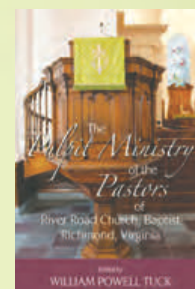


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*William Powell Tuck, ed.*

River Road Church has a storied history of pastoral leadership, as evidenced in this volume of sermons preached by five pastors spanning almost seven decades. Each preacher brought different gifts of preaching, management styles, craftsmanship and vision to accomplish the challenges of building up the congregation and enhancing the spiritual life of the membership.



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*Walker L. Knight*

A religious journalist for five decades, Walker L. Knight calmly articulated a message of missions ministry that focused on grace, compassion, inclusion, and reconciliation. When he saw racism and other troubling issues at play in Baptist life, he addressed them. Walker set a new standard for denominational journalism by repeatedly devoting entire editions of *Home Missions* magazine to specific issues that impacted the context for missions. Walker advanced civil rights without belligerence.



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*Bert Montgomery*

New Orleans native Bert Montgomery shares a collection of personal stories and experiences from friends, neighbors, and classmates in and around New Orleans. Part oral history and part memoir, this book is a journey through the storm Katrina and into inter-connected wholeness.

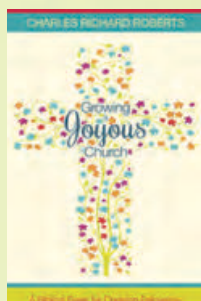


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*Charles Richardson Roberts*

Christian fellowship is built upon a covenant relationship with God, the lordship of Jesus Christ, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. These basic tenets of the faith play a vital role in “growing a joyous church,” as evidenced in this Bible study for use by individuals or groups.



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I see in our congregations and in our denomination ways in which diversity is lived out well. We have a church in Newark, N.J., that has 35 nationalities present in that worshipping congregation — and they have made it work.

My older son Ethan and his wife Urbi — she's African American — are going to Calvary Baptist Church in Clifton, N.J., which is an international congregation. Not huge, but people from Romania, a lot of Filipinos, African Americans and Euro-Americans. It's a great place for them and for our grandson.

So diversity is possible, but it takes a lot of grace. It takes the ability to step back from one's own culture and presuppositions and ask questions about the other's perspective.

One learning moment for me came when I was the Area Minister in New Jersey. A good friend on the board is an African-American woman. We were talking about our two teenage boys coming up to the age when they were getting their driver's licenses.

We were talking about insurance rates going through the roof and all. Then she started talking about what she had to tell her son as a young, black teenager in New Jersey in order to protect himself if pulled over by the police.

She was just sharing; she wasn't being bombastic or anything. This was just life for her, and she was talking about what she was telling her son.

I said, "Loretta, I've never thought of having to say any of that to my boy." That's when you begin to ask: What does reality look like from that person's position?

You can live into an intercultural, multicultural setting because you have new eyes and new sensitivities. We primarily live parallel lives in our culture, but there are places for deep friendships across race and other divisions in our culture.

When I talk with seminarians I say: First, you need some training in being in a multicultural world because that is the world in which we live. The second is interfaith. We live in a religiously plural country. Having interfaith sensitivities is needed — knowing people of other faiths so we can easily make friends of them.

So, I think diversity is possible. We're seeing it lived out in congregations and in ABC life. It's a struggle at times. People don't see eye to eye within congregations and certainly not within denominations. But I find when people are filled with grace, and live into mercy toward others, it's a huge step.

**BT: Earlier you talked about participating in a gathering in Rome, and recently I saw your photo with the pope. What were those experiences like?**

RM: It was a great honor to represent the Baptist World Alliance in that setting, and we were accorded the privilege of having a fraternal delegate at the Synod on the Family because of the Roman Catholic-Baptist dialogues that BWA sponsors.

As fraternal delegates, we were allowed to be in the plenary sessions but [have] no voice and no vote — except we were each given a three-minute moment to speak in the plenary small groups.

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"There is no such thing in the New Testament as an independent church. So finding ways in which we give expression to that organic unity is important, and I think denominations do that."

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We had full access to the conversation. As we were going through the document, there were places where I said: "I think there's something missing here," or in one place I said I was upset about the way they were referring to Protestants. They asked that I suggest a change.

I said, "Take it out" — and they took it out. I found that there was great respect accorded to me.

At some of these conversations, not so much with the Cardinals but others there, we'd be talking about something and I'd give my perspective. And they'd say, "I could be a Baptist." There was a great deal of interest and, I think, appreciation for our perspective in some of the items they were talking about.

I came away deeply grateful for the ministry of Francis. He is breathing a breath of fresh air into the Roman Catholic Church — a breath of mercy that is much needed not only in the Roman Catholic Church, but the church at large.

He is working very hard to reposition the [Catholic] church away from privilege and power and toward being a servant church. In that, there is a lot in common between his spirit and the spirit that is present in the Baptist community, and I'm really grateful for him and for his leadership in this way.

I was in Argentina a couple of years ago

to speak to Argentinian Baptists right after he had been elected. They had such good words to say about him from their experience. He has continued that openness, that humility, that emphasis on the church being a community of servants and a place that lives grace. I think that's important for all of us.

**BT: Your willingness to serve as chair of the National Council of Churches suggests you value ecumenical cooperation. Why is that important to you?**

RM: I grew up with Methodists and Pentecostals and other good friends who were following Jesus just as I was. So I've always understood that Baptists weren't the only Christians.

The last prayer our Savior prayed before he was crucified was that we might be one. That's pretty serious stuff.

So when I was a local pastor I worked with other pastors in our community. When I was serving in New Jersey in several capacities, I worked with different expressions of the Christian faith to tackle issues we were facing there.

Unity isn't something we create. God has created unity in the forming of the church. It's divisions we create, and it's our task to try to bring down those divisions. I know a lot of people start talking about a world church as though there is something heinous about that.

The thing that I've found in the ecumenical movement is that it creates an appreciation for the gifts and emphases that various expressions of the Christian body offer to one another. My wife is a Lutheran pastor, and I have found in the Lutheran tradition things that have deepened my faith.

We have American Baptists going on personal spiritual retreats that are looking at older forms of spirituality. When I was in Rome, one item in the document they were writing was about the importance of family worship. In Baptist life we would have talked about that in earlier years as having a family altar.

The strong emphasis I found in the meeting in Rome around scripture is a gift we gave to the Roman Catholic Church — not just Baptists, but as Protestants in general. The emphasis on Holy Scripture is taking on a new prominence in the Roman Catholic Church.

At the same time we are drawing from them some older forms of spiritual practices that can enhance our lives as Baptists. With our United Methodist friends, we are looking at the strong emphasis on putting people in small groups for forming communities.

Our Pentecostal brothers and sisters emphasize the work of the Spirit — not just



Roy Medley, now General Secretary Emeritus of American Baptist Churches, USA, visits the Judson Heritage Room — honoring early Baptist missionaries Adoniram and Ann Hasseltine Judson — in the American Baptist Historical Society archives housed on the Atlanta campus of Mercer University.

personally, but in the life of the church. I hear more and more in mainline Protestant circles an emphasis on the work of the Spirit. I think all of those are ways in which we enhance one another and learn from each other.

At times we are able to speak with a common voice. Here in the U.S., the National Association of Evangelicals, the Catholic Bishops in the U.S. and the National Council of Churches have all made statements on poverty and immigration. There's not a dime's worth of difference between any of them.

There is a sense of the Spirit pulling us together on some of those issues we face. It is another expression of an ecumenical spirit of saying we can live and work with one another, respecting differences but also knowing those differences are not as great as the unity that's given us because we confess Jesus as Lord.

**BT: Your long tenure with American Baptists suggests you have not given up on denominationalism. What do you see as the benefits of denominational identity and cooperation?**

RM: Fred Rogers was once asked what he had learned about children, of most importance, during his years with *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. He said: "Children long to belong."

I think that's present within us not just as children. It is an expression of the fact that we're created in the image of God and the nature of God is Trinitarian — so there's community within the life of the Godhead, and that community is to be lived out in the expression of the church as well.

That means an independent church of any type is an oxymoron. There is no such thing in the New Testament as an independent church. So finding ways in which we give expression to that organic unity is important, and I think denominations do that.

Being part of a larger family gives an opportunity to stretch in ways that one would not have been stretched before and to introduce new understandings of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus.

As Baptists, we've always said we join together to do things we can do together better. The mission work that we do is incredibly important, but I don't think that's the only reason. I get upset with Baptists when they cite that as the only reason we live in community as congregations — because I don't think that's good New Testament ecclesiology. It is one aspect of how living in community with other congregations strengthens our witness within

the life of the world.

Early Baptists met on a regular basis to support one another and to assist in developing common mission strategies for their own areas where churches needed to be started. All that was common thinking among Baptists, and it would enhance our life if we came back to more of a sense of common life together. It's really important for individual churches to be embedded in a larger community of faith.

**BT: During your time as General Secretary, there have been significant social changes that have impacted and continue to impact churches and denominational groups — including the growing acceptance of same-sex relationships, the rise of the "nones" and "dones," the growing threat of religiously motivated terrorism and more. How do you think American Christians, and Baptists in particular, are doing in the midst of such drastic change and the challenges they bring?**

RM: It's the question of our day, isn't it? What is the future of the church and local congregations in a culture that is shifting and has shifted so much?

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38

First, I believe there is power in the gospel to change lives and that as the church continues to give witness to that gospel, it will continue to attract people and will continue to change people. But congregations are going to have to be willing to change as well.

Baptists have never stood for an established church, but we have benefitted like every church in America from what was seen as being the Christian culture. We don't have that crutch to stand on any longer.

I preached at Prairie Baptist Church in Kansas City, Kan., recently and said that churches can make an impact when there are three critical things present.

One is worship that is transformative — not just entertainment. I made a modest proposition that in the narthex of every church we put up a sign that says: "Warning! Danger ahead! You will be changed by being here."

Life for the 12 disciples wasn't easy with Jesus. He was always pushing them, stretching them, challenging their understanding of what God was up to. He blew open their narrow vision of what this Messiah was to be and do.

I think God does the same thing to us ... as we worship today. The goal of worship is to reform us and recast us — to reconvert us to Jesus each time we enter worship.

Second, community is essential. Because of the emphasis on the individual, we Baptists can have a hyper-individualist view of the life of the church. It's like, "I'm here as an individual believer and I'll stay as long as it tickles my fancy."

But we grow in our capacity to follow Jesus because the church lives his life into us. That's what happened to me as a boy growing up in a congregation and is still what happens to me today: people live Jesus into me. Having a sense of community where we belong and are integrally involved in assisting others is really important.

And, third, congregations understand they exist for the healing of the world through the love of God. As a friend of mine put it, "We are privileged to serve as Christians."

I've been preaching in ABC life for the past couple of years that the church cannot live as a gated community. We have to be open to those who are pressed to the very margins of life, and it makes church life messy.

One of the challenges in our churches is to be willing to live with the messiness because Jesus still invites sinners to his table.

### BT: Church and denominational leadership can be draining. How do you refuel your spiritual tank?

RM: I'm a member of a local congregation. They don't see me a whole lot, but they're still my primary community of faith. When I step into that sanctuary, it ministers to me in a very important and deep way.

They let me just be Roy, not General Secretary Medley. I'm a fellow follower of Jesus who is looking to be fed, looking to be challenged, and looking for direction just like anybody else coming that Sunday. So I'm very grateful to First Baptist Freehold (N.J.) for just letting me be a member.

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Scripture continues to confront me in ways I never anticipated. I've been in professional ministry for 40 years and have been in the life of the church since I was a kid. Yet these same scriptures come with new meaning and new insights.

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I've also had a spiritual director during these years. I knew coming into this that we American Baptists, like every denomination, were going to run headlong into the issues of human sexuality, interfaith relations — all of those big questions.

I was running right toward them and couldn't do that in my own strength. So I asked a friend to become my spiritual director. He asked why I had chosen him. I said because you lived through your young son having brain cancer. You navigated those very difficult waters, and I need somebody whose faith runs deep to help me.

He has been a wonderful gift during these years as we talk about the pressures that anyone who is in church leadership faces.

Scripture continues to confront me in ways I never anticipated. I've been in professional ministry for 40 years and have been in the life of the church since I was a kid. Yet these same scriptures come with new meaning and new insights.

I think about those early Baptists in England who said that there is more light to break forth from scripture. That's been true in my life.

In ABC life we have an initiative called "Transformed by the Spirit." We invite people, individually but hopefully in groups, to take up a scripture passage and reflect on it with one another. Our ABC leadership team spent one year reflecting every month we met on the same passage: Jesus' sending of the 70 [from Luke 10].

Every month we would spend an hour on that passage, and each time something new would come out. So dwelling in the Word has been really important to me.

Then, just integrating into my life some new forms of prayer. There are times when my prayer is about pouring out before God. But learning to be still and listen for the voice of God has been an important part of my learning about prayer.

### BT: Can you identify two or three memorable moments from your time as General Secretary that will always stay with you?

RM: One goes back to the question you asked about the future of the church. I was on a red-eye flight from Phoenix to Atlanta and, like every flight nowadays, it was packed. A young man, 20-something, took the middle seat beside me. I'd been working all weekend with churches in the Phoenix area and was worn out. Before the plane had gotten off the tarmac I was dozing.

But I was awakened more than once by this young man asking for a gin and tonic. After awhile he was pretty socially lubricated and became very talkative. He began to pour out his life to me — a stranger.

He said he was arrested for drug possession in Utah and was on his way back home to North Carolina. I think he said he was 23 years old.

"I can't read," he said. "I've got a learning disability and went all the way through school with so much shame about not being able to read."

He said: I don't have a job, my brother doesn't have a job, and we're just a couple of... He used an expression I can't use in this interview.

A lot of the flight was spent with him talking like this, and then he turned the conversation and asked: "So what do you do?"

I said, "You don't want to know." He said, "It can't be that bad."

I said, "I'll tell you if you promise not to freak out." He asked, "What is it?"

I said, "Well, I'm a Baptist minister." He said, "Oh my, it is that bad."

Then what he said next cut me to the quick because he said to me: "I guess you've just been

sitting there judging me all this time.”

To a person who knows mercy and is supposed to show mercy as a Christian, to have someone say their understanding of who you are is one who judges people when they pour out the brokenness of their lives — that was hard.

I said to him, “Son, I’ve not been judging you. My heart has been breaking for you.”

He said, “Well, what do you think, preacher?”

I said, “It’s not what I think; it’s what I know. What I know is that God loves you more than you can ever imagine and God wants to help get your life to a point where you can feel good about it.”

We talked for the rest of the way about faith, about Jesus. And at one point he said to me: “You don’t talk like any preacher I’ve ever talked to before.”

As the plane was beginning its final approach, he said: “I wish I weren’t so drunk. I’d like to talk some more.”

That really drew me up short in terms of how so many people see us, especially as Baptists, as people who just stand in judgment rather than people who have been in a mess ourselves and have found forgiveness and new life because Jesus speaks mercy and forgiveness to us. I’ll never forget that moment.

**BT: That was memorable.**

RM: On the other side of the scale, I’ll never forget being in Burma. I was the first American Baptist official to be able to go into the Chin Hills again. All of our missionaries were forced out in the ’60s, but [now] the church there is vibrant and strong and they still feel this real connection with us.

I was one of the first American Baptists [allowed] back into the Kachin Hills as the government released restrictions and allowed me to go there. The reception was incredible. At the airport in Myitkyina there were probably 3,000 people waiting to greet me.

As we went through the Kachin State and the Chin State later, in every village we would visit people would line the roads for literally miles before we would ever get to the village. They were there to greet us, to sing, to dance, to offer gifts and to welcome us.

At one point, we were going to a village and I asked the driver to stop. I wanted to walk among the people. As we started walking down this narrow, dirt road with people on both sides, people started coming up to me just wanting to touch my beard, wanting to touch my coat — any way they could make

a connection back to American Baptists who sent these missionaries and had brought the Christian faith to them. It was an incredible experience.

Because of the conflict they’ve been in with the military, because of their being Christian and the military suppressing them, and the violence they’ve experienced, there was a lot of conversation about peace with justice. We met with the U.S. Ambassador, and with [opposition leader] Aung San Suu Kyi, and a number of government officials to talk about human rights violations and the importance of religious liberty in that setting.

As I was leaving Myitkyina, again a thousand people lined up. Women were holding out their babies for me to touch and to bless. Young children were holding signs saying, “Do not forget us. Remember your promise to pray for us.”

It was heartbreaking. [I] didn’t want to get on the plane.

**BT: When was that?**

RM: This past February. I’ve been to Burma several times, but only with the Judson 200 Celebration [in 2012] was I able to first go into the Chin State and then last February be allowed into the Kachin State and into the Southern Chin State where there has been some violence. So that reception was just incredible.

I mentioned earlier about Lebanon. My experience with the Baptist community in the Middle East — whether in Lebanon, or with the Association of Baptist Churches of Israel, or with Palestinian Baptists — has been transformative for me.

I have seen in them a commitment as Christians to be a bridge of peace between Jews and Muslims and to offer themselves in countless ways in the work for peace and justice in the Middle East against such great odds. These are very small communities.

You talk to the Palestinians and hear how their grandfather’s land was confiscated during the formation of Israel and how they lost everything, and yet their commitment is to love and to work for peace.

You talk to someone like Alia — a Lebanese Baptist — and hear how her father was captured and killed during the Lebanese Civil War by Muslim militia and of her starkly facing a decision as to whether she would live forever hating those who had done this to her family or whether she would live in love toward them as Jesus loved her. She is in the forefront of ministering to the refugees flooding into Lebanon now.

You see people who have been abused but will not let that be the final word in their lives, but the love of Jesus will be the final word in their relationships to others. First, it makes you ashamed; that’s the first response.

Then it becomes such an encouragement as to what the love of Christ can do in your own life. I would say those would be three experiences that have been transformative for me.

**BT: What is ahead for you after you leave the leadership position that has taken up so much of your life?**

RM: Family is ahead for me, and I look forward to that. When Pat and I celebrated our 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, I said to her: “You know, it’s probably more like 15 years in actuality for the amount of time I’m on the road.”

You can’t lead and sit in Valley Forge. Like any good pastor, you have to be out and among your people — and in a denominational role you have to be out in the world as well. So I want to have more time with my family; that’s a big thing.

The Baptist World Alliance has asked me to head up a new commission on interfaith relations. That will allow me to continue to broaden interfaith relationships with Muslims.

Also, I have two years left with the National Council of Churches as past president, so I’ll continue as an officer as we work on two major issues. One is mass incarceration, and the second is peace building through interfaith relations. And I’ve been asked to write chapters in a couple of books, so I look forward to that.

Aidsand Wright-Riggins, our Home Mission Society director who just retired, said: “I look forward to not being a professional Christian.” He said he looked forward to engaging in the life of faith as one who will have more time to devote to the spiritual disciplines. I look forward to that too.

**BT: Journalists are to disclose any pre-existing relationships. So this is the disclosure question: When I used to come to your house to borrow an encyclopedia or you came over to mine to stay with my brothers and me while my mother went somewhere, did you imagine we’d be doing this interview someday?**

RM: It’s been amazing to see how two boys who grew up across the road from each other in Ringgold, Ga., how God has blessed us. It has been a real joy to me and, as we would have said, who’d have thunk it? **BT**

## Positivity: You might want to try it

By Tony W. Cartledge

The annual Society of Biblical Literature meeting — held this past November in Atlanta — is always enjoyable. The days are long and tiring, so it's easy to become a bit ill.

Ordinarily, I'm not a cantankerous person but sometimes fall victim to grouching over things like walking a long way to hear a paper with an interesting title, only to discover an exercise in trivia or academic gibberish. So I decided to see how often I could turn potential negative experiences into positive ones for the day.

I started with a morning walk, but had not brought an appropriate coat for 35-degree weather. Instead of complaining, I just cut the walk short and stopped in a sunny spot to admire the bright yellow leaves of a ginkgo tree against a glorious blue sky.

As I approached the Peachtree Center mall and food court, I noticed an apparently homeless man shivering near the entrance. It was tempting to give him a wide berth or decline to meet his gaze.

But I decided instead to say hello, and when he asked for money for a cup of coffee, I invited him inside, learned his name, and bought Alonzo a hot breakfast.

Hustling on to the first meeting I had chosen for the morning (Egyptology and Ancient Israel), I had to cross one of several narrow skybridges that connect the Hyatt, Marriott and Hilton hotels. Traffic was clogged because several folks had run across old friends and stopped in the middle of the bridge to visit.

Instead of getting ill, I chose to be glad for their happy reunion.

I intended to eat lunch at Underground Atlanta but after hiking there, discovered it was closed. No disappointment needed, it gave me time to expand my walk to include Centennial Olympic Park, which was bustling prior to a Falcons game.

Along the way, a teenaged girl approached me with a plastic bag full of hard candy, and asked for a dollar to help her earn some sort of talent scholarship. I could have been annoyed, but gave her the dollar and told her to keep the candy.

By the time I got back, I had a blister on my right heel, but chose to be thankful that my new right hip allows me to walk far enough to earn a blister.

Back at the conference, I was too late to get a seat for a fascinating session on "Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Bible." So I stood in the back.

A large guy in front of me was hogging two



seats and knew I was there, but never offered to move his jacket and bag from the empty chair beside him so I could sit.

Instead of getting ill, I took it as an opportunity to burn extra calories by standing for two-and-a-half hours while occasionally fitting in some physical therapy exercises.

As a bonus, while standing in the back I could periodically check on the Duke-Georgetown game score without giving offense.

I made a point of getting to the 4 o'clock session early enough for a seat (whew!) while learning about Hebrew Bible, History and Archaeology.

Turning lemons to lemonade is starting to sound monotonous, but in a rewarding sort of way. You might want to try it sometime. **BT**

## Thanks, Jackie!

By John D. Pierce

Jackie Bowen showed up at Boynton Baptist Church in Ringgold, Ga., in the summer of 1975 to work with the youth. The Georgia Southern student from the mid-state town of Perry was welcomed to the hills of northwest Georgia where I was raised.

It was the first time we met.

The following summer Jackie and I were appointed to a 12-member collegiate team of Georgians to work at Bambi Lake, a beautiful camp in Michigan. It was a memorable 10-week experience during

America's bicentennial celebration.

Neither Jackie (now Jackie Bowen Riley) nor I could have imagined that someday we'd be colleagues in a publishing venture based in Macon, Ga.

Shortly after accepting the editorship of *Baptists Today*, I was tasked with filling the position of managing editor. Jackie, working as book editor for Smyth & Helwys Publishing at the time, and I had lunch to recall embellished stories from our past.

Returning to my office, I thought about the qualities needed in a managing editor: dependable, productive, cautious about details



and knowledgeable of our audience. Yes, Jackie.

That was 15 years ago, and I remain so pleased and grateful that she was open to sharing this venture. Jackie's dedication, organization and eagle-eyed editing skills are integral to the accuracy, timeliness and quality of everything we publish.

Moving into book publishing — with the Nurturing Faith imprint — would not have been so successful without Jackie's talents and commitments. Her name does not appear on the books, but often her contributions are nearly as significant as the author's.

In everything Jackie does, she makes others including me look better. So thanks Jackie for your superb contributions to *Baptists Today*/Nurturing Faith. **BT**





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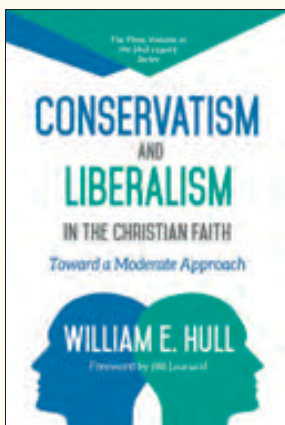
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Publication of this book and  
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## TEXTS AND TITLES FOR 2016

### Season of Christmas

Jan. 3 “A Good Way to Begin”

Psalm 147:12-20

God as the creator of all things, even the new year

### Season of Epiphany (Jan. 10-Feb. 7)

#### THEME

**Jesus: The Curtain Rises  
(Jan. 10-31)**

Jan. 10 “Of Water and Fire”

Luke 3:15-22

Jesus’ baptism pulls back the curtain on a world-changing ministry.

Jan. 17 “Of Water and Wine”

John 2:1-11

Jesus’ first recorded miracle sets an important tone.

Jan. 24 “An Old Scroll and a New Mission”

Luke 4:14-21

Jesus’ first sermon got him thrown out of the synagogue.

Jan. 31 “A New Prophet and an Old Response”

Luke 4:21-30

Israel had a history of rejecting the prophets, Jesus included.

### Transfiguration Sunday

Feb. 7 “Who Needs a King?”

Psalm 99

God is king of all, and that’s a good thing.

### Season of Lent (Feb. 10-March 26)

Feb. 14 “Who Needs a Rescuer?”

Psalm 91

God is a deliverer, and that’s good too.

Feb. 21 “Who Needs a Light?”

Psalm 27

With God as our light and salvation, who could ask for more?

Feb. 28 “Who Needs God?”

Psalm 63

God’s present love is food for the soul.

March 6 “When Old Becomes New”

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Old lives can become new creations in Christ.

March 13 “God’s New Thing”

Isaiah 43:16-21

Isaiah looked at a troubled world and saw God doing a new thing.

March 20 “The Dark Night Before the Dawn”

Luke 23:1-49

Jesus’ crucifixion is distasteful to consider, but essential nevertheless.

### Season of Easter (March 27-May 8)

#### Easter Sunday

March 27 “Ladies First”

Luke 24:1-12

Women were first in love and faithfulness, first to witness Jesus’ resurrection.

#### THEME

**Close Encounters of the Jesus Kind:  
Conversations with Jesus  
(April 3-May 8)**

April 3 “A Disciple We Can Like”

John 20:19-31

Thomas was a disciple we can relate to.

April 10 “One Shepherd to Another”

John 21:1-19

Jesus didn’t pass the torch, but handed on a shepherd’s crook.

April 17 “Ask the Sheep”

John 10:22-30

Wondering if Jesus was the Messiah ... Ask his sheep.

April 24 “A Serious Summary”

John 13:31-35

Here’s one commandment with many ramifications.

May 1 “At Home with God”

John 14:23-29

Listen to a different take on the “ideal home.”

May 8 “Make Them One”

John 17:20-26

Hear another “Lord’s prayer” worth repeating.

### Season of Pentecost (May 15-Nov. 20)

#### Pentecost Sunday

May 15 “Someone’s Coming” John 14:8-17

Jesus would never leave his followers alone: enter the Spirit.

### *Trinity Sunday*

May 22 “Trinitarian Roots”

John 16:12-15

God the Son talks about God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

### **THEME**

**Getting on in Galatia:  
Paul’s Angriest Letter  
(May 29-July 3)**

May 29 “You Did What?”

Galatians 1:1-12

Paul can’t believe the Galatians have deserted grace for works.

June 5 “Training Camp”

Galatians 1:11-24

Paul recounts his long days of preparation to preach.

June 12 “Do You Feel ‘Justified?’”

Galatians 2:15-21

To be justified by faith is to be crucified with Christ.

June 19 “No More Lines – Really?”

Galatians 3:23-29

Dividing lines become meaningless in the shadow of the cross.

June 26 “What Will Prevail?”

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

We have human traits – and spiritual gifts. What do others see?

July 3 “Living Like You Mean It”

Galatians 6:1-16

If we are new creations in Christ, something should be different.

### **THEME**

**Nothing ‘Minor’ About These Prophets  
(July 10-31)**

July 10 “The Leaning Tower of Israel”

Amos 7:7-17

A visionary plumb line reveals a crooked people.

July 17 “Full Pockets and Empty Hearts”

Amos 8:1-12

There’s no good news for those who trample the poor.

July 24 “A Seriously Broken Home”

Hosea 1:1-10

Hosea’s broken family spoke to a broken nation.

July 31 “A Love That Won’t Let Go”

Hosea 11:1-11

God’s love is not the traveling kind.

### **THEME**

**Faith Matters: Lessons from Hebrews  
(Aug. 7-28)**

Aug. 7 “You’re Not the First”

Hebrews 11:1-16

A parade of Old Testament faithfuls witness to the importance of faith.

Aug. 14 “You’re Not Alone”

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

The parade continues: a “cloud of witnesses” is cheering us on.

Aug. 21 “All Shook Up”

Hebrews 12:14-29

When God shakes up the world, the faithful can remain unmoved.

Aug. 28 “Remember – and Do”

Hebrews 13:1-16

A chain of reminders calls for faithful living.

Sept. 4 “Getting Into Shape”

Jeremiah 18:1-11

Our ideal shape is in the potter’s hands — if we don’t fight them.

### **THEME**

**An Apostle’s Apprentice:  
Lessons from Timothy  
(Sept. 11-Oct 23)**

Sept. 11 “Bad Starts Can Be Redeemed”

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Paul was “chief of sinners,” but with God’s help, turned it around.

Sept. 18 “It’s Not About You”

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Faithful workers are concerned for others too.

Sept. 25 “Find Contentment Where You Are”

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Can “where you are” bring peace with God?

Oct. 2 “Keep the Faith”

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Faith ethics, like work ethics, often begin at home.

Oct. 9 “Don’t Be Ashamed”

2 Timothy 2:8-15

When we live as we ought, there’s no cause for shame.

Oct. 16 “Read the Instructions”

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

It’s always helpful to start by reading the instructions, including the scriptures.

Oct. 23 “Finish the Race”

2 Timothy 4:6-18

Timothy was challenged to be faithful until the end.

Oct. 30 “Little Big Man”

Luke 19:1-10

Zacchaeus and the Grinch had a lot in common.

### **THEME**

**A Time for Gratitude:  
Songs of Thankful People  
(Nov. 6-27)**

Nov. 6 “Justice Always Counts”

Psalms 145:1-5, 17-21

Sing a psalm of praise to a God who is just.

Nov. 13 “A New Song for a Lasting Love”

Psalms 98

We can’t say enough good things about God’s steadfast love and mercy.

Nov. 20 “When All Else Fails”

Psalms 46

God is our refuge and strength — and not only in desperate times.

### **Season of Advent (Nov. 27-Dec. 18)**

Nov. 27 “Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem”

Psalms 122

The world’s most strategic real estate still needs our prayers.

Dec. 4 “Starving for Hope”

Matthew 3:1-12

People were feeling desperate. Why else listen to John’s fiery message?

Dec. 11 “The Real McCoy”

Matthew 11:2-11

Was Jesus the Messiah? The proof was in the pudding.

Dec. 18 “The Invisible Man”

Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph is the forgotten man at Christmas, but he had a story too.

### **Season of Christmas**

Dec. 25 “Why Christmas Matters”

Titus 3:4-7

Witness a short synopsis of Jesus’ mission on earth.





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