

MARCH-APRIL 2018

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THE LIGHT OF
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INSIDE

VOL. 36, ISSUE 2
MARCH / APRIL 2018



JOIN US!
Melissa Rogers to
receive Judson-Rice
Award April 26.

8

THOUGHTS

7 Whatever happened to being a good witness for Jesus?
By John D. Pierce

13 Let's talk about boundaries
Bill Wilson

17 Where everything old is new again
By Tony W. Cartledge

18 The mission of God
By John R. Franke

19 Is my example worth following?
By Ginger Hughes

20 Prince Harry and me
By Brett Younger

42 Remembering two remarkable women
By John D. Pierce

43 Principles for maintaining unity in divisive times
By Larry Hovis

RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS

Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1909)
By Bruce Gourley



56



4

EXPANDED LOVE: Couple models good stewardship of unexpected parenting experiences

FEATURES

9 **DREAMING AGAIN:** Q&A with Bob Dale about growing healthy congregations for changing futures

44 **WHAT'S MISSING?** Revisiting the story of Jesus as told by the Church
By Bruce Gourley

46 **ALIVE AND WELL:** Review and Expositor a steady voice for theological scholarship
By Tony W. Cartledge

48 **AGING IS LIFE:** Reflections on living between 'now' and 'evermore'
By Larry L. McSwain

60 **QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK SCIENTISTS:** How can we understand Jesus in light of evolution?
By Paul Wallace

62 **DAY OF CONTRASTS:** Fools for Christ or just plain fools?
By John D. Pierce

MEDIA

54 **Author: History matters when exploring exodus story**
Review by Tony W. Cartledge

59 **Resources for responding to anxiety and envy**
Review by John D. Pierce

Cover photo by Bruce Gourley. "Morning Glory" inspires thoughts of Easter as well as the flower for which this hot spring pool was named. To explore this remarkable display of nature and more of the majesty of Yellowstone this summer with Bruce's expertise, check out the two Nurturing Faith Experiences set for July. See the inside front cover or visit nurturingfaith.net/upcoming-trips.

Worth Repeating6
Editorial7

Reblog19
Lighter Side20

Recognition & Remembrance40



Ashley and Chris Ward, with their three children (left to right), Thomas, Jedidiah and Josslyn, on the front porch of their home in Knoxville, Tenn.

Expanded love

Couple models good stewardship of unexpected parenting experiences

**STORY AND PHOTO
BY JOHN D. PIERCE**

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — Chris and Ashley Ward, sweethearts since their high school days, never imagined the future that would unfold before them. Reality would bring a lot less idealism but more love than they could have ever envisioned.

The couple sat calmly in their historic Knoxville, Tenn., home while their daughter played with the cat and their two lively sons burned seemingly unlimited energy.

The snack their mother had provided in hopes of creating a bit of calm wasn't

particularly effective. But, then, they were just kids being kids.

“Most of the time you hear us before you see us,” said Ashley, smilingly, of their family of five, while unnecessarily apologizing for the expected clamorous setting in which we talked.

SURPRISES & SUPPORT

Chris works for an HVAC company, and Ashley is a hair stylist. After getting married they became involved in Central Baptist Church of Fountain City, the Knoxville community in which they were raised.

Ashley said that although she was a believer growing up, she didn't go to church

regularly, as Chris did, because her father worked weekends. However the young couple quickly found a warm embrace and places of service within this church community.

“They made us feel like family,” said Ashley. “These are some of the greatest friends we've ever had.”

Ashley said that, after she became pregnant, they were particularly pleased to have found this church home. They anticipated the spiritual nurture the church would provide for their child.

However, the church family would play an even greater role in their surprisingly growing family than they could have imagined.

Ashley gave birth to their daughter, Josslyn, on May 5, 2009, arriving at just 23 weeks of development and weighing only 13 ounces. Childbirth was so difficult for Ashley that she and Chris knew they would never take that risk again.

Josslyn spent five months in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at the University of Tennessee Medical Center and has faced multiple surgeries. She continues to deal with issues related to her vision and developmental delays.

“You expect healthy and perfect children, and that’s not what happened,” said Ashley, reflectively. “But we began to bond with other families there and to mentor new ones coming in.”

Chris — whose work would often take him out of town — recalled the challenge of fulfilling that commitment while giving needed time and attention to his family. He would head to the NICU after work — and twice was called to the hospital during the night.

Throughout the many challenging times following Josslyn’s birth and needed medical treatments, Chris and Ashley learned to lean on their church family.

“People were paying our utilities and groceries that we didn’t even know,” said Ashley, gratefully. “It definitely was a ministry to us.”

In turn, these grateful parents held Josslyn’s first birthday party at the church — asking that people bring donations for the hospital rather than personal gifts.

WIDER EMBRACE

During the many visits to the NICU, Chris said they couldn’t help but notice the newborns there with neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS) resulting from exposure to addictive opiate drugs in the mother’s womb.

“They would be screaming,” Chris recalled, “and there was nothing you could do.”

Ashley said the couple learned so much from the challenging experiences in the NICU and later at home with Josslyn — while guiding her continual development. They began to wonder how they might be

better stewards of what they had unexpectedly become informed and equipped to do.

“Her journey opened us up to adoption,” said Ashley. “After diving into Early Intervention for two and a half years, we knew we could do this for another child...”

Chris and Ashley began to reconsider the words they’d shared after Josslyn’s birth: “We’re done; our family is complete.”

So they applied to become foster parents to other children with special needs.

Thomas, who arrived two days before Christmas of 2011, was born addicted to opiate drugs. He would experience the related trauma and aftereffects.

After taking him into their home as foster parents, the Wards then adopted him. And, again, they thought their family unit to be complete.

A few years later, however, they learned of another child about to be born to the same mother.

“At first we weren’t really sure,” said Ashley. But the couple couldn’t get over the fact that these two boys were related, yet likely to be raised apart.

So when contacted by the Department of Children’s Services, “We said, ‘yes.’”

Jedidiah was born on Nov. 3, 2014 with the same condition. He, too, was taken in under foster care and then adopted a year later.

“It’s not at all what I thought I would have,” said Ashley, with surprise but not an ounce of disappointment. “But I see God working through all of this — and I’ve tried hard to make it that.”

SHARED LEARNING

Chris and Ashley balance their dual commitments to providing the best opportunities for their own children to grow to their potential and to helping other families now going through similar experiences.

“Ultimately, I just want them to meet their developmental milestones,” said Ashley of their three children. But she is not selfish with her knowledge and experience.

Just recently, she met a young minister’s wife at Starbucks to offer encouragement and practical advice. That family has now

fostered and then adopted a child with developmental disabilities.

When asked what advice she would give to families just beginning the experience of parenting children with special needs, Ashley offered these three:

“First, be a voice for your child,” she said. “And don’t judge the child by how it looks on paper.”

She explained that a child’s potential could well exceed expectations and that getting the best medical and educational attention needed requires parents to be active rather than passive with providers.

“You are your child’s biggest advocate by far,” added Chris.

Second, said Ashley, families facing such challenges need to learn to accept the help that others want to offer.

“Rely on your community,” said Ashley. “Let others do things for you.”

And, third, she added: Sometimes you just have to act and hope and pray that you are doing the right thing.

“You get in a survival mode and you just do it,” she said, “and hope for the best.”

With appreciation for the many ways Central Baptist Church of Fountain City has embraced and supported their family, Ashley encourages other congregations to be intentionally accommodating of families with children with disabilities.

Pastor Mike Smith said the church is on both the giving and receiving end when it comes to the Ward family. He sees them as models of unconditional love and faithful service to others.

“Chris and Ashley are two of the most genuine people I know,” he said.

While the Wards give a lot of time and attention to their children’s development, they acknowledge getting quite an education of their own through these unexpected experiences that have grown their household into one of enlarged love and joy.

“For one,” said Chris, “I’ve become much more patient.” And it shows.

Chris said they have learned as a couple to adapt to whatever challenges and opportunities come along.

“This is a whole other world than we knew existed before eight years ago.” **NFJ**

Worth Repeating

“There is no institution with greater capacity to create protected spaces for healing and restoration for survivors, as well as confession, repentance and rehabilitation for perpetrators.”

From a statement, accompanied by the hashtag #SilencelsNotSpiritual, issued by female Christian leaders urging churches to assume a greater role in combating violence against women (RNS)

“When Christians resort to dismissal of unpleasant truth as ‘fake news,’ we are essentially saying that truth doesn’t matter. We are saying that we prefer the comfort of the lie to a hard truth.”

Ed Stetzer, Billy Graham Distinguished Chair of Church, Mission and Evangelism at Wheaton College (*Christianity Today*)

“Only 29 percent of Americans polled said they pray to relieve stress, a gradual but consistent decline since the high of 37 percent recorded in 2008.”

Yonat Shimron, writing for Religion News Service on an American Psychological Association survey on “Stress in America”

“Mainstream Muslims have been hearing for years that they must repudiate the hateful fringe perverting their religion; surely the same applies to us Christians.”

David Von Drehle, columnist for *The Washington Post*

“While about one-in-five American Muslim adults were raised in a different faith tradition and converted to Islam, a similar share of Americans who were raised Muslim now no longer identify with the faith.”

From a Pew Research Center study showing Muslim population growth in the U.S. is not due to conversions (*Newsweek*)

“Abandoning the term evangelical is the most superficial fix conceivable. Real soul searching would mean asking what it is about the evangelical worldview that has made evangelical leaders and ordinary Bible-believers susceptible to courtship by authoritarian, bigoted, sexist, tribal, anti-intellectual greedmongers who dangle the carrot of theocracy.”

Valerie Tarico, writing on evangelicalism for AlterNet

“If you blink when you cross the Allenby Bridge, then you’ll miss seeing the Jordan River.”

Gidon Bromberg, the Israeli director of the environmental group EcoPeace, referencing the bridge that links Jordan and the West Bank, and the impact of long-term drought on the region (AP)

“Substantial shares of Americans of nearly all religious groups — as well as those who have no religious affiliation at all — say they meditate at least once a week.”

From Pew Research, regarding the 40 percent of Americans who meditate regularly and come from different faith traditions

“Making up around 25 percent of the population, white evangelicals are the most worried about the threats posed by immigrants, by far. They are the most suspicious of Islam, by far. They are the most resistant to same-sex marriage, by far.”

Harry Bruinius, writing for *The Christian Science Monitor*

“They gave me the keys to the kingdom.”

Thomas Wilkinson, who leads “Catacombs by Candlelight” tours at St. Patrick’s Old Cathedral in Lower Manhattan, New York City’s only subterranean cemetery with recesses for tombs (RNS)

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Whatever happened to being a good witness for Jesus?

By John D. Pierce

Evangelism, or “witnessing” as it was often called, was considered a highly important function of what it meant to be a Christian in many church circles including the one of my Baptist upbringing.

This task, rooted in Jesus’ call to “Go ye therefore...,” was clear: Those who had heard the Good News of Jesus and experienced salvation were to faithfully pass along this vital message to others.

In fact, we learned that each of us was not only responsible for his or her own salvation and ongoing discipleship but also for ensuring that every person we encountered — neighbor, co-worker, classmate and even strangers — was given the chance to hear about Jesus too.

Evangelism was presented more as an obligation than an opportunity. We didn’t want someone — especially those we loved the most — to go to hell on our watch or because we had failed to share the proper route to salvation.

And we were constantly reminded that the recipients of our witness needed more than our words: “Seeing” Jesus in our lives was necessary for the “hearing” about Jesus to be effective.

Evangelism was something of a spiritual recruitment campaign with various “plans” of salvation that were often too rote and too rooted in a shallow theological process that suggested instantaneous assurance of eternal rest with little to no regard for what it meant to be a follower of Jesus — other than to take on similar responsibilities that included the recruitment of others.

While that approach to evangelism had its weaknesses, it had its strengths also — particularly this overarching idea: The love and grace of Jesus are to be shared widely, and how well one reflects Jesus in his or

her own life plays a crucial role in how well others might be compelled to follow Jesus themselves.

Yet today much of what is called evangelical Christianity in America is fortifying itself into an ever-narrowing, protectionist circle with little to no regard for how it is repelling both those who’ve never professed to be Christian and many who have.

Whatever happened to being a good, faithful witness for Jesus? Why is this once-high priority less appealing now to many church leaders than being in positions of political power that provide a platform for advocating for causes that Jesus did not?

When the life and teachings of Jesus get downplayed or even cast aside in favor of narrow political ideologies deemed “biblical” but lacking any semblance to the love and mercy that Jesus taught, the Christian witness is lost. And so are many persons who do (or would) find Jesus appealing — but not those who bear his name loudly and proudly.

This is no time to put fingers in our ears but to hear clearly what is being said by those who are moving ever further from the church — not because of a failed faith in God but from a failure on behalf of many American Christians to embrace and reflect the basic message of Jesus — which was not an allegiance to some narrow, religious/political agenda to be pushed on the larger populace.

Those willing to hear what is driving persons from involvement in and identity

with Christianity and the church will find fewer pagans than embarrassed and estranged believers who feel like they were told one thing about Jesus and his followers and then have “witnessed” something different.

Honest confessions, if not ignored or dismissed, provide painful but helpful perspectives that could allow for a needed course correction.

It is crushing to read repeatedly of those who leave or never engage in faith communities because they see (in some cases correctly and in some incorrectly) more love, kindness and grace on the outside.

This is not doomsday, however. Many faithful Christians and congregations are offering an alternative witness that actually points people to Jesus. Such faithfulness brings responses such as the one I read recently: “Today, the only reason I might still call myself a Christian is because of that church.”

Being a witness for Christ is challenging and needed for such a time — and old models aren’t likely to work as well as consistent reflections of what Jesus revealed as the highest priorities of loving God and others.

Who would have believed that the greatest obstacle to sharing the good news of Jesus Christ is not secularism, materialism or intellectualism, as many warned, but the absence of Jesus’ generous grace and loving embrace among those who claim his name while seeking personal advantages and excusing their highly selective condemnation of others?

For many years we were repeatedly told that our witness is ineffective unless our lives match up with the message. It seems that truth needs a humble resurrection. **NFJ**





Join us for

THE 18TH ANNUAL
JUDSON-RICE AWARD DINNER

Honoring religious liberty advocate **Melissa Rogers**
Celebrating the release of **Bob's Dale's** *To Dream Again, Again!*



THURSDAY, APRIL 26, 2018

Bridger Field House
Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC

6 pm—Registration / Reception

6:30 pm—Dinner Program featuring a **Conversation with Melissa Rogers**, religious liberty advocate, Brookings Institution senior fellow, and former White House director of faith-based and neighborhood partnerships

A book signing will be held with author Bob Dale for his new and important resource, *To Dream Again, Again: Growing Healthy Congregations for Changing Futures*, published by Nurturing Faith in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches and the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation.

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Dreaming Again

A conversation with Bob Dale about growing healthy congregations for changing futures

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The 1981 book, *To Dream Again: How To Help Your Church Come Alive* by Robert D. Dale, was a proven, go-to source for church leaders eager to re-envision congregational ministry. The publisher deemed it their most important book of the decade.

Nearly 500 doctoral projects or dissertations have used the book's model as their core research source. Now, with continual cultural change and new challenges facing congregational life, it is time to dream again — again.

Therefore, the one to whom many have looked for guidance in cultivating a healthy congregational dream has rewritten this resource for the unique challenges and opportunities facing churches today.

This new book, *To Dream Again, Again: Growing Healthy Congregations for Changing Futures* by Robert D. Dale, will be available soon (at nurturingfaith.net) — with its official release and book signing on April 26 as part of the Judson-Rice Award Dinner at Wake Forest University. (See details on opposite page.)

This book is part of the Healthy Church Resources series provided through the collaborative efforts of the Center for Healthy Churches (chchurches.org), the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation, and Nurturing Faith Publishing.

Nurturing Faith Journal editor John Pierce asked the author what readers might expect from this resource and how it connects to the needs of congregations today.

NFJ: Why do congregations need to dream again?

RDD: There are a couple of reasons to dream again. First, congregations lose energy and direction over time. Second, time doesn't stand still, so drifting churches fall farther and farther back.

First, congregations, like their members, fall into habits that become traditions that become ruts that become norms. Most of the time, this happens so gradually that congregations don't see deadening routines until they've already become "the way we do things around here."

It takes leadership to help the church step back and ask: "Why are we here?" "What is God calling us to be and do now?" "Who are we in God's kingdom?"

Second, our culture and generational tastes change fast. Ministry is always a moving target. If our churches don't take their calling to be "contrast communities" seriously, we slide into becoming social clubs with music and forfeit our Gospel distinctives and prophetic edge.

NFJ: In general, what has changed since the first version of the book came out?

RDD: The first edition of *To Dream Again* came out in 1981. But, the world has turned a couple of corners since then.

Futurists have identified 1990 and 2008 as "watershed years" — those times when the ways we think and live shift quickly from the familiar to the new.

Churches, as faith communities that conserve core messages and practices, feel besieged and confused when the culture lurches along chaotically. That confusion is both a challenge and an opportunity for us.

As an opportunity, churches identify their foundational calling when the rest of the world is wandering. A clear calling is a ministry beacon in a confused culture.

NFJ: What is the most important question that churches should be asking now?

RDD: The "why" question is always basic. Why us? Why here? Why now?

Congregations with crisp answers to *why* are empowered to live their *how* with faith and confidence.

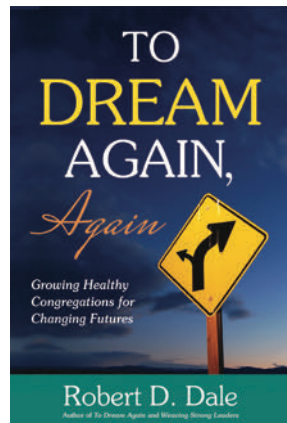
NFJ: What are your hopes for this new book?

RDD: It is a new book. The "health cycle model" has been updated, but the framing chapters at the beginning and at the end of the book are completely redone and updated.

I hope another generation of leaders will find a "do it yourself" resource. And, if help is needed beyond the congregation itself, the Center for Healthy Churches is ready to offer assistance.

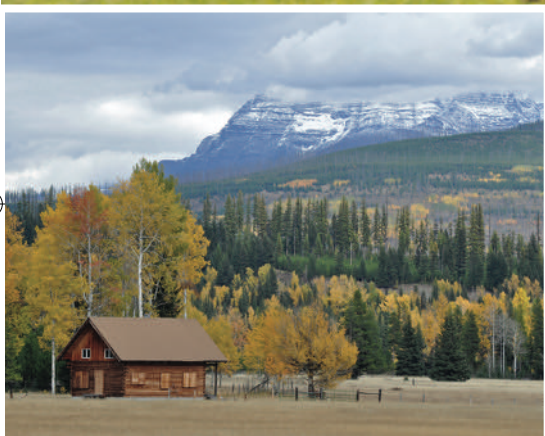
NFJ: You write about "turning dreams into deeds." How does one move from reader to taking action?

RDD: This new book provides a GPS for leaders. It is easier to lead a change process when you have a companion for the journey. The "health cycle model" can be followed by faith leaders or congregational groups in moving from dreaming to doing. May God transform every dreamer into a doer. **NFJ**



GO WEST

New customized opportunities from Nurturing Faith
for restoration and exploration



***Guided by Bruce Gourley, writer, historian
and adventurer based in Bozeman, Montana***

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Bruce Gourley is the online editor and contributing writer for Nurturing Faith, an award-winning photographer and owner of the popular web site yellowstone.net.

To begin exploring any of these opportunities, contact Bruce at bgourley@nurturingfaith.net.

DIG A LITTLE DEEPER IN 2018

Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge are scholarly yet applicable weekly lessons inside this journal with free teaching resources (video overview, lesson plans and more) online at nurturingfaith.net. Get your class started by calling (478) 301-5655.

Lent: Keeping Faith

March 4
Exodus 20:1-17
A Covenant Nation

March 11
Numbers 21:4-9
Covenant Breaking

March 18
Psalm 51
Covenant Renewal

March 25
Psalm 40:1-10
Covenant Celebration

Easter: Keeping Close

April 1
Mark 16:1-8
Too Good to Be True?

April 8
Psalm 133, Acts 4:32-35
Happy Together

April 15
Luke 24:13-49
The Road to Hope

April 22
John 10:11-21
The Good Shepherd

April 29
John 15:1-8
The True Vine

May 6
John 15:9-17
Real Love

May 13
John 17:6-19
Questions of Belonging

May 20
John 15:26-16:15
Goodbye, and Hello

Season After Pentecost

*The Perils of
Pauline ... Thinking*

May 27
Romans 8:12-17
In the Flesh, of the Spirit

June 3
2 Corinthians 4:5-12
Treasure Sharing

June 10
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:5
We Don't Lose Heart

June 17
2 Corinthians 5:6-17
By Faith, Not Sight

June 24
2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Living Oxymorons

July 1
2 Corinthians 8:1-15
Motivating Generosity

July 8
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Heavenly Secrets and
Earthly Thorns

A Prophetic Interlude

July 15
Amos 7:7-15
Walking the Line

July 22
Jeremiah 23:1-6
Bad Shepherds and Good

Not Your Ordinary Rabbi

July 29
John 6:1-21
He Did What?

August 5
John 6:22-35
Straight Talk

August 12
John 6:35-51
Living Bread

August 19
John 6:51-58
Offensive Language

August 26
John 6:56-69
When It's Hard to Believe

Doing, and Being

September 2
Deuteronomy 4:1-15
Following Through

September 9
Psalm 146
Trusting God

September 16
Isaiah 50:4-9
Standing Firm

September 23
Psalm 1
Living Wisely

September 30
Psalm 124
Offering Praise

October 7
Genesis 2:18-24
Being Equal

October 14
Psalm 90
Gaining Perspective

October 21
Isaiah 53:4-12
Redeeming Love

October 28
Jeremiah 31:7-9
Saving Grace

November 4
Deuteronomy 6:1-9
Remembering Always

November 11
1 Kings 17:8-16
Doing Faith

November 18
1 Samuel 2:1-10
Singing Joy

November 25
Daniel 7:1-14
Dreaming Hope

Advent: Someone's Coming

December 2
Luke 21:25-36
Coming to Reign

December 9
Malachi 3:1-4
Coming to Judge

December 16
Isaiah 12:1-6
Coming to Save

December 23
Hebrews 10:1-10
Coming to Sanctify

Christmas

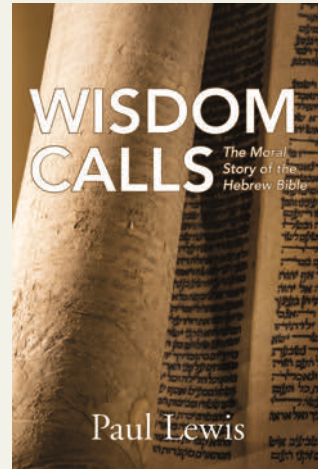
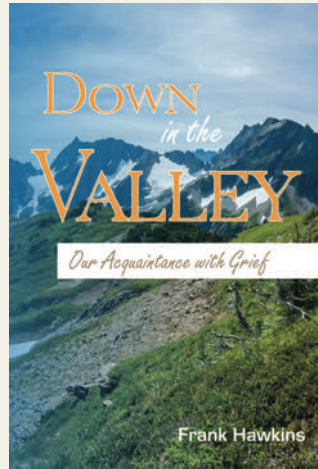
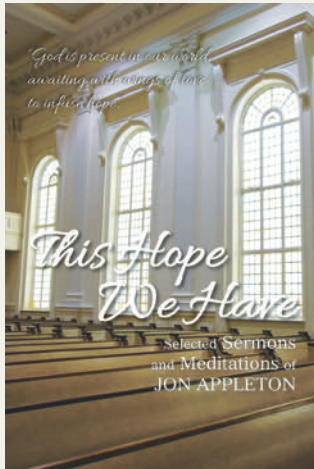
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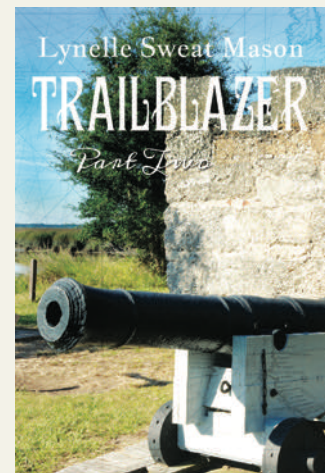
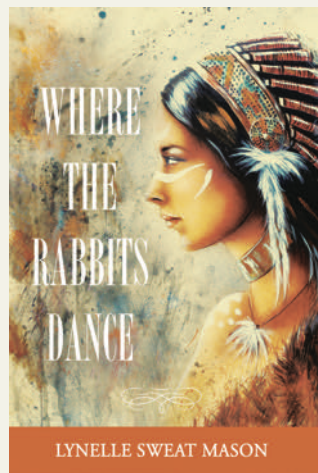
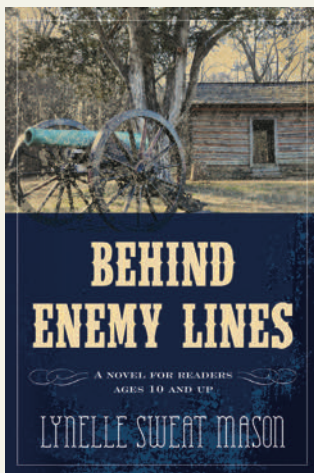
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BEING CHURCH IN CHANGING TIMES

A column provided in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches (chchurches.org)

Let's talk about boundaries

By Bill Wilson

Over the years I have seen great harm inflicted on congregants and clergy alike by boundary violations. As part of offering guidance to clergy and churches, I attended my first Boundaries Workshop. Wow!

I KNEW:

- Boundary violations have become a pressing issue in ministry settings.
- Clergy over-functioning and laity under-functioning (and vice versa) are a lethal mix.
- A minister with a Messiah complex can be deadly.
- From personal experience how sick clergy can be.
- Some laity think they own the minister and his/her family.
- From experience what it feels like to be a victim of boundary violations.
- This topic is one most of us would rather not address.

HOWEVER, I HADN'T:

- Realized how pervasive this issue is for the 21st century church.
- Understood how reluctant we/I have been to confront the congregational systems we have built that have enabled and even encouraged fuzzy boundaries.
- Been sensitive enough to how vulnerable every minister is to many temptations.
- Stopped to take in how many men and women, boys and girls have had their lives harmed by boundary violators.

For all the good that clergy can do for the sake of the kingdom, an unhealthy minister has the capacity to inflict pain and harm that will carry its poison far into the future.

So I have tried to capture my thoughts as I mull over the implications of clear and healthy boundaries for clergy and congregations alike:

1. Boundaries are our friends. Just as clear rules make a game more enjoyable for all the participants, clear boundaries make congregational life richer and more Christlike for all.
2. The personal and internal issues that every minister deals with have significant impacts on the way the minister lives out his or her calling in the church.
3. The personal and internal issues that every church member deals with will have significant impacts on the way each of us lives out our calling in our church.
4. Every minister needs someone to hold him or her accountable. This person (or persons) should have a name and a regular appointment on the calendar of the minister.
5. Every congregation should have a relationship with a licensed pastoral counselor to whom they refer congregants with personal issues.
6. Every congregation needs to establish a professional code of conduct for their clergy.
7. Clarity about a wide array of expectations between clergy and congregation is indispensable for healthy ministry.
8. Personnel committees have two essential roles: advocacy and accountability. Their job is a sacred trust that requires great maturity, spiritual insight and emotional intelligence. They should meet regularly.



Setting salaries is a minor task in their job description.

9. Every church needs clear guidelines for how they will do the ministry they have been called to. These must be composed in broad-enough terms to remain flexible as our contexts continue to shift and change. (When rules rule, the Kingdom of God is stifled.)
10. Every minister and every volunteer who works with children and youth should undergo a thorough criminal background check and be required to attend an annual boundary awareness workshop/review.
11. All churches need clear policies regarding online and social media communications for clergy and laity.
12. Someone who considers himself or herself above the need for clear boundaries likely has a problem.

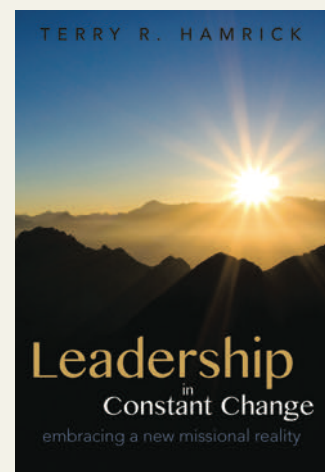
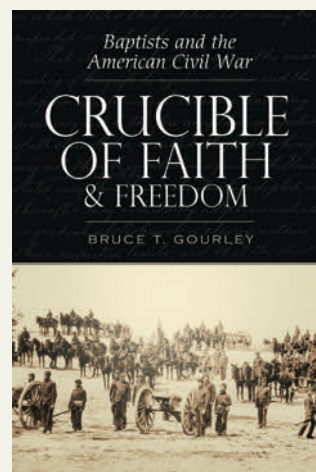
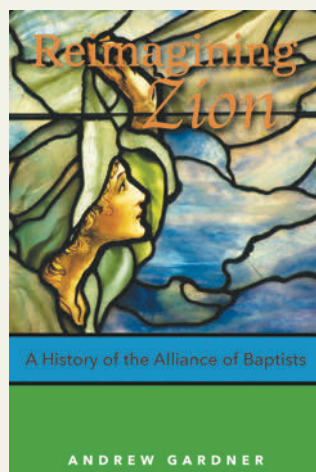
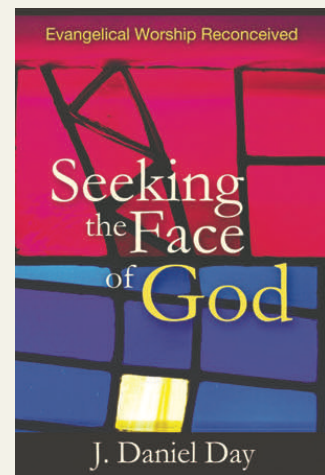
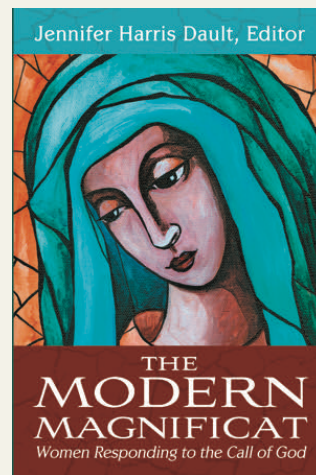
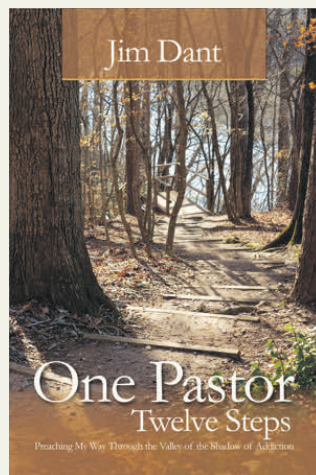
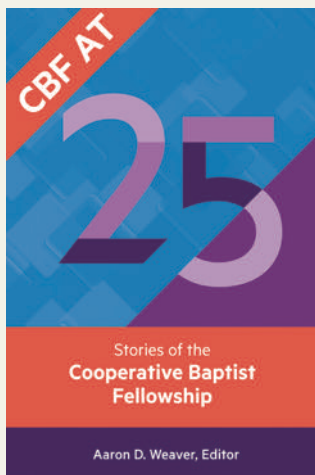
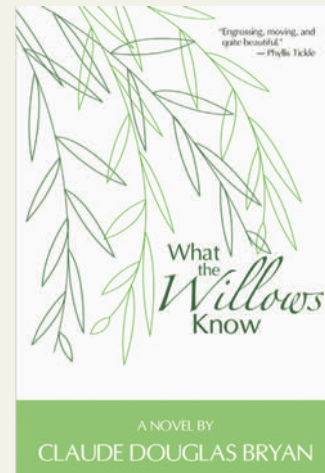
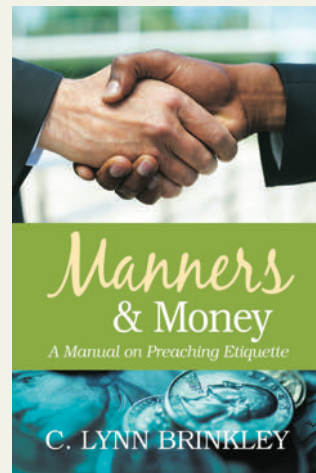
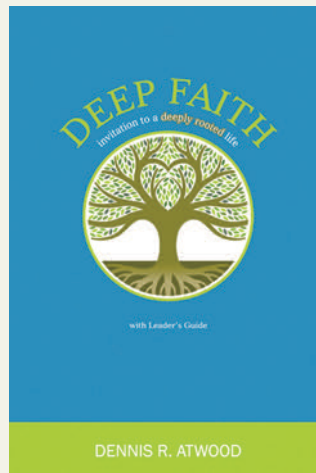
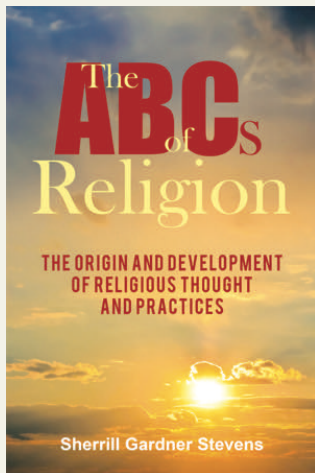
Since having my consciousness raised regarding the urgency of this issue, I've come to a greater appreciation for how very difficult it is to be effective in ministry and maintain proper boundaries.

Some of us were raised with better clarity in this regard than others. No one, however, can afford to take this issue lightly or ignore his or her own vulnerabilities. We must pay close attention to boundaries if we are going to be taken seriously in our community.

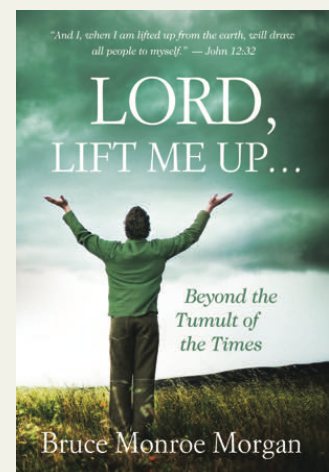
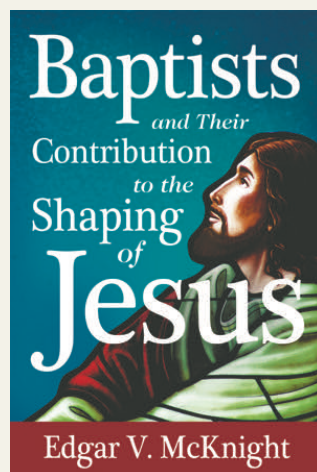
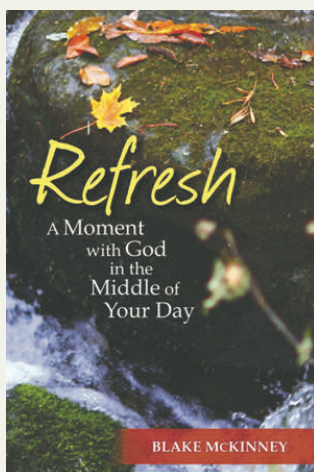
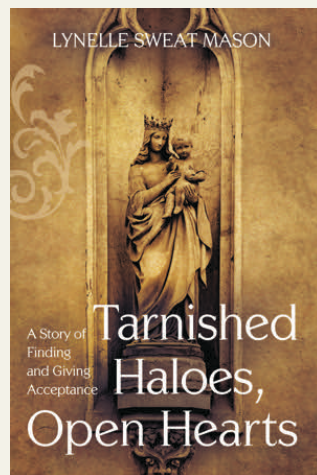
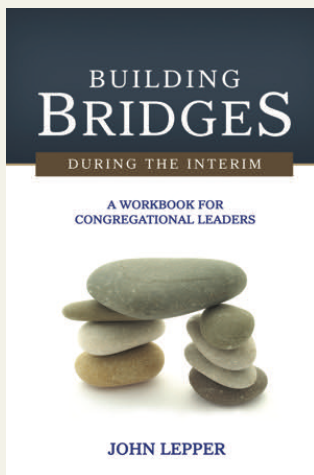
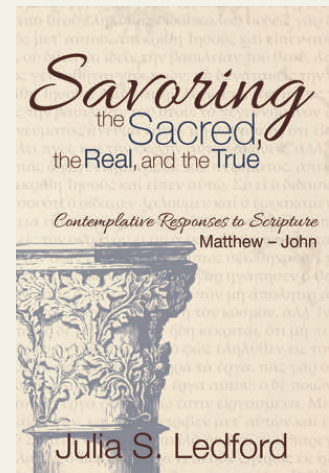
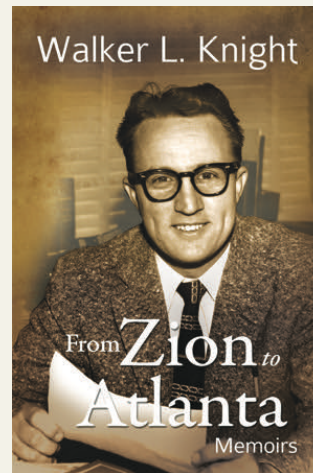
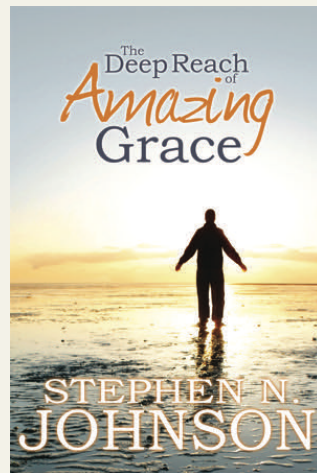
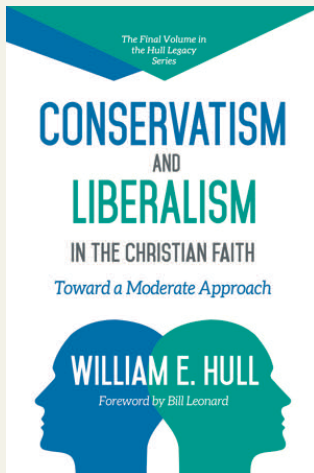
Every congregation and its clergy should covenant with one another to make healthy boundaries a high priority. What that will look like will vary from place to place, but it must be addressed and it must become a high priority. Anything less dishonors the One we serve. **NFJ**

—Bill Wilson is the founding director of the Center for Healthy Churches.

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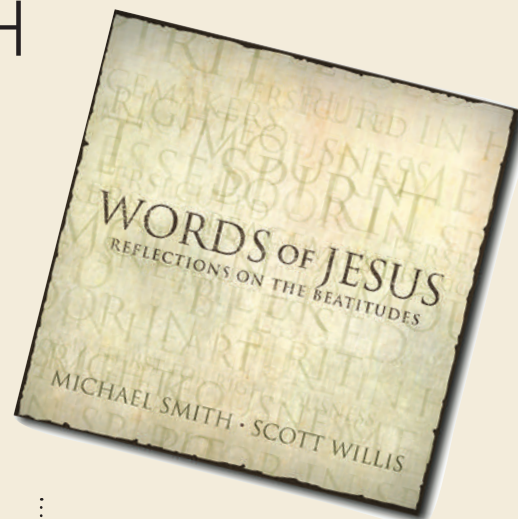


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Where everything old is new again

By Tony W. Cartledge

Last year ended with some interesting stories from the world of archaeology that are worth highlighting. One doesn't relate directly to the Bible, other than to the highly metaphorical stories of creation in Genesis 1 and 2.

An article in the June 2017 issue of *Nature* revealed that fossilized remains identified as *Homo sapiens* were found in Morocco that date back 315,000 years, pushing back the origin of our species considerably further than previously thought. These finds in northwest Africa also indicate that humans probably did not emerge from an idyllic spot in East Africa, as earlier proposed, but developed over a broader area.

Closer to the biblical world, archaeologists wrapping up a lengthy dig at Gezer uncovered three bodies of residents who died in a fiery conflagration dating to the 13th century BCE — about the same time Egypt's Pharaoh Merneptah claims to have attacked and burned the city.

Merneptah is best known to biblical students for a monumental stele on which he claims to have conquered a number of cities and peoples in the Levant, including a people called "Israel" — the earliest reference to Israelites outside of the Bible. Merneptah overstated his case, saying "Israel is laid waste: his seed is no more" — but Israel was just beginning.

Excavators found an ashy destruction layer more than three feet deep in parts of Gezer. An adult and a child whose bodies were discovered were apparently inside an industrial building when the roof and walls collapsed — only to be found 3,200 years later.

The bodies were so badly burned that their gender could not be determined, but the child was wearing earrings that survived.

One can only imagine the circumstances of their deaths: perhaps hiding from rampaging fighters, or trying to loot something from the building before fleeing. In either case, they were unsuccessful.

In Jerusalem, archaeologists digging on the eastern slopes of the "City of David" reached a noticeable destruction layer that was uneven, but could be evidence of the Babylonians' burning of the city in 587 BCE.

The primary indicator is the discovery of many storage jars bearing rosette stamps on the handles, showing they had been used in the payment of taxes or levies to the government. Earlier forms of the stamps also bore the inscription "*lemel-ech*," meaning "for the king," so they are commonly referred to as LMLK seals.

Excavators proposed that the uneven depth of the layer — up to three feet thick in some places and barely noticeable in others — may indicate the conquerors did not burn every building, possibly selecting those most strategic or valuable, such as the storehouses where the LMLK jars were kept.

Several interesting finds emerged from excavations at Timnah, a copper mining camp deep in southern Israel, across the Aravah Valley from ancient Edom. Once known as "Slave's Hill," the site is in such an arid region that fragments of textiles dating back to the time of King Solomon have been preserved, offering the oldest known examples outside Egypt of textiles colored with plant-based dyes.

The existence of brightly colored and patterned clothing — which would have been expensive — in such a remote location indicates many of the people there were not slaves, but rather skilled workers or supervisors. Fish bones and other imported

foods also indicate a higher than expected standard of living for people working in such a desolate region.

The existence of large mining operations dating to the 10th-11th century BCE is clear, but material finds are not yet sufficient to determine whether run by Egyptians, Israelites or Edomites.

Finally, one of the more interesting finds of last year resulted from unconscious destruction and vandalism, when ISIS militants in the Iraqi city of Mosul tunneled into the mound beneath a site known as Nebi Yunus. It is traditionally, but erroneously, considered the tomb of the prophet Jonah.

Beneath it was actually a palace first built by the Assyrian king Sennacherib (705–681 BCE) in ancient Nineveh. Sennacherib's rule included the northern part of Israel, and he famously conquered dozens of cities in Judah before threatening Jerusalem in 701 BCE.

While tunneling for portable artifacts that could be sold on the black market to finance their murderous operations, the militants uncovered and left in place large wall panels, including a massive marble cuneiform inscription and a relief sculpture of divine figures using plant fronds to sprinkle the "water of life," presumably for the benefit of the king or other humans. Perhaps they were hoping for a prosperous new year, though they celebrated it as the "Akitu" festival in the springtime.

Archaeology is attractive for many reasons, not least because everything old is new again. If diggin' is on your bucket list, we can guarantee you one bucket after another this summer at Jezreel. To check on availability for this June 7-22 experience, email me at cartledge@nurturingfaith.net.

NFJ

The Mission of God

By John R. Franke

It has become very common in the last few years to hear reference to the mission of God as the basis for understanding the mission of the church. This is the broad consensus of the ecumenical movement in the 20th century that the mission of the church finds its rationale in the *missio Dei*, “mission of God.”

One of the challenges of this consensus is that, while it served to inseparably link the mission of the church with participation in the mission of God, it did not lead to specification with regard to the precise nature of the mission of God.

While the connection between the mission of God and the mission of the church remained murky, this ecumenical consensus did secure two additional important points: first, that God, by God’s very nature, is a missionary God; and second, that the church of this missionary God must therefore be a missionary church.

With regard to the first of these points, mission is a part of God’s very nature and is expressed in the being and actions of God throughout eternity and made known by the sending of the Son into the world.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to his disciples: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (20:21). The term “mission” is derived from the Latin “to send” (*mitto*) and “sending” (*missio*). Mission means to send and be sent. The sending of the Father and the sentness of the Son point to the triune God as both

sender and sent.

Mission is an attribute of God and part of God’s very nature. One of the consequences of affirming that mission is an attribute of God and part of the divine nature is that it means the mission of God does not have an end point. It does not cease at the consummation of the age but instead continues into eternity as an essential aspect of the divine nature.

While the mission of God is complex and multifaceted, its central character and that from which all other aspects flow is love. This notion that God is a loving missionary for all eternity points to the particular concerns of God in engagement with the world.

Purposeful, self-sacrificial acts of love flowing from God to the world are indicative not only of God’s love for the world but also of God’s eternal nature. In the face of human rebellion, this missionary love is expressed to the world through the life of Jesus for the purpose of salvation.

As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16).

Paul makes it clear that the means of salvation is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who is the Son of God and the Lord of the world. This salvation entails the liberation of the created order — humanity and the entire cosmos — from the powers of sin and death (Rom. 8:2-25). In the same way that the mission of God

in Jesus Christ to love the world is passed on to the church, so also is the mission of salvation and reconciliation.

As many New Testament scholars have pointed out, it is important not to read this idea of salvation from the individualistic perspective of modern Western culture. To do so will be to miss the full scope and grandeur of the divine mission. God’s actions are not only on behalf of humanity, but of the entire created order as well to set it free from bondage and decay.

The fullness and cosmic scope of the mission of God involves the work of rescuing the world from the powers of sin and death so that a new human community is formed to incarnate the love of God in their midst for the sake of the world.

God is at work creating an international network of diverse communities that participate in this liberating, transformative reality in the present, even if in a provisional, imperfect fashion. To capture this divine mission Paul uses numerous words and images such as liberation, transformation, new creation, peace, reconciliation and justification to articulate a comprehensive vision of salvation.

This salvific mission is rooted in the self-giving, self-sacrificing love of God lived out in the eternal trinitarian community and made known in the created order through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is this divine mission that forms the context for an understanding of the mission of the church to be explored over the next several columns. [NFJ](#)

—John R. Franke is theologian in residence at Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis and general coordinator of the Gospel and Our Culture Network.



Is my example worth following?

BY GINGER HUGHES

Short little legs, with a red rope dragging in the dirt behind them, trailed behind a pair of much longer ones. We were on my dad's farm, my youngest's favorite place to be. And he was with his Papa, one of his favorite people to be with.

This little boy loves everything about the farm. He wakes up in the morning and in his haste to get outside, begins putting his shoes on while still wearing his pajamas. We have to slow him down long enough to eat a few bites and get dressed.

He grabs a bright orange, too-big-for-his-head cap, a red lead rope, Papa's hand, and then heads outside to feed the horses, cows, goats and chickens. Sure he loves the outdoors, but he loves being with his Papa more.

Whether it's watering and feeding the animals, riding horses, tending the garden, or simply propping up on the fence in that relaxed, yet self-assured way that only cowboys and farmers seem to know how to do, my little fellow is right there copying his Papa's every move.

During one trip to the farm I relaxed in a white, plastic lawn chair, enjoying the

shade the tall pines provided, as I watched my son do his "farm work." He'd been "working" hard hauling buckets of feed back and forth to the various horse stalls all morning. After a while he saw his Papa walk over to the fence and prop up, and clearly thought he should do the same.

As I watched my son prop on that fence, imitating my dad, questions settled in my mind.

Does he follow me in a similar way? If so, is my life an example worth following? What do my children see when they watch me every day? Am I teaching them by my example and not just my words?

If I say to my daughter, "Please be kind," yet I treat people unkindly, what will she think? Better yet, what will she do?

If I say to my son, "Please be patient and wait your turn," yet I consistently act with impatience, gripe about waiting in line or cut in front of others, what will he think? As he grows older, what will he do?

What if I tell my children, "Share your toys," yet they never see me share anything with my neighbor, what will they think? More importantly, what will they do?

If I say, "Use your words kindly and listen carefully," but they see me speak harshly and rarely listen to them or others, what will they think? As they grow up, what will they do?



Whether we are parenting small children, working in an office, or playing on a ball field, we each have influence. People around us, especially those close to us, notice not only what we say, but also how we live. I have to wonder what kind of influence I demonstrate to the people around me.

I can say all the right things. I can talk about Jesus all day long. I can even have good Sunday school answers and sound very religious. But what do others see me do?

Do I love God, and do I love my neighbor? Do others see me living out this greatest commandment in acts of love and service?

Do they see me really listening to the one whose heart is broken, sharing food with the one whose pantry is bare, or extending the hand of friendship to the one sitting alone? Do they see me living with a heart full of love and a hand extended out in grace?

First John 2:6 tell us, "Whoever claims to live in [Jesus] must walk as Jesus walked." Do they see me emulating the life of Christ? **NFJ**

—Ginger Hughes is the wife of a pastor, a mother of two and an accountant. She is a Georgia native currently living in the foothills of North Carolina. Her passion for writing is fueled by the desire to offer encouragement, grace and a deeper understanding that we are all God's children. Her blogging for Nurturing Faith is sponsored by a gift from First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga. Additional writings may be found at nomamasperfect.com.

Blogs, daily news, events, social media connections and more may be found at nurturingfaith.net

Prince Harry and Me

By Brett Younger

We questioned their judgment when the Coopers asked us to take care of Harry for a week. We are good people, but we are not dog people. I have not lived with a dog since my Chihuahua Catastrophe lived up to his name in an encounter with a brand new 1968 Ford Mustang.

Our only goal was to keep Harry alive until his family got home. We were so afraid that something would happen, but Harry sleeps most of the time. He disappears like Harry Houdini into blankets and pillows.

Harry is a combination of Harry Styles and Harry Truman — hip, but wise. He’s a little Toto, a little Benji and a lot Ewok. He is nine years old, so if he was human he would be seven years older than I am. Harry is a Shih Tzu, a breed not meant to hunt, herd or protect. If I fall into a well, Harry will keep the news to himself.

I want us to be Turner and Hooch, but Harry sees our walks as an opportunity to train me to take orders. My attempts at “Sit,” “Stay” and “Heel” are met with Harry’s “you don’t know what you’re doing” look. Several of our walks take place in freezing weather, but Harry likes being a chili dog — though he does not care for that joke.

Harry walks faster than I do so that he can pretend I am not there. He is fascinated with finding the right pile of leaves, hibernating squirrels and the backsides of other dogs. Walking with Harry is interactive. We speed up. We slow down. We move from



side to side. We get excited about parked cars.

New Yorkers ask, “What’s your dog’s name?” more often than “What’s your name?” I wonder why these people did not talk to me before I borrowed a dog, but I like the subculture of dog people. They may not speak to one another if they do not have their dog, but there is not a lot of judgment.

I assume Harry and I are friends after our week together, but he could be thinking Cujo thoughts and I would never know. Though Harry seems unimpressed with me, that does not keep me from being wild about Harry. Petting Harry is like singing the blues. You feel better, though you are not sure why.

Hanging around Harry is good for my soul. Politics is ugly. Work is stressful. People can be difficult. Harry does not care about any of that.

I talk to Harry a lot. He is not attentive, but he does not interrupt. Talking to Harry is like talking to myself, which is just a little bit like praying.

Abraham Lincoln said, “I care not much for a man’s religion whose dog is not the better for it.”

Caring for animals may seem unimportant with all of the problems in the world, but the message of loving one another, loving animals and loving creation is a hopeful word in a troubled time. When good churches have food drives they include dog food. They take pets to visit the sick and host adoption events.

When St. Francis talked to animals they talked back, but I can only imagine what Harry is thinking:

- You could learn a lot from me.*
- The past is gone.*
- The future isn’t here yet.*
- Enjoy the moment.*
- I appreciate what I have.*
- I don’t sit around wishing I was Lassie.*
- I don’t want to be a terrier, a boxer, or a poodle.*
- I am fine with who I am.*
- Be happy with who you are.*
- There’s a reason all dogs go to heaven.*
- We don’t care about money.*
- We don’t worry ourselves to death.*
- Dogs don’t hold grudges.*
- We aren’t judgmental, like cats.*
- You are too easily frustrated.*
- You should chase things.*
- Jump for joy when you’re happy.*
- Get excited about whatever is in front of you.*
- Wag your tail because life is good.*

We grow in our faith in a variety of ways. We worship. We read. We pray. We listen. We walk the dog. **NFJ**

—Brett Younger is the senior minister of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, New York.

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LESSONS FOR
MARCH / APRIL 2018

BIBLE STUDIES



The Bible Lessons that anchor the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies are written by Tony Cartledge in a scholarly, yet applicable, style from the wide range of Christian scriptures. A graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div) and Duke University (Ph.D.), and with years of experience as a pastor, writer, and professor at Campbell University, he provides deep insight for Christian living without “dumbing down” the richness of the biblical texts for honest learners.

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Adult teaching plans by **David Woody**, Minister of Faith Development at Providence Baptist Church in Charleston, S.C., are available at nurturingfaith.net



Youth teaching plans by **Jeremy Colliver**, Minister to Families with Youth at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga., are available at nurturingfaith.net

Scripture citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

IN THIS ISSUE

Lent: Keeping Faith

March 4

Exodus 20:1-17
A Covenant Nation

March 11

Numbers 21:4-9
Covenant Breaking

March 18

Psalms 51
Covenant Renewal

March 25

Psalms 40:1-17
Covenant Celebration

Easter: Keeping Close

April 1

Mark 16:1-8
Too Good to Be True?

April 8

Psalms 133, Acts 4:32-35
Happy Together

April 15

Luke 24:13-49
The Road to Hope

April 22

John 10:1-18
The Good Shepherd

April 29

John 15:1-8
The True Vine

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Easter: Keeping Close

May 6

John 15:9-17
Real Love

May 13

John 17:6-19
Questions of Belonging

May 20

John 15:26-16:15
Goodbye, and Hello

SEASON AFTER PENTECOST

The Perils of Pauline . . . Thinking

May 27

Romans 8:12-17
In the Flesh, of the Spirit

June 3

2 Corinthians 4:5-12
Treasure Sharing

June 10

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:5
We Don't Lose Heart

June 17

2 Corinthians 5:6-17
By Faith, Not Sight

June 24

2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Living Oxymorons

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 4, 2018

Exodus 20:1-17

A Covenant Nation

Do you ever get the feeling, living in this anything-goes society, of treading water in a sea of moral chaos? That can leave us looking for a firmly anchored buoy to keep us afloat, or a sturdy boat to carry us ashore.

Unfortunately, such yearnings can go too far when they lead to a rigid religious fundamentalism. As we long for direction amid the confusing disorder of our lives, fundamentalism offers the promise of certainty and firm answers (whether right or wrong), and many people turn to it simply because anything is better than chaos.

God, however, offers something better than a list of legalistic propositions. We can live in relationship with the author of the universe and the maker of our hearts. Exodus 19–20 describes the inauguration of a covenant between God and Israel – one that can speak to Christians, too.

Worship God alone (v. 1-3)

The Decalogue (a Latin term meaning “Ten Words”) constitutes the best known and most central part of the law that governed Israel’s self-understanding. Reportedly first given at Sinai as part of a covenant ceremony, it appears

Exodus 20:2-3 –

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”

again, in slightly different form, in Deut. 5:6-21. The commandments fall into two obvious sections: four commands describing a proper relationship with God followed by six precepts describing a healthy relationship with other persons. Sound relations with other people grow from a vital connection with God

Yahweh’s message began with self-revelation: “I am Yahweh,” the name God had revealed to Moses (Exod. 3:13-15). “Yahweh” is probably derived from the Hebrew verb of being (*hayah*), and may mean something such as “the one who is,” or “the one who causes to be.”

“I am Yahweh” was a reminder of “who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” The people owed their lives to Yahweh’s deliverance, so it was appropriate for God to insist “you shall have no other gods before me” (v. 3). Israel lived in a highly polytheistic world, and did not yet understand that Yahweh was the only God: true monotheism emerges most clearly with the eighth century prophets. The commandment did not speak to whether other gods exist, for they were real to the people: the commandment was to worship only Yahweh.

Worship God rightly (vv. 4-11)

Commands two, three, and four described how Israel was and was not to

worship God. The original commands were probably shorter than the version we have preserved in scripture. Later expansions suggest that Israel had some difficulty in understanding and obeying the commandments. The most amplified commands are probably the ones that gave Israel the most trouble.

The second command probably began “You shall not make any shaped image.” Other peoples bowed down to human-formed idols of their gods, but Israel was to accept and worship Yahweh as mysterious, wonderful, and invisible to the eyes.

The temptation to worship idols was so constant and pervasive that later scribes added a heated commentary about Yahweh’s punishment of the disobedient (“those who reject me”) to the third and fourth generation, and the promise of blessing for the righteous (“those who love me”) to the thousandth generation.

While each person is responsible for his or her own sin, there is no question that the dysfunction of abusive or incompetent parents passes from generation to generation. Still, whatever sinful or inept tendencies we inherit or absorb, we can choose to live in a right relationship with God.

The third command insists that we avoid misusing God’s name and show proper respect (v. 7). It is sad to think of children who grow up thinking God’s last name is “Damn,” or that “Jesus Christ!” means something bad has happened. The trendy use of “Oh My God” (OMG!) in response to everything from cute puppies to bad hair shows similar disrespect.

The main intent of the command relates to invoking God’s name to


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support a false statement or oath. Promoting racist and sexist attitudes or misguided ethics by claiming God's endorsement also violates the spirit of the third commandment.

The heart of the fourth command is v. 8: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." Verses 9-11 are a later addition from priestly writers who wanted to clarify the command and extend it to everyone, including servants, immigrants, and cattle! They believed God was best honored when all took time for rest and giving thanks. Could this be the most neglected commandment in our day?


Treat others well (vv. 12-17)

The last six commandments find their roots in the first four, and all of them find their foundation in the opening statement: "I am Yahweh, your God." The way we live with others is firmly grounded in the way we live with God. 

Relationships with others begin with our family. As Yahweh is the author of all life, parents are the specific channel through which we come to be. Thus, a directive relating to family properly serves as the bridge between the commandments dealing with our relationship to God and those relating to others.

It is also fitting that honoring parents should stand next to the first four commandments, because it is from them that we gain our first understanding of God – for good or bad. The commandment does not demand blind obedience to misguided parents, but counsels a show of respect to our progenitors, even when we disagree with them.

The command was directed mainly toward adult children, who bore responsibility for their parents' care when they grew old and infirm. The ancient world had no hospitals, assisted living


facilities, or government assistance programs. Aged parents depended on their adult children for shelter and care. Honoring one's parents by providing such care was both appropriate and essential. 


The reader will note that "mother" is shown the same respect as "father." The ancient Near East was a very male-dominated world, but here the woman is given proper recognition of her essential role in society, deserving of equal honor.

This command was also expanded by later writers, to the point that Paul called it "the first commandment with promise" (Eph. 6:2). "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your god is giving you" reflects the Deuteronomistic promise that faithful obedience leads to success in life.


Honoring others (vv. 13-17)

The last five commandments grow from the foundation established by a right relationship to God and to family.

The sixth command is straightforward: don't kill people (v. 13).  The word used (*shaqer*) evolved over time, ranging from the early technical meaning of a murder associated with a blood feud to intentional killing, then to a more general meaning that included manslaughter, or unintentional killing. In context, it described killing within the covenant community and with wrongful intent.

Why is it wrong to kill? Because it is God who gives life, and it is not our place to take it away. We are not free to use and abuse life at will. 

We are not to commit adultery, according to the seventh command (v. 14). The word refers to a married person engaging in sex with someone other than his or her spouse. The precious gift of sexuality is an important part of who we are as individuals

and as partners in a marriage. We are not at liberty to violate that, and cannot do so without consequences to ourselves and to others. 

It is wrong for us to steal (v. 15, number eight) because it is God who gives all things, including the ability to earn an income or to receive an inheritance. Thievery does not acknowledge either God or the other person. It results in a destruction of trust even more significant than the loss of one's goods. Blessings rightly come from God and from the proper use of our God-given abilities – not from taking what belongs to another.

It is wrong to bear false witness against our neighbor because in doing so we are stealing their good reputation and bringing them harm (v. 16, number nine). Bearing false witness violates the integrity of relationships as established by Yahweh. God, the eternal truth, has created us in God's own image. Lying about others — whether in court or in everyday conversation — causes harm to other persons who are also made in God's image.

The final command deals with the compromise of one's own character through obsessive desire for what belongs to another. The problem with lust is that it opens the door to breaking any one of the other commandments – or all of them. The specific expansions added to the tenth commandment ("your neighbor's house . . . your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor") are clear indicators that this was a problem area for Israel. Few would deny that envy is a constant obstacle for us, as well.

Christian believers do not live under God's covenant with Israel, but the truths inherent in the Decalogue were embodied in Jesus' core teachings – if we truly love God and love others, following the commandments will be a natural result. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 11, 2018

Numbers 21:4-9

Covenant Breaking

Many people have a favorite snake story, usually related to a personal encounter with an unexpected serpent. I was bitten by a ground rattler when I was four years old and could tell stories about my first trip to the hospital, but my favorite snake tale involves my grandmother, whom we called “Bubba” (my uncle’s version of “mother,” which stuck).

Bubba lived alone in a creaky old house and slept with a small .22 rifle loaded with rat shot beside her bed. One night she was awakened by a scratching noise on the mantelpiece above the wood stove. She turned on a light to find a large black snake crawling across the mantle, and calmly shot it. A large, gold-framed copy of Warner Sallman’s “Head of Christ” also sat on the mantel. Today I have that portrait, complete with a peppering of rat shot in the frame.

The Bible has several famous snake stories of its own, and we find one of the most interesting in Num. 21:4-9.

An impatient people (vv. 4-5)

The story is intriguing in part because of its context. The first three verses of Numbers 21 describe how the entire people united in a faithful and

Exodus 21:9 –

“So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.”

successful engagement with God. When threatened by the Canaanite king of Arad, they collectively made a vow to Yahweh, promising to “utterly destroy” the enemy’s property and take no plunder if Yahweh would fight for them and grant them victory.

The story says God heard their corporate prayer and gave the victory. The people kept their end of the bargain as “they utterly destroyed their towns” and named the place “Hormah,” a reflection of the word for putting the enemy under the ban. ↓

Why did the narrator choose to insert the fascinating but unhappy story of Israel’s next rebellion immediately after the happy story of Israel’s successful interaction with God? You might think the people would have been impressed enough to remain in a trustful mood, but the next few verses portray the people as reverting to their old ways.

They had time to grow impatient – the narrator says they had traveled “by the way of the Red Sea” to go around the eastern border of Edom, a move made necessary when the King of Edom refused to allow them to pass through his land (Num. 20:14-20). ↓

Edom occupied the land immediately east of the Dead Sea, so the Israelites had to turn south, then go further east and north to bypass the desert kingdom. The land is rugged

and barren, marked by red sandstone mountains. The hot wind burns and the sun bears down without mercy. It is the sort of land that might inspire travelers to gripe and groan, and that is exactly what the people did.

To translate literally, they became “short in spirit” (v. 4). The people criticized both God and Moses, crying “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

We might extend sympathy to people who had been subsisting on manna for years, but the narrator perceived their complaint as rebellious — fortunately the last of multiple rebellions to be related during the wilderness wandering. To facilitate an attitude adjustment, the narrator believed, God decided to send a message by a host of legless messengers.

A plague and a plea (vv. 6-7)

How did it begin? Imagine a snake slithering from the shade of a rock and into the complaining crowd, where it soon bit somebody. Imagine another snake, then another, and another. Like Indiana Jones in the *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Israel seemed to have wandered into the middle of a huge nest of snakes. Poisonous serpents emerged on every side. More people were bitten. Victims became profoundly sick and experienced severe, burning pain. Many of the Israelites died (v. 6).

The text describes the snakes as *ha-nehashim ha-serapim*, or “fiery serpents,” often translated as “poisonous snakes.” The first word, translated as “serpents,” is very similar to the

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word for bronze (*nehoshet*). The second word means “burning ones” – the same word Isaiah used to describe the winged seraphim who appeared in the vision leading to his prophetic call (Isa. 6:2). I can testify that the bite of a poisonous snake causes an intense burning sensation, and many of the Israelites felt the burn. No matter what they did, they couldn’t get away from the slithering plague.

At some point, the people seem to have recognized the outbreak of snakes as divine punishment for their impatient and ungrateful criticism of God’s care. The people came to Moses and confessed their errant behavior: “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us” (v. 7).

Moses agreed to intercede, and prayed earnestly for the people.

A hope for healing (vv. 8-9)

God heard the prayer and responded, instructing Moses to make a bronze image of a serpent and fasten it to a pole in a public place. Then, anyone who had been bitten could look upon it and be healed (v. 8). “So,” the text says, “Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live” (v. 9).

The remedy sounds so much like sympathetic magic that later Hebrew writers reinterpreted the text to insist that the people were required not just to look upon the serpent, but to look upon it with faith that God could heal (Wisdom of Solomon 16:5-7, Pseudo-Jonathan targum).

Now, here’s an interesting thing. The people had prayed for Yahweh to get rid of the snakes, but that didn’t happen. Instead, God offered a means of healing for those who were

snake-bitten.

Why do you think God chose that response?

The idea of a world devoid of every evil and hurtful thing may seem appealing, but God could not delete every possibility of evil and leave our free will intact. Instead, God did something better, offering healing to those who were hurt and hope to those who were dying. Whether we think of the serpent on the pole as a symbol of evil incarnate or as a sign of divine hope, its function was the same. It turned people’s hearts toward God, and they found healing.

We might think the story of the bronze serpent would end there, but it did not. Would you dispose of an artifact that had proven so valuable? The Israelites didn’t, either. They kept the bronze serpent with them, probably in the custody of the priests. At some point, according to the author of 2 Kings, they began to display and worship the image in idolatrous ways, making offerings to it, calling it “Nehushtan” (an alternate form of the word meaning “bronze”).^U During a religious reform late in the eighth century, BCE, King Hezekiah ordered that the revered image be broken into pieces (2 Kgs. 18:4).

But that was not the end of the story, either. The image lived on in memory as a symbol of healing. Jesus knew the story, and used it as a way of describing his own life and death and atoning work. While some might see this story in Numbers as an illustration of the wrath of God, Jesus saw it as a story about the love of God.

In one of our most familiar gospel accounts, when Nicodemus struggled to understand what Jesus had to say about being born again (or born “from above”), Jesus called up this story from Israel’s history, one that Nicodemus would surely remember and understand.^U

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,” Jesus said, “so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him” (John 3:14-21, NET).

When the snake-bitten people of Israel looked at the bronze serpent that Moses had made and lifted up on a pole, they found hope and healing. Just so, Jesus said he would be lifted up in public view. When Jesus died on the cross, he demonstrated the remarkable depth and breadth of God’s love, “so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Just as God did not remove the threat of snakes from Israel, but offered them healing, Jesus did not come to remove the threat of sin and death, but to offer healing and hope and life to those who fall victim to sin and its consequences.

That includes every one of us who lives long enough to understand what sin is. Sooner or later, all of us fall. All of us get snake-bitten. None of us are immune to the tempting tune of the wrong song. That is the way the world is. God cannot remove the possibility of evil from the world and leave us fully human at the same time. But God can offer healing and hope and life to those who look to him in faith.

That is what Jesus was doing on that cruel cross that stood on a rugged hill before a ragged group of people. Like the snake in the wilderness, Jesus was lifted up as an emblem of what our sin can do, and of what God’s love can do.

Now, the question is, what are we going to do? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 18, 2018

Psalm 51

Covenant Renewal

You know how it feels: you did something you knew was wrong, maybe more than once, and you got caught. You were embarrassed, mortified, ashamed. More than anything, you wanted to feel forgiven. You knew that you need to “come clean,” but even more you wanted to feel clean. You needed to do some serious repenting.

Psalm 51 is the quintessential psalm of repentance. A superscription preserves a tradition that the psalm was David’s prayer of repentance after the prophet Nathan confronted him about his utterly sinful actions in committing adultery with Bathsheba and plotting her husband Uriah’s death in battle. That would certainly be cause for the type of penitent pleading we find in Psalm 51, but the use of several expressions characteristic of exilic prophets and a reference to the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls make it likely that the psalm was composed at a later time. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more on this.)

Have mercy on me! (vv. 1-6)

The psalm begins with a cry for God to show mercy grounded in faithful love, to “blot out” the penitent’s

Psalm 51:1 –

*“Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast
love; according to your abundant
mercy blot out my transgressions.”*

wrongdoing and wash his soul clean from guilt (vv. 1-2). The poet’s profigate language employs the entire Hebrew vocabulary for religious, moral, or ethical offenses: “transgressions” (*pasha*), “iniquity” (*avon*), and “sin” (*hatt’at*).

“Transgressions” implies rebellion against what is expected in a relationship, “iniquity” has the connotation of crooked or wicked behavior, and the word often translated “sin” means “missing the mark” or “falling short.”

Have you felt guilty in any of these areas? The poet had, and his prayer moves immediately to abject confession: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (v. 3). He might try to forget or put his bad actions behind him, but they do not disappear. He knows he won’t find peace until he finds forgiveness.

Verse 4 seems to imply that sin is against God alone, rather than others, but that can’t be the case. We know that we can do wrong to others. Our bad decisions and wrongful actions can cause pain and harm to our families, our friends, or to others.

The penitent’s implied assertion that his sin is toward God reflects the context of an intensely personal prayer addressed to God. Though his actions have no doubt hurt others, his first business is with God, who is the ultimate determiner of right and

wrong. If God’s way is the measure of acceptable behavior, then he has first fallen short before God, so that “you are justified in your sentence, and blameless when you pass judgment.”

The following verse is even more subject to misinterpretation: “Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me” (v. 5, NRSV) is a better translation than the familiar King James Version’s “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” The verse does not suggest that the penitent’s mother conceived him through illicit intercourse, or imply that all sex is sinful. Neither does the verse support the practice of baptizing infants to cleanse them from “original sin” lest they be condemned.

A literal reading of the text might lead one in those directions, but poetry is, by nature, rife with metaphorical language. The poet is using hyperbole: to express the depth of his sin, he declares that he has been sinful since birth, even since conception. This does not mean he was a nefarious fetus, but simply expresses his sense of being sinful to the core, the product of a sinful world.

The poet understands that God both desires and reveals the real truth, even in the “hidden part” of our inner being, in our “secret heart” (v. 6).

Cleanse me (vv. 7-12)

Having established and confessed his wretched state, the psalmist seeks inner cleansing that can come only through forgiveness, and launches into a series of metaphors for cleansing. “Purge me

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with hyssop, and I shall be clean” (v. 7a) may sound like the administration of an unpleasant medicinal draught, but it draws on the priestly practice of dipping a sprig of the hyssop plant into both clean water and the blood of a sacrificial animal, then sprinkling it on a person or building to impute ritual purity. 📖

Cleansing on the deepest level can come only from God. Thus the psalmist prays “wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (v. 7b). 📖 Such forgiveness restores joy and gladness to one who has experienced the metaphorically bone-crushing weight of guilt (v. 8), for he or she can believe that God has blotted out one’s sins so they are no longer seen (v. 9).

An important shift occurs with v. 10: the psalmist recognizes that it’s not enough to be clean; he needs to be changed. Most psalms of lament pray for God to deal with problems caused by illness or enemies. The author of Psalm 51 knows that the needed change is internal rather than external: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” 📖

The psalmist knows he cannot have an open heart and a steady spirit without God’s help, and so he prays for God’s abiding presence: “do not take your holy spirit from me” (v. 11). He holds to a belief that, despite his sinfulness, God has not yet deserted him. As he prays for God to put a new and right spirit within him, he likewise pleads for God’s holy spirit to remain present within his life. 📖

With a clean heart and a renewed spirit, the psalmist could regain the joy of God’s salvation, and with the promise of God’s holy spirit within, he could find support for a “willing spirit” committed to following God’s way rather than his own (v. 12).

Do good for us! (vv. 13-18)

With verse 13 we get another indication of how serious the psalmist is: he has framed his prayer as a vow. Hebrew vows were by nature conditional promises. In narrative texts, they take the form of “O Lord, if you do such and such for me, I will do such and such for you.” 📖

Vows also occur in the psalms, where the form is adapted to the needs of poetry. Instead of the narrative introduction “If you . . .,” poetic vows simply begin with the psalmist’s request for deliverance, healing, or (in this case) forgiveness and renewal, then shift to a promise to be fulfilled if and when the plea is granted.

In this case, the psalmist promises that when he experiences God’s cleansing and spiritual presence, he will joyfully testify to God’s gracious acts, drawing other sinners to join him in repentance: “Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you” (v. 13).

The following verse repeats the vow in condensed form: “Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance” (v. 14). The reference to “bloodshed” may hint that the psalmist had been guilty of murder, but not necessarily. The word *damim* (the plural form of “blood”) was sometimes used in a figurative sense to indicate guilt, especially in a corporate sense. 📖

One could argue that v. 15 is yet another repetition of the vow: the psalmist has made it clear that he would offer vocal praise to God in response to divine grace and sustaining presence. Thus, “O Lord, open my lips” is yet another plea: God’s cleansing spirit would be the key to opening the psalmist’s lips in fulfillment of his vow, so that “my mouth will declare your praise.”

In vv. 16-17 we find a theme common to the psalms: after the destruction of the first temple (586 BCE) and before the construction of the second one (515 BCE), the Hebrews had no place to offer animal sacrifices. Perceptive worshipers also knew that physical sacrifices could be ritualized and empty: Samuel had told Saul that God desires obedience more than sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22), and the prophets had often insisted that God did not accept the ritual sacrifices of those who oppressed others (Amos 5:21-24, Isa. 1:11-16, Mic. 6:1-8, Jer. 14:12).

The psalmist believed that it wasn’t broken animals burned on the altar that pleased God, but broken hearts and spirits laid before God in repentance and a desire for reform.

The psalmist’s praise of penitence over animal sacrifice may have disturbed some traditionalists who longed for the restoration of the temple and did not want to see animal sacrifices devalued, at least when offered in the right spirit. Thus, many scholars think it likely that vv. 18-19 were added by a later scribe who prayed for God to “Do good to Zion” and “rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,” for “then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.”

Christians, of course, believe that Christ’s sacrifice for our redemption needs not be repeated – but our need for personal repentance and renewal remains ever-present. This is why Psalm 51 remains such a popular and appropriate text for reading during the season of Lent.

Can you identify with the psalmist? Has there been a time when you felt wholly guilty and desperately in need of spiritual cleansing through divine grace? Could that time be now? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 25, 2018

Psalm 40:1-17

Covenant Celebration

Has your life ever felt a bit like a roller coaster? There are times when we feel down, whether due to personal trouble or guilt or illness, but in time we recover and feel better, even joyful. We may feel on top of the world for a while. Life couldn't be better, but then something happens. Whether we mess things up on our own, or whether trouble comes from outside, we find ourselves struggling again.

That's the way real life is: it has ups and downs. And that's the kind of reality expressed in today's text, the reflections of one who knows what it is like to experience life's best times and worst times while trusting in God through them all.

Happy days (vv. 1-10)

The psalmist knows what it is like to experience God's deliverance. He speaks of a time when he was in deep trouble, described metaphorically as being in a "desolate pit" or a "miry bog" (v. 2a, NRSV), perhaps in danger of death.

In the face of such trial, the psalmist claimed to have waited earnestly for Yahweh to hear his cry (v. 1). God pulled him from the metaphorical mud and set his feet on a rock, returning a sense of security to life (v. 2b).

Psalm 40:5 –

"You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted."

The poet responded with praise, which he attributes to God's action and not his own: "he put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God" – a song of testimony that would lead others to stand in awe and likewise put their trust in Yahweh (v. 3).

Such people – those who trust in Yahweh rather than in human pride or false gods – are happy (v. 4), a word that can also be translated as "blessed." It describes the state of one who experiences security through trusting in the true God.

The psalmist's claim challenges us to consider our own state of mind, and to think of who we really trust. Do we trust in God and who God has made us to be, or allow ourselves to fall into the trap of living for others' approval? Do we follow God's way, or seek happiness in the false gods of materialism or self-gratification? What has been the result?

The psalmist claims to have experienced such joy in thinking on the multiplicity of Yahweh's "wondrous deeds and thoughts toward us," incomparable and beyond counting (v. 5). He apparently knows the secret of counting one's blessings and remembering the source from which they come.

A number of the psalms reflect a movement away from animal sacrifices or other offerings as a means

of pleasing God (51:16-17, 69:30-31, 50:8-15), reflecting a prophetic emphasis on obedience as superior to sacrifice.

Note the conjunction of obedience with heeding or hearing. Hebrew has no separate word meaning "obey," relying on the verb "to hear" instead: to truly hear is to obey. The psalmist indicates his obedience through having an "open ear" to hear and heed God's commands. He sees even this ability as a gift of God: the NRSV's "you have given me an open ear" translates an idiom "you have dug out ears for me."

Having heard God's word, he heeded it: "Then I said, 'Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart'" (vv. 7-8).

What does he mean by "in the scroll of the book it is written of me"? The question has puzzled interpreters for many years. Some think it may refer to a belief that God keeps a record book of human behavior. Others imagine a heavenly "scroll of the righteous" in which the names of those who please God are written.

The NET translators suggest that the "roll of the scroll" (literally) could refer to a Torah scroll on which God's instructions were written, such as the "book of the law" mentioned in texts such as Deut. 30:10, Josh. 1:8, and 2 Kgs. 22:8.


Perhaps a better view is to imagine that the psalmist has written his testimony on a scroll he intends to deposit in the temple as a witness of his past trust, present praise, and future confidence that God will hear his prayers. This is attested in other settings where

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vocal or written testimony is promised as the fulfillment of a vow.

The author of Psalm 40 may or may not have posted his praise on the temple wall, but he clearly claims to have proclaimed “the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation” – that is, before worshipers gathered outside of the temple. He had not held back either praise or testimony, and believed that God was well aware (v. 9).

Verse 10 repeats the thoughts of v. 9 in more detail. The psalmist does not hide what God has done in his heart, but speaks as an authentic evangelist of God’s faithfulness and salvation. 

Note how the poet piles up terms from Israel’s classic descriptions of God’s character: he speaks of God’s righteousness (twice), faithfulness (twice), salvation, and steadfast love within vv. 9-10, making public his praise before the worshipping congregation.

Have you ever felt so blessed that you could hardly hold it in? “Testimony meetings” aren’t as common as they used to be, but we all have opportunities to speak of what God has done for us, whether to our neighbors, our Bible study classmates, or even on social media. In any of these ways, it’s important to focus on thanksgiving in a way that focuses humbly on God’s blessing rather than our own piety.

Troubled days (vv. 11-17)

The psalmist had been blessed, but no living person is exempt from trouble, and trouble had come calling again. The poet apparently believed his trials had been self-inflicted. Israel’s traditional covenant theology, expressed most clearly in Deuteronomy 28, taught that obedience to God’s way would lead to health and prosperity, while rebellion would inevitably result in sickness and woe – and the psalmist had

woes aplenty.


In v. 11 the psalmist pleads “Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me.” Calling on the very divine dispositions he had praised in the previous verse, he cries “let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.”

Obviously, things have gone sour, as “evils have encompassed me without number” – dangers that the psalmist connects to his own failings: “my iniquities have overtaken me, until I cannot see” (v. 12a).

Have you ever felt blinded by troubles, temptations, or failure, finding it hard to see any way forward? We could all confess that our sins are many: the psalmist compared them to the number of hairs on his head, leaving him so weighed down that “my heart fails me” (v. 12b).

Again, then, the psalmist prays for deliverance. As noted above, the remaining verses are identical to Psalm 70, where they stand alone. Whether the present psalmist knew that plea and quoted it here, or whether Psalm 70 is secondary, we cannot know.

What we do know is that the psalmist felt oppressed, not only by his own sin, but also by others who wanted to hurt him while he was down. The reference to those “who seek to snatch away my life” probably suggests something short of attempted murder, but he clearly believed enemies were out to get him, so he prayed for God to confound, to shame, and to turn back those “who desire my hurt” (v. 14).

Verse 15 calls to mind the sort of bullying common to the playground, when one child falls or fails at a game, and others taunt “Nyah! Nyah!” Had others openly made fun of the psalmist’s lowly situation? He gives that impression: “Let those be appalled because of their shame, who say to me ‘Aha! Aha!’” 

As he prays for enemies to be shamed and appalled, the psalmist asks “May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, ‘Great is the LORD!’” (v. 16).

The poet wants to experience God’s salvation again. He doesn’t want to be up and down, but longs for deliverance and stability that would allow him to continually proclaim Yahweh’s greatness.

He wants that, but hasn’t gotten there yet. He still feels “poor and needy.” This is probably not a description of his financial condition. His poverty is one of spirit; his need is for forgiveness that he believes will lead to deliverance from trouble.

Despite his poor state, the poet holds to the belief that “the LORD takes thought for me” (v. 17a). That belief leads him to close by addressing God with a final plea: “You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God” (v. 17b).

This psalm is a reminder that no one lives on a constant spiritual high. We may know the joyful relief of forgiveness that brings a sense of cleansing and being right with God – but we also know what it is like to go astray and feel far from God.

Sometimes we, like the psalmist, may connect personal or relational troubles to our spiritual state, thinking that God has left us to experience the natural results of our sins.

Such thoughts lead us to a special appreciation of the coming Holy Week, and of Christ’s willingness to give his own life as a means for effecting our salvation. We don’t have to understand how the atonement works in order to be eternally grateful for the way God has demonstrated the steadfast love and faithfulness the psalmist celebrated, so that Christ has indeed become our help and deliverer. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

New password for online teaching resources is: Spring.

April 1

Mark 16:1-8

Too Good to Be True?

What would you say is the most important day in the history of the world? It wasn't the day any particular president was elected, any bill was signed, any invention was created, or any discovery was made. Christians can argue that no other day can compare to the first Easter, the day Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

We are well aware that our broader culture gives more attention to Christmas, though Christ's birth is often lost amid the holiday trappings. Even Easter can be obscured by cheerful bunnies and colorful eggs, but the memory of Christ's resurrection refuses to be veiled. Jesus did not remain in the tomb, and the significance of his resurrection can't be found in a basket, no matter how hard we try to turn boiled eggs into a symbol of rebirth.

We come to Easter – and to church on Easter – from different places in life, and with different motivations. But how we come is not as important as how we leave. Today's lesson challenges us to consider what direction we will follow as we move on from Easter.

An early morning (vv. 1-3)

The four Gospels often relate things differently, and the Easter story is no

Mark 16:8 –

“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

exception. There is much that they remember in different ways, but on one matter they all agree: it was *women*, not men, who discovered the empty tomb. The eleven remaining male disciples were in hiding. Other believers were doing their best to appear inconspicuous, scrupulously avoiding the tomb where Jesus was buried, going out of their way to keep from drawing any attention to themselves. After all, Roman soldiers were posted at the tomb to provide security – the same Roman soldiers who sometimes crucified people.

But women coming to care for the body would not be perceived as a threat, and their love for Jesus went beyond the fear of soldiers. So, they had bought the appropriate spices, presumably purchased on the previous evening, after the Sabbath ended at sundown (v. 1). It was a hard thing to do, working with a dead body that might already smell bad and certainly no longer looked like the image burned into their memories.

They would have come sooner, but Jesus had been crucified on a Friday afternoon, and the Sabbath began at sundown, and the law prevented anyone from doing work on the Sabbath, even caring for the dead. So it was that they waited through the Sabbath, and then rose while it was yet dark on the first day of the week, and filled their arms

with aromatic plants or ointments commonly used to anoint the dead and to mask the odor of decay.

According to Mark, there were three women: Mary, the mother of James, Mary Magdalene, and Salome. We can imagine them walking quietly through the early dark, stumbling occasionally, whispering among themselves, wondering how they would manage to move the large round stone that sealed off the tomb (vv. 2-3).

Like a large mill wheel on edge, the stone would have fit into a gutter that was carved for it in the hillside, so it could be rolled sideways from the small entrance to the tomb. The stone was designed to be movable, but generally by several men. Still, the women were certain they would find a way, or else they would not have come.

An empty tomb (vv. 4-8)

We know what they found, however. As the first fingers of sunlight streamed into the garden, they came to the tomb, where the stone had already been rolled to the side (v. 4). The shadowy entrance to the tomb was unguarded and uncovered. The women knew that no one friendly to Jesus could have gotten there before them. What did this mean? Had the Romans moved his body? Had grave robbers looted the tomb in search of jewels or gold?

Within the tomb, they found “a young man dressed in a white robe” (v. 5). Mark doesn't call him an angel, but he doesn't deny it, either. The man was apparently no one the women knew, and they would have known everyone on earth who was close to Jesus.

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It's hard to imagine how the women's minds must have raced as they stood there, dumbfounded. When the young man spoke, it was at once the most wonderful and the most frightening thing he could have told them: "Do not be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him" (v. 6).

The speaker's words form the core of the early credo that Jesus was crucified and buried, but raised again. In traditional Easter morning greetings, we often exclaim to each other "He is risen!" responding with "He is risen indeed!" Mark was careful, however, to use the passive form of the verb – "he has been raised" – emphasizing the power and the work of God, who raised Jesus from the dead.

The young man instructed the women to go and tell the disciples – and Peter, to emphasize that the one who denied Jesus still had business with him – that Jesus was going ahead of them into Galilee, where they would see him (v. 7).

Can you put yourself in the women's sandals, just for a moment, and imagine what such news would be like? Could even Jesus rise from the dead and start walking around as before? As Mark tells the story, you can almost hear the women screaming at the thought, fighting to see who can get out of the tomb first, dropping their spices and running away as fast as their legs could carry them.

The angel had told them to tell the others, and Matthew says the women ran in great joy and immediately told the disciples what they had seen and heard (28:8). Luke agrees that they ran back and told the good news, but says the disciples didn't believe them, though Peter went to check out their

story (23:9-12). John affirms that Mary Magdalene ran back to tell Peter and "the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved" (20:2).

Mark's story, however, is sharply different. He says, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (v. 8).

And that is the end of Mark's gospel, in the earliest form that we have it. Verses 9-20 were a later addition, as were another, shorter ending found in some manuscripts. (See *The Hardest Question* online for more).

An unfinished story

The ending of Mark's gospel leaves the reader hanging. Some scholars believe he intended it that way, while others argue that Mark would have continued the story, but the original ending has been lost. However Mark's gospel ends, the other gospels affirm that the women got over their fear and did not remain quiet, or even afraid. They did in fact tell the good news and in so doing they became the first preachers, the first evangelists, the first to proclaim the gospel story of the risen lord.

Well-meaning scribes in the second or third century could not bear the unfinished nature of Mark's gospel, and so they added various endings to it, but it may be that the most effective telling of the Easter story is one that has no ending, one that is unfinished.

Mark draws us a haunting picture of someone who is first confronted with the truth that the teacher they follow is not a dead martyr, but a living Lord. The women came looking for Jesus, only to find that he was already out in Galilee, looking for them. They came expecting to find a dead master but discovered that Jesus would not remain just a sweet memory.

The shock of finding Jesus gone and hearing that "he has been raised" was scary news. For a time, the women were stupefied. There was no way they could calmly explain it. The only thing they could do was run screaming into the early dawn with hearts pounding and minds uncertain. What do you do with a crucified lord who *lives*?

Maybe, then, maybe Mark's gospel provides the most realistic story of all, and the one we most need to hear. We may desire to hold on to Easter as the bedrock of our faith, but Mark's gospel won't fill us with certainty and assurance. If we show up on Easter to get a booster shot of orderly and systematic religion, we won't find it in Mark.

What Jesus offers on Easter is not calm assurance but dumbfounded wonder, not warm comfort but a chilling challenge, not sleepy-headed certainty but an open-ended future.

That, in fact, is the whole point of the story. The tomb is empty. Christ has been raised. As long as there are people to hear the gospel story, the story remains unfinished. In a way, those later scribes who added their own endings to Mark's gospel were doing precisely what we are called to do. We have to finish the story. We have to go forward into whatever Galilee lies before us and trust that Jesus will meet us there, will walk with us there, will lead us there.

If we are honest, we must acknowledge that it's more than a little frightening to imagine a life that is always open to the future, serving a lord who will neither stay dead nor within the boxes we create for him.

What are we supposed to do with such a story as this? That's a question each person has to answer. As we confront the reality of the risen Christ, we have to write our own Easter story. It's time we started. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 8

Psalm 133, Acts 4:32-35

Happy Together

Perhaps you have known people who seem to relish strife, but it's safe to say that most of us love the thought of living in a community, a country, and a world that is marked by peaceful harmony and mutual appreciation than by prejudice or enmity between peoples. Israel's poets were no different.

A poet's hope (Psalm 133)

We normally consider just one of the four lectionary texts, but this week we will include two: Psalm 133 and the text from Acts fit together nicely.

Psalm 133, designated as a "Psalm of Ascent," was probably sung most commonly in the context of Israel's three major pilgrim festivals. It celebrates the joy of kindred people dwelling or sitting together as they would during festival meals (v. 1, the Hebrew word can mean either "to sit" or "to dwell").

The NRSV's "kindred" is literally "brothers," and some scholars have argued that the image refers to brothers who continue to live in the family compound or "house of the father," even after reaching adulthood.

More writers recognize that "brothers" can carry the broader meaning of

Psalm 133:1 –

"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!"

"kindred," and think of the sentiment as a wish for the larger Hebrew community to live in harmony. The annual festivals would be an appropriate time for sharing in fellowship, food, and worship – all of which can be effective in building community.

The poet uses two similes or word pictures to express something "good and pleasant." The first is the image of fragrant anointing oil running down Aaron's face and dripping from his beard as he was anointed Israel's first high priest (v. 2).

In some ways, such scented oils were the ancient equivalent of the various skin lotions, creams, or "revitalizing oils" that many people use today. In a day when baths were infrequent, rubbing oil onto one's skin and then scraping or wiping it off could provide a bit of cleansing and a fresher smell – more "good and pleasant" than before.

The second word picture imaginatively transports the dew on Mount Hermon to the people gathered around the temple on Mount Zion (v. 3). Mount Hermon, actually a range of mountains straddling the borders of northern Israel with Syria and Lebanon, is more than 9,000 feet tall. The highest reaches of the mountain range are snow-covered for most of the year, and the melting snow pack – perhaps enhanced by heavy dew in warmer months – drains into several streams that join to form the Jordan River.

Images of dew in particular and

water in general inspire thoughts of both freshness and refreshment – both "good and pleasant." While Canaanites appear to have thought of Mount Hermon as the home of a god called Baal-Hermon (Judg. 3:3, 1 Chron. 5:23), the psalmist transferred Hermon's sacred character to Zion, Yahweh's earthly resting place.

Both images, as alien as they might seem to us, convey the idea of something fresh and renewing, like fellowship with old friends at a rural church homecoming. How good and pleasant that can be!

A church's reality (Acts 4:32-33)

Our second text for the day comes from Luke's description of the early Christian community in Jerusalem following the resurrection of Christ and the miracle of Pentecost. Twice, Luke describes the community as being characterized by unity, generosity, and mutual care. The first summary statement is in Acts 2:42-47. The second describes a community that seems too good to be true.

"Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul," Luke said, as the NRSV translates v. 32a. The word rendered as "soul" is *psuche*, the root of our English words "psyche" and "psychology." While the KJV and NAS95 translations also use "soul," the NIV, NET, and HCSB translate it as "mind." Like the Hebrew *nephesh*, the word *psuche* refers to one's interior life, the conscious awareness of who we are and what we think.

The terms "heart and soul" are metaphorical in any sense — no one literally surrendered possession of

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heart or mind, but Luke suggests they joined in common cause for the purpose of loving/serving Christ and loving/serving each other. To truly love is to serve.

That spirit of unity and loving service inspired such generous sharing that Luke could say “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common” (v. 32b), a statement that echoes his earlier claim that “All who believed were together and had all things in common” (2:44).

On the surface, this appears to suggest wholesale communal living in which everyone pooled their possessions and lived from a common fund. Does Acts, then, teach a Socialist or Communist ideology in which no one owns private property or personal wealth?

We must be careful not to draw too many inferences from Luke’s summary statement. If in fact he intends to reflect a fully communal system, it apparently didn’t work well or last very long. While v. 34 insists there was not a needy person among them, the church in Jerusalem later became so impoverished that Paul took up a collection to assist it (Rom. 15:25-28, 1 Cor. 16:1-4, 2 Cor. 8:1-15).


Luke’s purpose, in any case, is not to make political statements or to endorse an economic ideology, but to show how the people were living out Christ’s call to love and serve one another.

In Luke’s mind, the Christian witnesses of word and deed are inseparable. Thus, sandwiched between three verses about social concern, he observes that “With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all” (v. 33).

This verse does two things. First, it injects the apostles, who were not

mentioned in v. 32, but become significant players in the stories that follow.

Secondly, it describes a characteristic practice of the newly bold apostles, who spoke “with great power” as they testified to the resurrection of Christ. The word “their” is supplied in the NRSV translation: the text says literally, “they gave testimony.” The testimony they proclaimed, however, grew from their experience as witnesses of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. The “great power” that emboldened the apostles, the reader assumes, derives from the Holy Spirit, which had come upon them at Pentecost (Acts 2, cf. 1:8, 3:12).

Thirdly, Luke describes the end result: “great grace was upon them all.” Members of the church had not only experienced grace, but also had learned to express it. Luke’s intent is not simply to remind us that the believers had been saved by grace, but to assert that their lives were now characterized by grace. 

A spirit of community (Acts 4:34-35)

Now Luke returns to the theme of communally shared resources. Acts 2:44 and 4:32 make no mention of the apostles or the method by which goods were distributed, but in v. 35 Luke notes that when people sold property for the purpose of aiding the community, they brought the money and “laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as they had need.”



This adds a layer of administration to the mix, along with the element of apostolic authority: to put one’s self or one’s possessions at the feet of another indicated submission to the other’s leadership.


These verses offer more insight into the system of sharing. Though v. 32 might seem to imply that early believers contributed all of their property or

funds to a common pool, the verbal tenses in v. 34 suggest that property was sold piecemeal to provide contributions as needs arose or the common fund grew dry.

The verb for “selling” is a present active participle, and the word for “bringing” is in the imperfect tense. Both suggest a type of continual or progressive action. Thus, instead of “they sold and brought,” as in NRSV, the phrase could be translated “they were selling and bringing.” The NIV gets the same point across by introducing the phrase with “From time to time,” though those words are not in the text: “From time to time those who owned land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds ...”

The text, then, suggests that the ownership of private property or wealth continued, but church members were so filled with grace that they were willing to dispose of it as needed for the common good. As J. Bradley Chance puts it, “the early community can best be described not so much as practicing communal *ownership*, as generous *sharing*” (emphasis by Chance, *Acts* [Smyth & Helwys, 2007], 81).

A community in which there are no needy persons reflects a longstanding ideal for Israel (see Deut. 15:1-11).  With the advent of Christ and the power of the Spirit, Luke says the ideal became reality ... at least for a time. Evidence suggests that it didn’t last. 

We can’t be sure of the answer, but it appears that the early church — like the modern church — was just as subject to self-interest as Israel had been before it. The ideal of a generous community so rich in the Spirit and in grace that it leaves no one in need remains a great hope still in need of fulfillment. 

Nevertheless, the ideal remains, and we have to ask: How does our community measure up? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 15

Luke 24:13-49

The Road to Hope

Have you ever run into someone who seemed very familiar to you, but you just couldn't put a name to the face or a finger on the connection? Can you even begin to imagine how you would feel if you discovered that the person was Jesus? The text for today tells just such a story. The Emmaus encounter is unique to Luke, and it beautifully displays his literary ability.

On the road
(vv. 13-27)

Our story begins in the late afternoon of the first Easter, when we drop in on a conversation between two disciples who had been present when the women came to report that the tomb was empty and that angels had proclaimed Jesus alive. But could they believe it? Heads spinning with questions, they started the long walk home to Emmaus, a distance of about seven miles.

A man named Cleopas and his companion were engaged in a heavy conversation about the crushing events of the previous week. The hope they had placed in Jesus had been decimated by his betrayal and crucifixion. The curious story of the empty tomb was more confus-

Luke 24:44 –

“Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you — that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’”

ing than encouraging. The two were so engrossed in their conversation that they didn't notice when Jesus began walking along with them, and didn't recognize him when he spoke (vv. 15-16).

When Jesus asked what they were discussing with such animation, the disciples were amazed that he had to ask. Incredulously, Cleopas replied: “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” (v. 18). Again, Jesus pressed for more, asking them to explain their understanding of what had happened. Only then could he help them to grow in their discernment of his purpose.

The travelers responded with a quick review. The events concerned Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet who had demonstrated himself to be powerful in word and deed before God and all the people (v. 19). Only with God's approval, they reasoned, could this Jesus have done the mighty works that characterized his life and made such an impression.

The chief priests and rulers, however, perceived Jesus as a threat, and had engineered his death (v. 20). The following contrast is emphatic: “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (v. 21a). Faith-

ful Jews expected a Messiah, but they commonly expected him to be a military messiah who would deliver Israel from the power of Rome. The death of Jesus had put an end to that hope.

Even the evidence of the empty tomb had done little to encourage them. The travelers spoke with amazement concerning the women's report (vv. 22-24), but not with conviction. They were not yet convinced that Jesus was risen – or that he was the Messiah.

Jesus responded to their news with his own sense of amazement: how could they have misunderstood the scriptures – and his own teaching – so thoroughly? His response was surprising for one who appeared to be a new acquaintance: “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (vv. 25-26).

Like most of their contemporaries, the two disciples had been selective in their study of the Hebrew scriptures. They preferred to skip any suggestions that the Messiah would suffer. But Jesus pointed to scriptures that spoke of a suffering Messiah, drawing from the law, the prophets and the psalms to help the confused disciples to perceive the real truth about the Messiah. The Law/Torah, Prophets, and Writings (which includes the psalms) are the three divisions of the Hebrew scriptures.

At the table
(vv. 28-35)

As the travelers drew near to Emmaus, the author suggests, Jesus continued

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walking as if he planned to go on, but his companions insisted that he stop for the night and lodge with them (vv. 28-29). Jesus agreed, and they were soon reclining about the dinner table. Since the “stranger” had taught them like a rabbi on the road, the disciples invited their guest to offer the blessing. In traditional Jewish fashion, he took a small loaf of bread, broke it, and passed it to the others while offering thanks. A traditional blessing still in use is “Blessed are you, O LORD, King of the universe, who brings forth food from the earth.”

In that moment, Luke says, “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (v. 31a). Was it the sound of those familiar words, or did they see the nail prints when he passed the bread? It matters not. The Lord had veiled their eyes before, and now he had uncovered them. No doubt, it is significant for Luke (and the early church) that Jesus became known through word and sacrament, as Jesus expounded the scriptures and broke the bread.


Luke’s story takes on a sudden and unexpected twist: in the very moment that the amazed disciples recognized Jesus, he *disappeared* (v. 31b; literally, “became unseen”).

In retrospect, the two disciples were amazed that they had not recognized him earlier. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (v. 32). Memory plays an important role in understanding, and now the two disciples were beginning to understand.

A part of being a faithful disciple is the willingness to share what one has learned of Christ. Thus, the two friends immediately got up and hurried back across the seven miles to Jerusalem and shared the good news with the other disciples. They discovered that the Lord had also appeared to Peter, who

had been seeking to convince the others that Jesus was indeed risen (vv. 33-34). Cleopas and his companion then shared with them all they could remember of their conversation with Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

Back in Jerusalem (vv. 36-49)

Some must not have been convinced, however, for when they suddenly realized that Jesus had “popped in” and was standing in their midst, his first order of business was to calm them down with a greeting of peace (v. 36), for “They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost” (v. 37). 

Jesus’ second goal was to offer proofs that he had physically risen. This story would have been particularly important to the early church and gospel writers in their arguments against critics who claimed they had seen only a vision, if anything. Jesus questioned their faith (v. 38), then showed them his hands and feet, where puncture wounds left by the nails were still evident (v. 40). Jesus challenged them to touch him and see for themselves he was real, “for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (v. 39).

Given that the disciples were “disbelieving and still wondering,” Jesus offered further proof by asking if they had any food, then eating a piece of broiled fish in their presence (vv. 40-42). These acts were no doubt part of what Luke had in mind when he later wrote of how the post-resurrection Jesus had appeared over a period of 40 days, offering “many convincing proofs” that he was alive (Acts 1:3).

With the disciples in an awestruck but more receptive state of mind, Jesus reminded them of how he had spoken to them earlier of ways in which his life fulfilled the hopes of the law, the prophets, and the psalms (indicat-

ing the “writings”) (v. 44). He then “opened their minds to understand the scriptures,” adding, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sin is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (vv. 45-47).

This text is a bit problematic, because there is no Old Testament scripture that says precisely those things. Perhaps Jesus (or Luke) had in mind Hos. 6:2: “After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.” That text was not originally about a Messiah, but from Micah’s plea for Israel to repent and return to Yahweh so God would cease punishing them and restore them to a life of freedom in which they could live more faithfully.

While modern exegetes are far more careful to focus on context and avoid proof-texting, New Testament writers followed rabbinic practice by playing fast and loose with the text. Usually citing the Greek translation, they seized upon any hint of a messianic prediction in the Hebrew scriptures.

Luke concludes the encounter with a promise that Jesus would send his Spirit (“what my Father promised” upon them, urging them to remain in Jerusalem “until you have been clothed with power from on high” (vv. 48-49). The gospel closes with Luke’s version of Jesus’ ascension, which he situates in Bethany on that same night (vv. 50-53).

Today’s text is a charming story, but it is more than charming. We cannot underestimate the importance of what it contains. The early church’s understanding of Christ and the resurrection depends on it and similar memories. As a result, much of our own theology has its roots in what the gathered disciples learned in that remarkable conversation with Jesus. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 22

John 10:1-18

The Good Shepherd

Perhaps you have participated in team-building or get-acquainted activities that involved questions such as “If you were an animal, what would you be?” If you are an independent sort, you might have said “a cat,” or if you are both independent and aggressive, “a tiger.” I have known some people who remind me of a cold fish or a pesky mosquito, though I doubt they would have chosen the same. Perhaps you like to think of yourself as a faithful dog or a cuddly panda bear, as a powerful horse or a bird that flies free.

If we were more honest than idealistic, we might agree with the Hebrews, who concluded that most of us are a lot like sheep who are greatly in need of a shepherd. The psalmists often relied on this metaphor. Psalm 100:3b insists that “we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (compare Ps. 74:1, 79:13, 95:7), while the more familiar Psalm 23 declares that “The Lord is my shepherd” (compare Ps. 80:1).

The prophets also employed metaphors of shepherds and sheep, none more clearly than Ezekiel, who railed against those political and religious leaders who had failed in their mission to guide and protect God’s people, preying on them and allowing them to become scattered. 📖

John 10:11 –

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Sheepish people ...

Ezekiel’s description of the shepherds’ failure tells us a great deal about the needs of the sheep. Through thousands of years of domestication, sheep have lost many of their natural defenses. Unlike animals in the wild who circle up to protect the young when faced with danger, sheep scatter with no strategy; they are entirely dependent on the shepherd for their protection.

That domesticated image provides a helpful idea of what it means to be “born in sin.” We are not inherently guilty at birth, but we are born into a world that has lost its ability to withstand temptation. When evil comes knocking at the door, we don’t know what to do with it.

Ezekiel also speaks of how the sheep are subject to sickness and injury and pain, and how they are prone to become lost. We know that these things are true in our own lives. We face issues of suffering and mortality that we don’t want to face alone.

Like sheep, we depend on others for our self-esteem, for our sense of right and wrong, for our comfort in sickness and our direction in life. Isaiah had it right when he said “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have all turned to our own way” (Isa. 53:6a). 📖

... need a good shepherd ...
(vv. 1-18)

So, it is not surprising that Jesus chose

the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep to describe his relationship with us. “I am the good shepherd,” he said. Jesus spoke of two particular evils that endanger the lambs of God: thieves who would intentionally lead the sheep into harm’s way (vv. 1, 8, 10), and “hired hands” (vv. 12-13) who would allow the sheep to fall into danger by simple neglect. We usually give most attention to the good shepherd when we study this text, but we cannot ignore those thieves and bandits and hired hands. Where would we find them in our day?

We might think of drug dealers who cultivate addiction in others for their own gain, or to corporations that spend billions of dollars every year promoting legal but still harmful habits. We know there are criminal rings that lure young women and boys into lives of forced labor as virtual slaves in the sex trade or on fishing vessels or in other jobs for no payment at all.

We think of older kids who lead younger children into trouble just for the fun of it, or so they won’t be the only ones who are doing wrong. We hear of persons who use their power to selfishly exploit others in sexual or economic ways. We think of deeply prejudiced persons who spread their hate to others and bring intentional harm to their favorite targets.

There really are thieves and bandits among us, and there are hirelings, too – persons who ignore their responsibilities toward others in pursuit of their own selfish goals. We know there are parents and others in positions of responsibility who neglect the needs of children,

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practice unhealthy habits in front of them, or even physically or verbally abuse them, inflicting wounds that go much deeper than the skin. Instead of showing children the love of God, the importance of right living, and the sense of belonging in a community of faith, they exemplify the ways of the world.

The remarkable claim of the gospel is that God has seen our sheepish plight, and cared about us enough to send Christ to become the good shepherd who knows his own, calls to them, and leads them in right paths. They follow, he said, “because they know his voice” (vv. 1-5).

This comforting description of Christ’s love is a reminder that we need to listen for his voice, and teach others how they may hear Jesus calling, too. The metaphor assumes that we are willing sheep who know the shepherd’s voice.

Jesus went on to describe himself as not only the gatekeeper for the sheep, but also the gate through which we may become part of his flock (vv. 7, 9): “Whoever enters by me will be saved,” Jesus said, “and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (vv. 90).^U

How does this happen? How does the good shepherd rescue us from death and bring us to find an abundant life? Does the good shepherd rescue us simply by virtue of his good example, or through his terrific teaching, or by means of the positive self-esteem he instills in those who follow him faithfully?

No, there is something about Jesus that goes beyond even this: Jesus is not only a good shepherd, he is also a sacrificial shepherd. Jesus was willing to give more than his

time and his efforts for the sheep. He was willing to give his life. “I am the good shepherd,” he said. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (v. 11).

Unlike the hired hand who runs away in the face of danger, Jesus was willing to die for the sheep — including us — sharing with his own the same intimate love that he shares with the Father (vv. 12-15, 17-18).^U

Jesus went on to make a curious claim: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (v. 16).

It’s hard to know exactly what Jesus meant by that, but his teaching makes it clear that his flock encompasses all the world — not just the Jews who thought of themselves as the people of God, and not just Christian groups who think they have the only correct understanding of doctrine or orthodoxy. The love of Jesus and the kingdom of God are open to all people. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more.)

... to be good sheep

Jesus made it clear that he was willing to do what it takes to be a true shepherd who can meet our deepest needs. Is it worth asking what it takes to be the kind of sheep who are worth dying for? Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd,” and then he explained what that meant. If we could truthfully make the statement “I am the good sheep,” what would come after?^U

To be a good and faithful sheep does not mean that we become blind or stupid or defenseless. It means that we accept the abilities God has given us and seek the path in which the shepherd would lead us. It is important to remember that *we follow*

the same shepherd, but we don’t all follow the same path. The good sheep is constantly seeking the path God has chosen for him or her.

In our home is a print by Richard Tumbleston, one of my favorite artists, a nice pastoral landscape titled *Remembering Luther*. The overall scene is a farm in the North Carolina mountains. In the background, a farmer leads a small flock of sheep across the pasture toward a small, white frame house. In the foreground is a gabled barn built of wood, set upon a strong brick foundation. And in front of the barn, with his shadow falling on a heavy wooden door anchored in that firm foundation, stands a sheep who has chosen a different path.

The sheep represents Martin Luther, who felt God leading him to revitalize the church by calling everything about it into question and challenging others to follow the true shepherd more closely. A couple of the other sheep have turned to look at Luther, as if they are thinking about joining him in this new venture.

The picture reminds me that being a faithful member of God’s flock does not take away our identity and force us to become just one more sheep in the crowd. Rather, being one of Jesus’ own requires that we claim our identities and our special gifts, that we seek out the particular calling God has for us, that we be willing to give of ourselves and our gifts to follow God’s way. Even when that involves risk or potential danger, we remember that the good shepherd has already laid down his life so we might have life that is abundant, life that is eternal.

May we all be willing to say “I am the good sheep. I live in the shepherd’s love and trust in the shepherd’s care. Where he leads me, I will follow.”^{NFJ}

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 29

John 15:1-8

The True Vine

Vines and vineyards were a big deal in ancient Israel, and not just because people liked grapes or raisins: they were all about wine. Wine provided needed calories, and its small alcoholic content helped to prevent bacterial growth, making wine safer to drink than water from some sources, and it could be stored for years. 📖

Grape vines, like olive trees, flourish in much of Israel. While other natural resources may have been lacking, wine and olive oil were dependable sources of income for small farmers, crucial for their survival.

Jesus' first reported miracle involved turning water to wine (John 2:1-11), and he apparently enjoyed wine enough for enemies to accuse him of overindulgence (Matt. 11:19, Luke 7:34). So, we are not surprised that Jesus tapped into a vine-based Old Testament metaphor to describe a spiritual reality.

Today's text speaks of Jesus as a vine, the Father as the vinedresser, and Christians as branches from the vine. 📖 Each section of the text emphasizes a different point, but all of them are concerned with a single thing: the production of fruit. Like peach

John 15:4 –

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”

flavoring infused in a wine made from grapes, the theme runs throughout (vv. 2, 4, 5, 8).

The vine and the vinedresser (vv. 1-4)

The prophet Isaiah preached one of the most memorable sermons in the Old Testament by composing a song about a man who went to great lengths to prepare, plant, and tend a vineyard on a fertile hill (Isa. 5:1-7). Anticipating an abundant harvest, he built a wall to protect the crop and carved out a wine-vat to process the grapes. Instead of sweet grapes, however, the vines produced sour and useless fruit.

Isaiah declared that the vineyard was fit only for destruction, and lowered the prophetic boom: “For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!” (Isa. 5:7).

Other prophecies use the same metaphor, 📖 and it is not surprising that Jesus did the same. He spoke of himself as the real vine, not a pretender. Unlike Israel, he and his followers would bear fruit that would please the keeper of the vineyard.

“I am the true vine” (v. 1a) recalls other “I am” sayings of Jesus: the Fourth Gospel includes seven of them. 📖 Although most versions have “I am

the true vine,” a better translation might be “I am the real vine.” The Greek word used here generally refers to something that is real, not imaginary. Jesus is “the real thing,” the authentic source of support and nutrients to fruit-bearing branches.

But Jesus is not alone in this metaphor: “and my father is the vinegrower” (v. 1b). Left to itself, a vine will grow in multiple directions and produce branches upon tangled branches that produce more greenery than fruit. The further a branch is from the central vine, the less fruit it bears. The sweetest and plumpest grapes are those that grow nearest the vine, where water and needed nutrients are most abundant.

Productive vineyards require a skilled vinedresser to tend the vines, cutting away unproductive branches altogether and pruning old growth from the good ones so they will remain productive. Vineyards are beautiful in the summer, when the vines are full of greenery and hanging with grapes.

After pruning, a vineyard in winter looks skeletal — but the vinedresser knows that the best grapes grow from new and healthy canes. Dead wood must be cut away, and even healthy canes must be pruned. One could argue that pruning is the most important step in wine-making. Even the best vintner can't redeem poor quality grapes.

Thus, Jesus said of the Father, “He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit” (v. 2).

This is a reminder that Jesus was speaking to his disciples, to people who were already attached to the vine

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and subject to pruning: “You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you” (v. 3). The word for “cleansed,” *katharos*, is closely related to the verb used for pruning, *kathairō*.^U

What might the metaphor of pruning suggest for the believer? Perhaps we have fallen into habits that rob us of time and detract from our witness. Perhaps our comfort level with sin has grown to the point that we don’t recognize how far we have wandered from Christ, like a twisted and tangled vine that produces little or no fruit.

Although Jesus attributed pruning to the Father, there must be an element of self-pruning, too: believing “branches” are subject to the Father’s tending, but also self-conscious. Jesus said, “you have already been cleansed *by the word that I have spoken to you.*” Being cleansed involves hearing and following the teachings of Jesus. Being fruitful involves cooperation from both parties. Thus Jesus said: “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me” (v. 4).

The vine and the branches (vv. 5-6)

The next two verses largely restate the importance of vine and branch “abiding” in each other. “Those who abide I me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (v. 5). A branch that is detached from the vine may look good at first, but with no access to water or nutrients, it cannot produce fruit. Soon it will wither and die. The branch is no good without the vine: Apart from Jesus, his followers can hardly produce the kind of fruit Jesus has in mind.

Likewise, branches that remain attached to the vine, but are so distant that they produce no fruit, are useless.

Thus, they are cut away and added to other deadwood, destined for burning (v. 6). While this is clearly a warning, it should not be read as a threat of hell. The point is that those who seek the abundant and fruitful life that Christ offers can do so only by abiding in him.^U

So what does it mean to “abide” in Jesus? The word for it (*menō*) occurs no less than seven times in these verses. It means to remain, or to continue. One aspect of abiding is to understand that it is reciprocal: “Abide in me as I abide in you” (v. 4a). To abide in Jesus is to be open to the indwelling of Jesus through the Spirit, and that comes through following his teachings. “You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you” (v. 3), Jesus said, but the Christian life requires continual pruning as we seek to eliminate distractions and focus on the main thing.

And what is that main thing? Immediately following this passage, Jesus turns to the subject of love: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (vv. 9-10).

To abide in Christ, then, is to abide in Christ’s love, and to abide in Christ’s love is to keep his commandments. And what is that? “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (v. 12).

Making it clear that this discussion is closely related to the vine and branches metaphor, Jesus went on to say “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last ...” (v. 16).

To abide in Jesus is to receive his love and to love others as Christ loved us.

The vine and a promise (vv. 7-8)

When we as branches abide in Christ the vine, we will produce good fruit and live in joyful harmony with God, so Jesus could say “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (v. 7). While this may appear to be a blank check for answered prayer, it is not a promise that every plea for healing or success or profit will get a positive response. Those who fully abide in Christ and his words will seek the same things Christ seeks.

When we do this, we will ask according to God’s will, not our own will – and that will result in producing good fruit for the kingdom, to the glory of the Father. “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (v. 8).

Notice the connection between “bearing fruit” and “becoming my disciples.” The two go together. Bearing fruit is a natural result of discipleship. Do our actions point to us as authentic disciples producing the good fruit of love expressed toward both God and others? Can we – as individuals and as members of the community of faith – say with confidence that we abide in Christ and follow his word?

People who plant vineyards are in it for the long haul. They expect the vines, properly tended and pruned, to grow and produce fruit for many years. Jesus likewise calls us to a life that is not short-lived, like a tomato vine that produces fruit for a season and then dies, but one that is consistent and long-lasting, revealing the love of Christ year after year after year.^U

What kind of harvest are we producing? What might we need to produce more and better fruit? **NFJ**

RECOGNITION & REMEMBRANCE

J. Estill Jones died Dec. 30, 2017 in Chatsworth, Ga., at age 96. He taught at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and served with the Georgia Baptist Convention. Pastorates included First Baptist churches of Chatsworth and Thomson, Ga., and Dogwood Hills Baptist Church in East Point, Ga. In his latter years he was active in First Baptist Church of Dalton, Ga.

Jody Long is executive coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia. He comes from First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Ga., where he was minister of missions and students.

Timothy Peoples is pastor of Emerywood Baptist Church in High Point, N.C. He served in the pastoral residency program at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas.

Jacob Roberts is associate pastor and minister of youth at First Baptist Church of Eatonton, Ga. He comes from Clermont (Fla.) Baptist Church, where he served as youth minister.

Marsha Scipio is associate general secretary for missional initiatives and partnerships, and **Kevin Walden** is associate general secretary for congregational and pastoral effectiveness for American Baptist Churches USA.

Ed Sunday-Winters is pastor of Greensboro United Church of Christ in Greensboro, Vt., coming from First Baptist Church of Phenix City, Ala.

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—Danny M. West, Professor of Preaching and Pastoral Studies, Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity

Let's keep giving!

**BY JOHN F. BRIDGES
DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT**

The Charities Aid Foundation uses what it calls the World Giving Index to measure global generosity. The criteria includes: the percentage of population engaged in monetary giving, volunteer time donated and kind acts toward others.

Nations with the highest scores, these researchers concluded, are those with populations whose generosity is tied to spiritual commitments and disciplines more than to wealth.

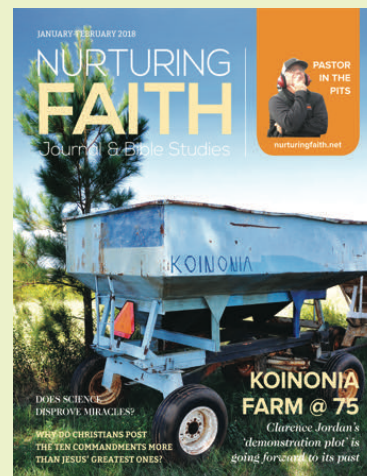
My favorite observation in a recent report is that the inclusion of some poorer populations in the rankings proves,

“You don't have to be wealthy to be generous.”

How true! One only has to be spiritual and disciplined to be generous.

The ministry of Nurturing Faith depends on the many and varied gifts of our faithful supporters. Please be among them if you are not. And, if you are, consider how you might be more generous through monthly giving or estate planning or other good ways.

I am eager and available to talk with you about how your faithful support can make a big difference through this uniquely independent publishing ministry. You may reach me at (704) 616-1725 or jbridges@nurturingfaith.net. **NFJ**



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—Tommy James, Pastor,
First Baptist Church, Burnsville, N.C.

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Remembering two remarkable women

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Everyone needs more mature, mentoring people in their lives who lead by words and deeds. Pearl DuVall, who died Dec. 26, 2017 in Cordele, Ga., was one of those for me.

She had the perfect balance of standing up with firmness for what is right while being compassionate beyond measure. Her death brought a couple of episodes to mind from our time as campus ministry colleagues in the 1980s in metro Atlanta.

One was an event at an Atlanta hotel in which some Baptist students were singing a popular “Christian” song of the time that focused on their faith being better than all others. The lyrics included denunciations of most of the world’s great religious traditions.

Pearl’s focus was not on the well-meaning students or receptive audience, but on the international-flavored hotel staff in the room. She wondered if they were rightly insulted by such arrogance to the point it might close them to considering Jesus.

That perspective was natural for Pearl, who spent many years with her late husband, Wallace, doing missions in Nigeria. But it helped me learn an important lesson: Always look around the perimeter of any experience for the important audience beyond the primary one.

Second was a meeting of the Georgia Baptist Convention when a fundamentalist preacher bellied up to a microphone and made a motion calling for an investigation of Pearl. It was clear he did not know her or the impact she had made in her missionary career or as a hospital chaplain who worked with nursing students.

He had just gotten drift that the convention employed a woman who had dastardly agreed for her church to ordain her to the gospel ministry she expressed so well. (He also missed the point that chaplaincy required such ordination.)

My campus ministry colleagues were aghast — and then confused when I said,



“I think I’ll go second the motion.” Then I added, “If someone investigates Pearl’s work, they’ll double her salary.”

I’m grateful for those many good years of working with college students — and to have mentors like Pearl who taught and showed me how to do it better.

On the eve of Christmas Eve 2017, family and friends gathered in Dublin, Ga., to celebrate the long and remarkable life of Sarah Frost, who had died at age 97.

Visiting Sarah over the years was always a treat — especially when taking along unsuspecting friends. Generally, they knew we were going to see an elderly, retired math teacher who faithfully supported our publishing ministry with her monthly gifts and notes of encouragement. Such was true.

Upon meeting Sarah, however, they discovered a feisty and friendly former Marine who could talk Braves baseball with me as well as anyone — and was not afraid to share an opinion about any other matter. In other words, she was fun.

Often the visits would begin with lunch at nearby Red Lobster and then move

to her home. Sarah would stand before the many photos on her refrigerator and unravel updates about family and friends — much like standing before a chalkboard teaching young minds how to work a math problem. (Honestly, I’ve always preferred stories to math.)

Though in her 90s, Sarah complained less about aches and pains than how she wished the local cable company carried all of the ESPN channels. She showed us the treadmill where she got her daily workout while watching sporting events.

I never attended a Braves game without knowing that Sarah was at home trying to spot me. “Were you at the game last night and wearing a blue shirt?” she might ask.

We’d talk about the University of Georgia, attended by her daughter Betsy and my daughters Meredith and Abigail. And, of course, we talked about preachers, politics and whatever else was in the news each day.

Sarah grew up on a family farm in Monroe, N.C., during the Great Depression. She worked her way through college in Greensboro and then taught school and coached girls basketball until World War II broke out.

She enlisted in the newly formed Marine Corps Women’s Reserve, serving in various posts across the nation from 1943–1945. Then Sarah took advantage of the G.I. Bill to attend graduate school at Columbia University.

Returning to her home state, she taught high school math courses in Winston-Salem and won a Ford Foundation Fellowship to explore “the use of mathematics in government, business and education.”

When her husband, Bill, took a job in Georgia in 1964, Sarah took her excellence in teaching to Dublin High School where she said, “I looked forward to every Monday...” And we look forward to seeing her again. **NFJ**



A framework for maintaining unity

BY LARRY HOVIS

Baptists tend to “multiply by dividing.” The emphases on individual freedom and local autonomy make it easy to go separate ways when facing disagreement with one another.

History is replete with splits and splinters, and Baptists’ cherished principles certainly allow for that approach to dealing with conflict. Too often conflict separation is preferred over conflict resolution.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. “Cherished Baptist principles” allow for division in the midst of diversity, but they can also serve as a framework for maintaining unity in the midst of that same diversity. How?

While there is no single, normative list of “historic Baptist principles,” here is how I would articulate them as a source of unity for contemporary Baptists.

The Lordship of Jesus Christ — Baptists certainly aren’t the only Christians who hold to this belief, but this is where we start. We confess Jesus alone — not pope or pastor — as our Lord.

We serve a crucified and risen Savior and seek to imitate his life. We love whom he loved and care for those about whom he cared. What Jesus made primary, so should we. What Jesus seemed uninterested in we should not make normative, and certainly not a test of fellowship.

Jesus said the greatest commandments are to love God and our neighbor. That should be the focus of our life and work together. To elevate anything else to that level is not being faithful to the way of Jesus.

The Authority of the Scriptures — We are “people of the Book.” The Bible is our “rule

for faith and practice.” While we might find other statements of faith (creeds and confessions) helpful, they are subordinate to the Bible itself.

Such statements (even when held by a great majority) are not authoritative. Looking back at our history of biblical interpretation, we can see many examples of how our understanding of God’s truth as revealed in the Scriptures has changed over time.

After all, “we see through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12). Therefore, an honest, healthy posture toward biblical interpretation would demand that we hold onto our convictions strongly, but not too tightly.



The Priesthood of All Believers — While we value leaders, we maintain that all believers relate directly to God and have the responsibility of serving God in the world. We recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believer-priests.

As we see evidence of the gifts and fruits of the Spirit in our brothers and sisters, we can and should respect their viewpoints and convictions, even when they don’t agree with our viewpoints and convictions.

The Freedom of Each Congregation — Congregations are free, under the lordship of Jesus Christ, to read and interpret the Scriptures and make decisions regarding every aspect of their life and mission, including membership and leadership.

Baptist bodies beyond the congregation (associations, conventions, fellowships, etc.), while also free, have no authority over constituent congregations. Being in fellowship does not mean agreement in every matter of faith and practice.

Religious Liberty for All People — Because Baptists have, in most times and places, been in the minority, we believe in religious liberty for all people, even those who don’t share our beliefs. And we don’t abandon this

belief when we are in the majority!

We don’t want to be forced to violate our conscience; neither should we force others to violate their conscience. Unless all are free, none are truly free. We do not abandon our convictions when we grant others the freedom to follow their convictions. In fact, we live out our convictions when we grant others the freedom to follow their convictions.

Cooperating in God’s Mission — While valuing the rights of the individual Christian and church, we realize God’s mission is bigger than the individual. We accomplish more together than we do alone. God’s mission is plural, not singular.

We need each other. Congregations work with other congregations in areas where they have shared values and goals. Working together on some things does not mean they agree on all things, and it certainly should not mean they endorse all positions held by a sister church.

Baptists today face no shortage of divisive issues. Baptist churches and denominational bodies are under great pressure to address these issues, with various “sides” threatening to leave if all do not conform to their position.

Baptists have done enough dividing during our 400-year history. We face so many external challenges that further division would only weaken us.

Our cherished historic principles offer a more excellent way. By maintaining our convictions, allowing our sisters and brothers to do the same (even when we don’t agree), and staying in relationship with one another (not only in spite of but even because of our differences), we bear witness to the God who “reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:11-21). **NFJ**

—Larry Hovis is executive coordinator for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina.

What's missing?

Revisiting the story of Jesus as told by the Church

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

When have you read an obituary that only included information about a person's birth and death? Never, most likely.

Yet, from the fourth century to the present time the story that the church has typically told about Jesus begins with his birth and then skips to his death and resurrection. Little to nothing is noted about his revealing life and teachings — as if they were mere filler.

CREEDS

Consider, for example, the three primary creeds of the Christian faith: the Nicene Creed (4th century), Apostles Creed (4th century) and the Athanasian Creed (around the turn of the 6th century).

These three are doctrinal statements. That is, they claim to express what Christians must “believe.” Each of the three creeds speaks of Jesus' birth and then skips to his death and resurrection, completely ignoring his life and teachings.

Likewise, the predominant Protestant doctrinal statements of faith claim to prescribe what Christians must believe doctrinally, while skipping from Jesus' birth to his death and resurrection.

These include the Augsburg Confession (Lutheran, 1530), Westminster Confession (Presbyterian, 1646), Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (Congregational, 1658), Philadelphia Confession (Baptist, 1688), Articles of Religion (Methodist, 1784), and the Baptist Faith and Message (2000).

In short, the story of Jesus — as told by virtually all major Christian doctrinal statements of faith since the fourth century — focuses solely on his birth, death and resurrection. How Jesus lived and what he taught are not a part of the story.

GOSPEL EMPHASIS

On the other hand, the Gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — tell an entirely different story about Jesus.

A total of 89 chapters comprise the four Gospels found in the New Testament. Four of the 89 chapters — two in Matthew and two in Luke — focus on the birth of Jesus. Eight chapters, two in each Gospel account, speak of Jesus' death and resurrection. The remaining 77 chapters recount the life and teachings of Jesus.

In other words, the 87 percent of the Gospels devoted to Jesus revealing God through his life and teachings is ignored in virtually all major Christian creeds and confessions.

Only about 13 percent of the Gospels references Jesus' birth, death and resurrection — though important indeed. This small percentage is effectively the sum total of what major Christian creeds and confessions affirm about Jesus.

In short, doctrinal Christianity tells a story about Jesus that largely ignores his actual life and teachings, a misleading and biased story that unfortunately has long been embedded in Christian practice.

MINGLING

For most of the history of Western civilization, for instance, doctrinal Christianity and governments have co-mingled, in violation of Jesus' teachings. In the many instances of the marriage of church and state, including colonial America, never once have Jesus' life and teachings — the foundation of which is inclusive love and inherent human equality, both deriving from a theological perspective of all persons as created in the image of God — formed the basis of union.

To the contrary, doctrinal Christianity in the form of legal codes based upon Old Testament laws is the common historical

theme in church-state alliances.

Meanwhile, in contemporary America, white evangelicals campaign to reunite church and state on the basis of Old Testament laws, especially but not exclusively the Ten Commandments, rather than on Jesus' life and teachings.

In addition, an exclusive, authoritarian God based on Old Testament concepts and Pauline traditions is predominant in majoritarian evangelical churches rather than an inclusive, nurturing God most clearly expressed in the Gospels and more typically the focus of less legalist churches.

Evangelical churches frequently end services with a doctrinal-based altar call to “believe” in and “accept” Jesus' death and resurrection for one's sins (often using Pauline language). These invitations tend to be based on a prescribed “plan of salvation” that fails to call congregants to follow or emulate the life and teachings of Jesus.

HYMNS

Likewise, hymnbooks tend to place far more emphasis on Jesus' birth, death and resurrection, as well as on Old Testament law, than on the teachings and example of Jesus to which believers are called to follow.

Hymnary.org is a “comprehensive index of over 1 million hymn texts, hymn tunes, and hymnals.” Within the searchable database of hymn texts, tunes and hymnals combined, the word “cross” is mentioned 37,000 times and Jesus' “death” more than 25,000 times.

Also, the word “law” (mostly referring to Old Testament law) appears 6,247 times; “resurrection” on 5,300 occasions; Jesus' “birth” some 5,200 times; and the “Ten Commandments” 550 times.

The word “love,” in general, is mentioned some 132,000 times. However, Jesus' “Great Commandment” appears only 387 times and the Beatitudes in just 87 instances.

Regarding Jesus' greatest commandments to love God and neighbor (Mark 12:30-31), "my/our neighbor" appears just a combined 405 times.

Therefore, loving God, in short, is a common theme of hymns that aid our worship. However, loving neighbor, the actionable part of Jesus' greatest commandments, gets significantly less notice.

So, on Sunday mornings, within Christian churches, a worshiper is far more likely to sing about Jesus' death and resurrection or general obedience to an authoritarian God than an affirmation to follow the life and teachings of Jesus.

GIVING VOICE

In summary, throughout much of Christian history — through doctrinal statements, public expressions and the singing of congregational hymns — Jesus' life and teachings have received far less attention than his birth, death and resurrection.

Within these critical spheres of Christianity where the wholeness of Jesus' life and the centrality of his teachings are largely absent, it falls upon those with preaching and teaching responsibilities to fill the void in communicating Jesus, who revealed God, in the full way Jesus is revealed in the Gospels.

While historically and currently

WHAT IS A JESUS WORLDVIEW?

Nurturing Faith is guiding a developing effort to explore creative and collaborative ways to restore following Jesus as the highest Christian priority above all other ideologies and allegiances.

This initiative began last year in response to so-called "Christian" or "biblical" worldviews defined by political ideologies and/or narrow doctrinal tests that have little or nothing to do with Jesus — resulting in damage to the gospel witness and division within congregations.

As collaboration and funding grow, the development of congregational resources and events will be forthcoming with the common goal: to reclaim this defining priority and to refocus the Christian mission on being redeemed by Jesus and becoming faithful followers even when this calling conflicts with our personal preferences and perspectives. Visit jesusworldview.org for more information.



uneven in giving voice to the life and teachings of Jesus, from generation to generation Gospel proclaimers have the potential and the power to motivate faith communities to move beyond Christ-stunted doctrine, witness, worship and living.

Substantive, Jesus-focused proclamation, however, is not always well received. It challenges cultural embraces of power seeking, majoritarian privilege, racial and gender inequality, and self-serving greed. That may explain some of his absence.

This Easter season, there is no better

way for communities of faith to reaffirm the redemptive mission of Jesus than to go beyond the familiar birth-and-death-centric doctrine, witness and worship than to reimmerse those who claim Jesus as Savior and Lord in the full transformative nature of Jesus' life and teachings.

Daring to put Jesus' life and teachings front and center, one faith community at a time, would go a long way toward fully resurrecting the Jesus of the Gospels — who was born, lived, taught, died and was resurrected on our behalf. **NFJ**

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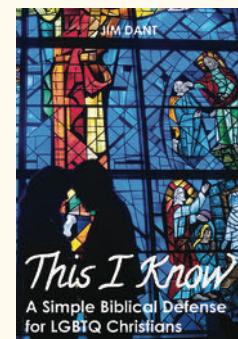
A new and needed resource

"Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so."

These words may ring hollow in the ears of a member of the LGBTQ community. They learned the tune as children. They memorized the words. They delighted in the idea of being cherished by God and guarded by scripture. But somewhere along the way, someone in the church turned the Bible into a weapon and Jesus into an inaccessible friend.

Many LGBTQ people have had to learn to trust this song again. They've had to be reintroduced to the Jesus who loves them and to the Bible that guards them. I want my LGBTQ brothers and sisters to know, Jesus loves them and the Bible says no different.

—Jim Dant, in *This I Know*



Orders: nurturingfaith.net / (478) 301-5655



Review & Expositor board members, present in person and remotely, discuss upcoming issue topics during a meeting prior to the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Boston last year.

Alive and well

Review and Expositor is a steady voice for theological scholarship

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE
Contributing Editor

Long ago and far away, the faculty of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) – founded in Greenville, S.C., in 1859 – formed a “Faculty Club” that met occasionally to present papers about their current work and to discuss various topics related to theological education.

During one of those meetings in 1903, the members discussed sharing their research with a wider audience, and set a course to begin publishing a regular journal for that purpose. The plan came to fruition with the appointment of seminary president E. Y. Mullins as managing editor, and the first issue of the *Baptist Review and Expositor*, in April 1904.

In that first issue, Mullins spoke to the belief that a “door of opportunity” stood open for a Baptist quarterly to help people

understand that “the superficial Christianity which ignores the deep foundations of life and truth cannot rise to the demands of the hour.”

People whose faith had been “left insecure” by modern science or philosophy needed help, he wrote, “not that of mere dogmatists whose stock in trade is bald assertion, but rather the appreciative and sympathetic help of a sober and careful effort to meet their difficulties in some adequate way on the high plane of reasoned exposition and discussion.”

The faculty conceived of the journal as a channel for offering diverse voices an opportunity to speak to the issues of the day. The first issue featured articles on the value of an educated clergy, symbolism in the New Testament, the Virgin Birth, Mullins’ own “Is Jesus Christ the Author of Religious Experience?” and an article by J. R. Sampey on “The Code of Hammurabi and the Laws of Moses.”

Over time, it became customary for a faculty member to serve as managing editor, while the president of the seminary held the title of editor-in-chief. The journal continued as a publication of the Southern Seminary faculty for more than 80 years and was broadly read by Southern Baptist clergy.

By the late 1980s, however, it became apparent that the editorial freedom of the journal could be threatened by the fundamentalist-conservative movement that had swept through the Southern Baptist Convention and captured trustee boards of the convention's six seminaries.

Roy Honeycutt, who still remained as president of Southern Seminary — and therefore editor-in-chief of the *Review & Expositor* — offered to give up his position and encouraged the faculty to preserve the journal's integrity by incorporating it as an entity independent of the seminary.

This transition was completed in May 1990, with Alan Culpepper — who later became the founding dean of Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology — at the helm as managing editor and SBTS faculty making up the editorial board.

As the fundamentalist-conservative shift in the seminaries continued over the next few years, subscriptions fell dramatically, in part because many readers were unaware that the journal was no longer subservient to the seminary.

In 1995 the editorial board explored options for survival, and determined to expand the journal's scope to include other Baptist theological schools in a cooperative consortium, though with an explicit desire to maintain the pre-fundamentalist "SBTS tradition" of open inquiry and theological exploration.

A number of new theological schools had opened in response to the fundamentalist shift in the Southern Baptist seminaries, several with faculty members who had formerly taught at SBTS.

The initial consortium group was established in 1996, adding editorial board representatives from McAfee, Baptist Theological Seminary of Richmond, and Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University — designated as sponsoring institutions.

Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Logsdon School of Divinity of Hardin-Simmons University, and the divinity school of Gardner-Webb University signed on as supporting patron schools.

Joel Drinkard, who taught Old Testament at Southern, took on the role as

business manager, and his wife Geneva served as circulation manager. For nearly 20 years the R&E's business end operated out of their basement, which also served as a stockroom for unsold issues.

Members of the editorial board or guest editors were recruited to edit each of the journal's four annual issues, usually focusing on a particular theme.

These have included an annual issue focused on a particular Bible study book, along with topics such as "The Changing Face of Baptists" (Summer 1998), "Prayer" (Fall 2007), "The Economy and the Kingdom of God" (Fall 2010), and "The Current Status of Baptist Women in Ministry" (Winter 2013), among others.

The road has not always been smooth. A 2001 issue on "Sexuality and the Church" included an article by a pastoral counselor touting an edgy view of "embodiment theology" that some readers found offensive. Truett Seminary withdrew from the consortium, calling the issue "irresponsible," while some other consortium members called for tighter editorial policies.

Membership in the consortium remains fluid, as various institutions have moved in or out, based on priorities of their schools or the availability of budget dollars to support the journal.

Currently, McAfee School of Theology and Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond remain as sponsor institutions, while patron supporters include the Ameri-

can Baptist Seminary of the West, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, Campbell University Divinity School, Central Baptist Theological Seminary, the School of Divinity at Gardner-Webb University, and the Logsdon School of Theology of Hardin-Simmons University.

In 2014 the *Review & Expositor* board entered a partnership with SAGE publications, a British publisher of academic journals, adopting a new format that allows for greater flexibility and more potential content. SAGE also handles circulation and business matters.

Mark E. Biddle, who teaches at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, currently serves as managing editor. The editorial board, which includes representatives from the sponsoring schools, meets twice each year to plan future issues and review updates from SAGE.

While much has changed through the years, the *Review & Expositor* remains "dedicated to free and open inquiry of issues related to the Church's mission in the contemporary world," according to the journal's page on the SAGE website.

"Baptist in its heritage, ecumenical in its outlook, and global in its vision," the publication continues to balance "scholarly analysis with practical application" in service to the church. Subscription information and a list of available issues may be found at us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/journal/review-expositor. NFJ



Editor's note: In the fall of 2017 Larry McSwain, retired professor from Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology, began sharing his reflections on the experiences of aging in a series of posts on his personal Facebook page. The following is an adapted and edited version of those reflections.

Aging is life

Reflections on living between the 'now' and the 'evermore'

BY LARRY L. MCSWAIN

The past year has been pretty challenging with several physical diagnoses that have resulted in my need to focus on my own health. I am private enough that I don't need to give a lot of details, but feel better about sharing some reflections on the reality of aging.

My first personal foray into understanding some meaning in the aging process came in a sermon series preached in 2002 at Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., where I served as interim pastor.

The series was on faith development with four sermons: "Growing Up — maturing," "Growing Out — connecting," "Growing In — centering" and "Growing Down — deepening."

In reviewing this last one I imagined I would have changed my mind about the aging process. The framework then still holds: every process of growth, including aging, requires a series of choices between paradoxical realities.

These challenges have the capacity to destroy us or develop us.

LOSS

Meeting on a Sunday night with a group in Jacksonville, I asked, "How do you know when you are aging?" Norma Towns responded: "If you are 65, and you wake up and you don't hurt, you are dead!"

The lack of physical vitality/energy/health is certainly one way we know loss. It is a reality of aging in multiple ways, though we are affected differently. It may happen at a different age, but it began for me in my mid-60s and accelerated in my 70s.

There is no surprise that we must visit more physicians and take more prescriptions on the journey, but the loss of passion surprised me. I had to find new interests and activities, and none of them were driving me as reading books, writing, and teaching students did before.

The loss of energy requires adjustment. That was one major loss for me.

One fear many aging persons have is the effect of memory loss, whether the modest loss of managing a name from the past without running the computer in your head for several minutes to come up with the name that matches the picture in your

head, or the growing into dementia with struggles with present reality, or full-blown Alzheimer's whose effects can be tragic.

I recently read *The End of Alzheimer's* by Dale Bredesen, M.D. It is an in-depth and somewhat technical analysis worth the effort, especially for those of us with potential genetic tendencies.

My last aunt died recently at age 86 after a 10-year saga of lost memory. My 96-year-old mother, her sister, is into a third year of loss of memory and out of touch with reality.

My wife Sue would testify that my acuity in remembering the name of almost any person, place or object is declining. Fortunately, if we work together, we can usually come up with what we need. One of us remembers the person's first name, and the other comes up with the last name.

I have more than one close friend my age and older with whom I have to partner for either of us to remember a name in a conversation. I decided a long time ago not to be embarrassed about it by just saying, "You know I am getting old and can't remember my own name some days."

Aging brings us face to face with the deepest loss of all: death. At its core, what we are facing is the finality of life itself. Physically, emotionally and spiritually, aging is the one last warning that it is time





'Living in maturity requires a focus on the things that matter most — which are really very simple. They are the family that loves you, food to sustain you, friends to nourish you, shelter to protect you, and the promise of God to bless you. Learning how to be satisfied with that much is the greatest freedom in the world.'

to prepare for that over which we have no control.

The longer we live, the more funerals appear on our calendars for departing friends, family members, admired acquaintances and church members. So, what are we going to do about it?

TIME

No doubt, frustration, anger, depression and finally despair are the easiest avenues we can choose to walk with the daily drain of the loss of vitality and verve. I know far too many people for whom a day older is a day sadder, a day weaker and a day less sure. I hope I can avoid living that way.

There is another way — the way of wisdom, life, enjoyment and health. Nothing we do will prevent the inevitable. Yet, there is much we do can do to limit the speed of its arrival.

The real question is, “How will we live in the meantime between the *now* and the *evermore*?”

Such a choice is personal, individual and uncontrolled by anyone else. But the resources available to us in the making of that choice are so overwhelming in number

and scope that we can live with confidence in the evening time of life. Unfortunately, many of us over the primal point of greatest vitality in the life cycle do not use the most valuable resource available to us to chart a different path.

That resource is time — time to study, time to meditate and pray, time to select the foods we eat, time to plan for those activities that revitalize, time to engage in help for others, time to renew old friendships, time to spend with family, time to make up for lost moments in the past. And the more we age, the more time we have.

As we grow older, one of the things we do is redefine “old.” In my youth I really thought it would be time to die at about age 40, so I was driven to accomplish all I could before then.

I did not have much value for those who were beyond that age. After all, the spoils belong to the young, the vital and the aggressive. That was the driving value of my youth culture.

To me at age 9, “old” was being over 30. As a 20-year-old, 60 was the magic turning point. At 60 I thought 80-85 would be “old.” Now I know multiple people over

age 100.

Aging begins the day we are born. From the first breath each of us begins the journey of life itself. From birth to death we proceed, and no matter where we are on that continuum, we are aging. Aging is life itself. Therefore, what we make of aging is what we make of life.

CELEBRATION

I want to celebrate life — to live each day with gratitude for the energy I have, the joy of family, fun with friends, and to share in the struggles of those with little to celebrate.

The only way I know how to do that is to thank God every day for each breath, heartbeat and feeling of life I have — and to confess as sins of wasted time my bitchin’ at rude drivers, drug commercials and the daily news.

Retirement is a part of that celebration. I have now retired from paid employment three times. When you are what Wayne Oates called a “workaholic,” it takes a long time to overcome the addiction. I thoroughly enjoyed being in each of the places I have worked, including self-employment as a coach/consultant before

my third retirement.

Oh, I still work fulltime. My supervisor is Sue and she has a daily list of cleaning, repairing, shopping, cooking, painting or other projects at which we both work. But that is different from setting an alarm every morning, fighting traffic to get to work and completing the demands of a job.

I love being retired. I get up in the morning when I feel like it, and I choose what I do or do not do each day — except the days on which there is a doctor's appointment (and there are lots of those).

The irony of retirement, however, is that you determine the kind you will have at an age when you could care less thinking about it. If you have not inherited wealth or if you do not work for an employer or several employers who have defined contribution programs that ensure a lifelong income, you must make a lot of choices of how much you will invest.

Some people show little interest in such decisions. Ministers are especially guilty of ignoring such realities, or they serve in congregations that are stingy. Some have opted out of Social Security and failed to commit 10 to 15 percent of their income above Social Security taxes every year to be able to afford the costs of retirement.

I am grateful that my colleague and friend Harold Songer at Southern Seminary insisted I learn what I needed to know about such choices. Even then, economic cycles may reward or punish our decisions. Remember 2002 and 2008–2009?

CHOICES

My longtime friend and colleague, Alan Culpepper, shared with me a good analysis of retirement in a recent email:

“I think of retirement in three phases — early, middle and late. During the early phase we have our health and mental facility. During this phase we continue to be independent and active. The middle phase is transitional... In the late phase we are dealing with major health issues, and our children have a determinative role in decisions about our care. We don't all age in the same way or respond to the aging process in the same way, of course, but this seems to me to be a pretty common pattern.”

In early retirement we work on our “bucket lists” of completing projects, exotic travel, learning a new passion or addressing “stressed” relationships. Early tinges of declining energy and shifting energies accompany the transitional phase. They are signals to us that change is on the way.

I am now into the late phase. I am glad to have lived this long before it appeared, but the trail of the future looks shorter than before.

At whatever stage of aging we may be, life as a set of choices continues. The first choice for me was to move from abundance to simplicity.

I would like to meet the economist who first proposed that one should plan for expenses in retirement equal to less than 80 percent of your last year of work income. That economist never lived with the reality of an inflationary economy with a fixed income.

One-third of American adults have saved nothing for retirement, including 28 percent of those over 55 years of age. And there comes a time in life, if not already, when upward mobility is no longer possible.

Living in maturity requires a focus on the things that matter most — which are really very simple. They are the family that loves you, food to sustain you, friends to nourish you, shelter to protect you, and the promise of God to bless you.

Learning how to be satisfied with that much is the greatest freedom in the world. It is arriving at that place in your life when you can say with all truthfulness, “I have enough.”

That is easier to write than to live. After all, our economic system is driven by dreams of more. I can hardly watch the Alfa Romeo Stelvio commercial and not think, “I would look good in one of those.”

LONELINESS

What do we do with our “aloneness”? Loneliness is a prevailing reality of being old, especially if one lives alone.

We can nurture it into gnawing bitterness, or we can seek to invest ourselves in the people who are still around us and discover the resources of the One who is always with us. God stands beside us in the

longest and loneliest hours, even the ones in the middle of the night when we are sleepless with wondering about tomorrow.

In the solitude of being alone with God, we discover resources within we never knew we had. I love the way Henri Nouwen said it in *The Wounded Healer*:

“When we are not afraid to enter into our own center and to concentrate on the stirrings of our own soul, we come to know that being alive means being loved. This experience tells us that we can love only because we are born out of love, that we can give only because our life is a gift, and that we can make others free only because we are set free by God whose heart is greater than ours.”

MORTALITY

There is an end to the aging process, no matter how many detours we take to avoid it — by ignoring it, denying it, fighting it and funding the world's largest medical establishment to postpone it.

Jane Tyson Clement captures that reality in her poem, “Growth,” that concludes: “... however clear, however bright, the road we traveled on is gone.” Also, *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande is a wonderful resource.

It is amazing that the most universal of all human experiences, dying, should be such a difficult topic to discuss. But it is.

Christian Century editor Peter W. Marty wrote a superb opinion article decrying the use of “she passed away” as a euphemism for “she died.” We get tongue-tied when it comes to talking about dying.

So, I am going to be transparent. I am dying. When my pulmonologist informed me last May that I had idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, she said it was “terminal.”

My first thought was, “Wow, she just told me I am going to die from this disease, but I am not bothered because we are all terminal.” I reported my news to family and friends with: “I am not afraid to die; I just don't want to suffer doing it” — as if I had a choice.

After several months of living with this news, consulting with multiple specialists, engaging in more tests, reading the scary descriptions on the Internet and waking up in the middle of many nights wondering —

I am in a different place.

Dying gives me great anxiety because I like my life as it is. If I die soon, I am going to miss too many events in the lives of my wife, children, grandchildren and friends — and I won't know who is going to be POTUS in 2020.

In some ways my Christian faith since childhood has conditioned me to treat dying with selfishness. It won't really matter if I die. "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain," wrote the Apostle Paul.

Christian faith is really about living in Christ, period. No time frame matters if I understand the true meaning of faithful dying.

Whatever eternity is, it includes *now*. Preparing to die is living in the present as though God's reign in the universe were the most important reality of our existence. So, let's talk about it!

Let's prepare for it through a written will, decisions about end-of-life medical realities (do not resuscitate?), burial/cremation, funeral, memorial, seeking forgiveness, cleaning out the attic, absolving

children of disposing of unwanted stuff, and on and on.

Of one thing I am certain: I am ready to die when the time comes, but not before God's good timing.

MYSTERY

Death is a holy experience. My father had his first heart attack at the age of 49. I sat with him in a hospital room praying most of the night for him to live. He did.

Several months later he told me, "Larry, I am alive because the nurse told me of your prayers for me. I was dying and saw myself walking down a long tunnel toward a brilliant light. And I turned and came back."

Five years later he had a second and fatal heart attack. But for those five years he was a different person, and I could say goodbye with acceptance.

Most of us are familiar with folk theologues people have created to explain the beyond: "We will go to heaven and be with all our loved ones and dance with Jesus."

The Bible is full of metaphors for

heaven and the heavenly life. Of one thing I am sure: These metaphors are not about us — but the joyful reality of a divine universe of justice, peace and love with the Holy One at its center.

I have no earthly idea of how or what that might mean. If I did, I would make an idol of my description and rob the Almighty of the glory and power of everlasting love.

Father James Flye, an Episcopal priest who served as a mentor of the writer James Agee, said in a conversation about his personal faith in his aging years:

"The older I get, the more I realize that God is an ocean — a vast ocean. There is no far shore I can see, no bottom. The picture, you see, is always bigger; the ocean just goes on."

So, this is my story. Thank you for walking with me through it. And may the peace of God guide your steps each day. **NFJ**

—Larry L. McSwain is a minister and Christian educator who served as a college president and as a seminary professor, dean and provost.

New releases from Nurturing Faith

After 37 years as a neurologist, Bill Holmes attended divinity school and then served as a pastor and hospital chaplain. From his experiences in medicine and ministry, and from his own journey through cancers and heart surgery, he shares thoughts and essays "from the bedside — a metaphor for sitting down, leaning in, and listening to those affected by the unimaginable, no matter what the setting."

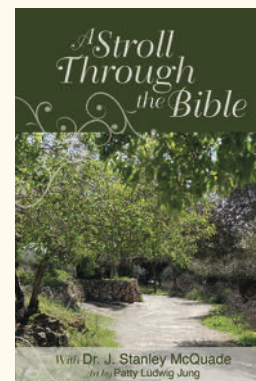
Writing from a pastoral viewpoint to those impacted by health and well-being concerns — and those who care for them — Holmes addresses issues such as faith, doubt, hope, prayer, miracles, major illness, disabilities, trauma, social injustices, etc.



Philosopher-physician-law professor-minister Stanley McQuade loves the Bible and wants to introduce some of his favorite stories and passages to a generation of adults and young people who, as he says, "have missed out on the ability to read the Bible for themselves."

He invites readers to join him on "a stroll through the Bible," believing that "sooner or later, if we are listening with our heart and seeking to order our lives by it, we are no longer getting into the Bible; the Bible is getting into us."

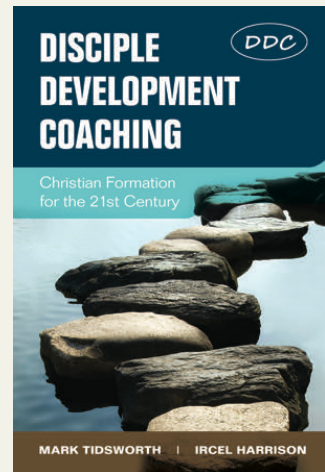
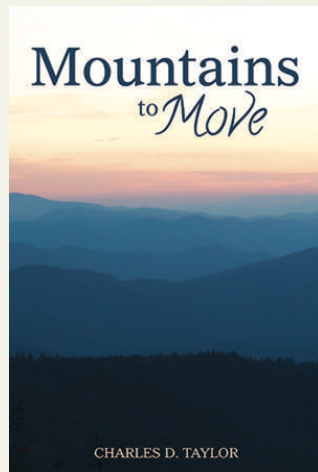
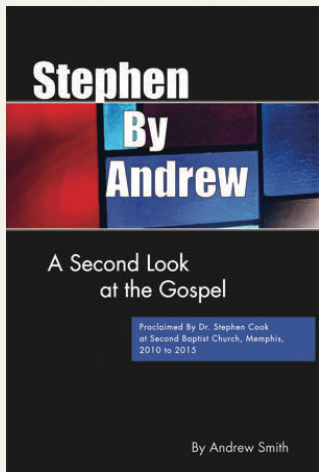
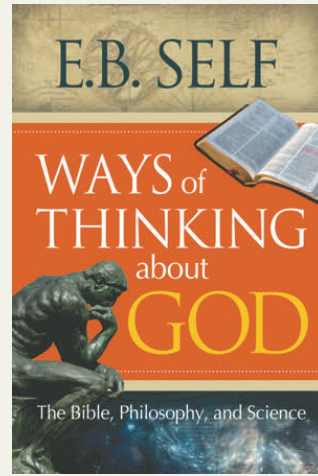
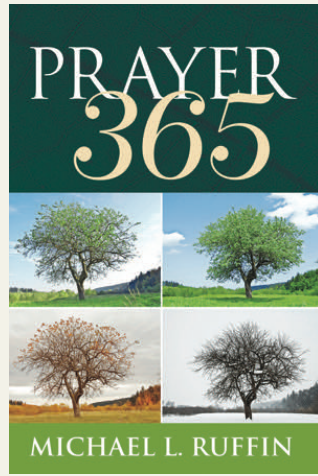
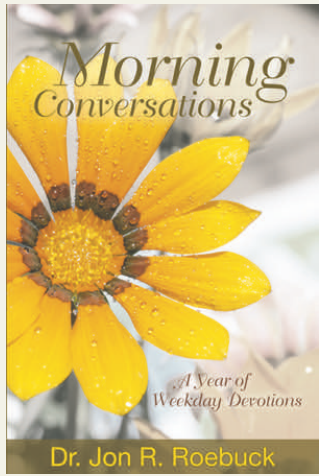
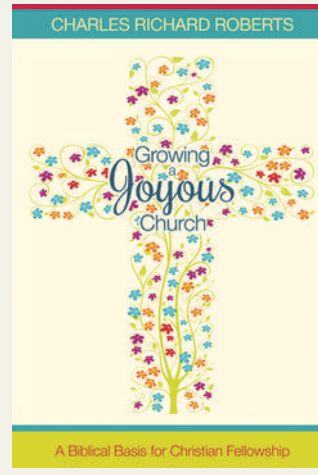
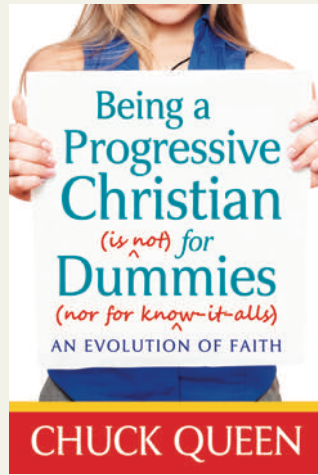
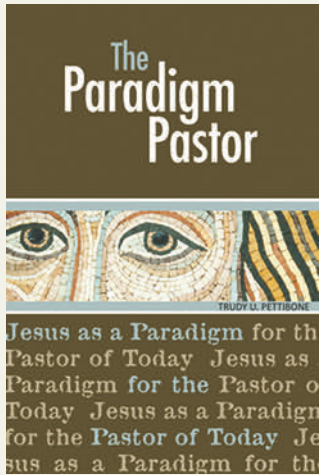
McQuade hopes that those on the "stroll" may come to love the Bible, live by it, and incorporate it into their lives.



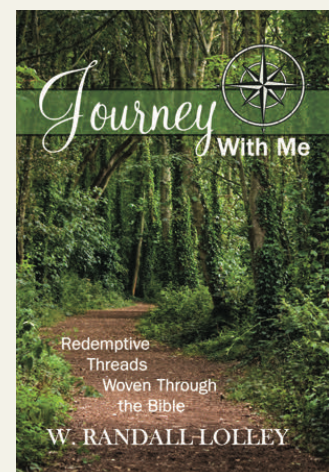
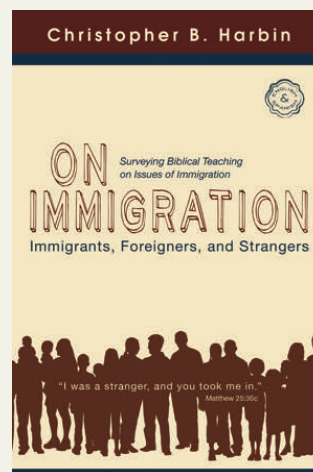
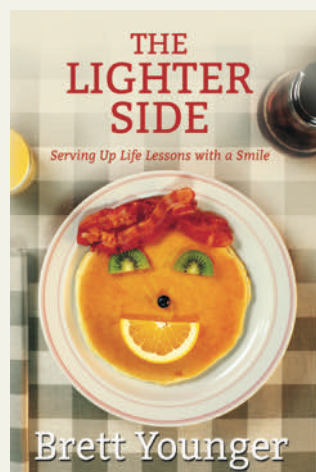
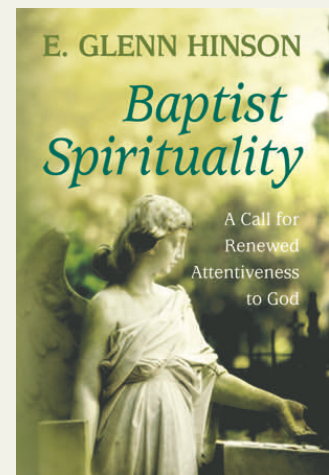
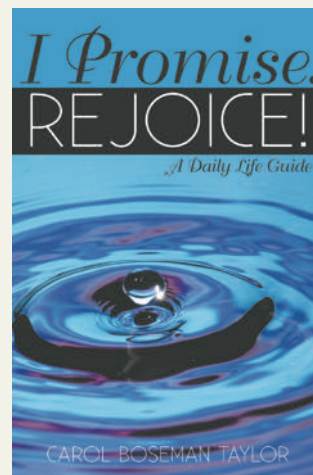
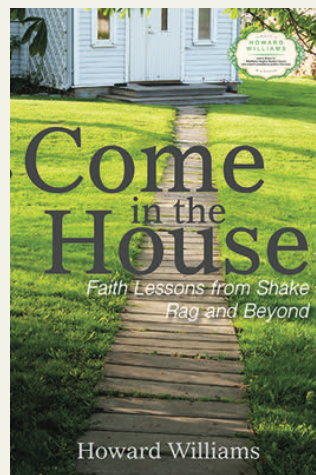
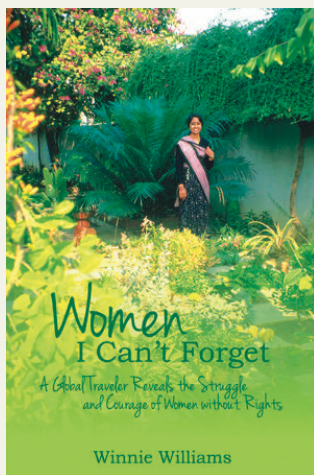
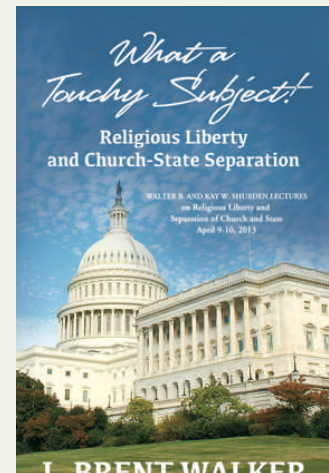
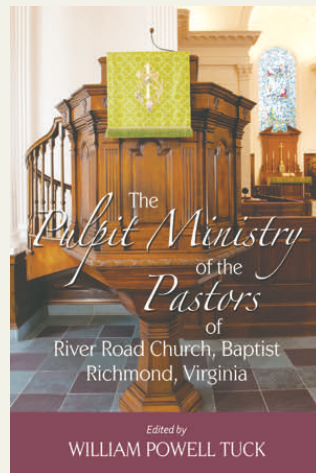
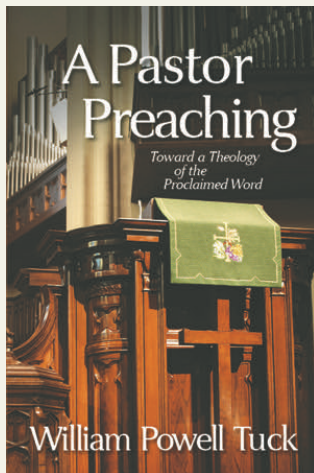
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History matters

Author explores the exodus story

A review by Tony W. Cartledge

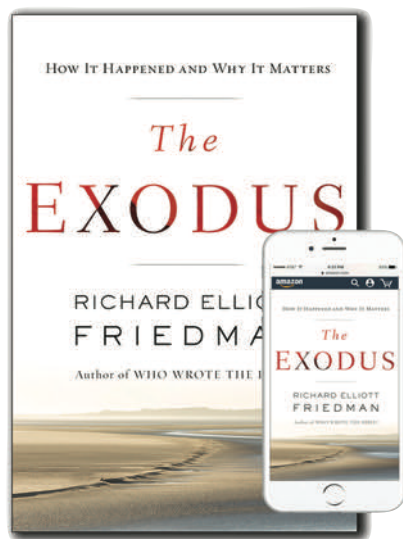
Does it really matter whether there's any real history behind the exodus? Richard Elliott Friedman, professor of Jewish studies and Hebrew Bible at the University of Georgia, believes it does.

In *Exodus: How It Happened and Why It Matters* (HarperOne, 2017), Friedman picks up an idea he first suggested in his popular *Who Wrote the Bible?* — expanding it to considerable effect. The idea is that the exodus really happened, but that it was limited to a small number of Levites who had lived in Egypt as resident aliens, but migrated to Canaan when they fell under Egyptian oppression.

Once in Canaan, they met and integrated themselves into a society of people who already identified themselves as tribal entities of Israel and Judah, finding a niche as priests and teachers who were given control of cities in each tribal area. In time, traditions of Israel's history were adapted to identify the Levites as descendants of Levi, one of Jacob's 12 sons, putative ancestors of the tribes.

As priests and teachers, the Levites passed on their traditions of Passover and exodus, so that all Israel came to identify with them as former slaves in Egypt. Stories were adjusted to symbolically include all the tribes in the migration, accounting for the massive and unrealistic image of two million people (600,000 men plus women, children, and cattle, Exod. 12:37-38) traveling across the Sinai.

As in his defense and application of the



Documentary Hypothesis in *Who Wrote the Bible?*, Friedman — who admits to being a great fan of detective novels — approaches his work like a detective, though without the drama. He writes for popular readers as well as scholars, using straightforward English and occasional humor while limiting technical citations to more than 30 pages of endnotes.

Though well versed in archaeology and a veteran of multiple seasons in the field, Friedman's primary focus has been on the Hebrew Bible. He decries a recent trend to ignore the text in favor of archaeology alone when sussing out clues to Israel's history and formation.

Pertinent to his argument, Friedman identifies the Elohist, Priestly and Deuteronomist sources of the Pentateuch (E, P and D) as having been written by Levitical priests, with the Yahwist (J) source and some earlier writings (mainly poetry) being the only materials not written by Levites.

Friedman also dates the various sources earlier than many current scholars, arguing that J, E, P and most of D were substantially complete before the end of the 8th century BCE (70).

Friedman makes his case that the exodus consisted of Levites by elaborating 10 lines of evidence:

1. Among the Israelites, only Levites (eight of them) have Egyptian names.
2. The revelation of the name Yahweh is recorded only in sources written by Levites.
3. The extensive description of the tabernacle has close similarities to the Egyptian battle tent of Ramses II and is found in sources written by Levite priests.
4. The Ark of the Covenant, which was entrusted to the Levites, has parallels to ceremonial Egyptian barks that were carried in processions.
5. All examples of Egyptian lore in the biblical story are found in Levite sources.
6. All references to circumcision (common in Egypt) in legal contexts occur in Levitical sources.
7. All three sources that connect plagues to the exodus were written by Levites.
8. All texts dealing with slavery both in Egypt and afterward are from Levite sources.
9. Every reference to aliens occurs in Levitical sources.
10. All 52 references to the sanctuary as *miqdash* identify it as the temple or tabernacle, to which only Levites had access.

Were the exodus confined to a relatively small group of Levites, Friedman suggests, arguments about the date of the event, the lack of any mention of it in Egyptian sources, and the lack of archaeo-

logical evidence in the Sinai for a massive departure become moot.

Friedman's belief that Israelites were already in the land when the Levites arrived is based on a recitation of archaeological evidence including inscriptions, material culture, and references in documents from surrounding cultures, as well as evidence deduced from the development of the Hebrew language.

The Levites, who may have had roots in Midian, brought the monotheistic worship of Yahweh to the people of Israel, Friedman says, identifying the Israelite god El and Yahweh as one and the same. Many contemporary scholars believe true monotheism did not arise prior to the 7th and 8th century prophets, or even the exile, but Friedman contends it developed far earlier.

In this regard, Friedman argues from texts such as Psalm 82 that the Israelites came to believe that other gods once existed but had all died. Nevertheless, for many years Yahweh was thought to have a consort, an *asherah* — a term Friedman believes should be understood generically rather than as a proper name.

He sees an intermediate state between polytheism and monotheism as the Israelites worshiped both Yahweh and “the Queen of Heaven,” thought to be Yahweh's wife, finding it difficult to finally give her up (see Jer. 44:16-18).

Along with monotheism, the Levites also brought an ethical sensibility with them, Friedman contends, with particular

regard to loving one's neighbor and treating immigrants well. Every reference to being kind to aliens (52 of them) derives from Levite sources, he notes, with all three of those sources offering the rationale “because you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 22:20, Lev. 19:33-34, Deut. 10:19, among others).

The Levitical command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18b) applies to all people, Friedman insists, not just fellow Israelites, as some contend. Israel's task in the world came to be understood as involving both the worship of one God and the equal treatment of all people.

Friedman is no literalist. He freely acknowledges that many biblical stories, such as the “conquest,” were either exaggerated or wholly fictional and designed for tendentious purposes. His understanding of the exodus is sharply nuanced, but he firmly believes an exodus event happened, with consequences felt to this day.

Friedman's case isn't airtight, and readers may disagree with his conclusions on many points, but perhaps all can appreciate his call for all people to learn from the Levites' stories and “take on the role of Abraham's seed,” determined to “act in a way that will bring blessing to all the earth's families.”

History matters, Friedman concludes, as does “[u]nderstanding how ideas got started and why people hang on to them ... The exodus of a group of people from Egypt happened. It made a difference. It still makes a difference.” **NFJ**



TO PLAN AHEAD FOR LOVELINESS

O what a pleasant recompense,
To cultivate some soulfulness
And plan ahead for loveliness
With sight beyond the present tense.

To see a garden where there's not
And vibrancy of earthen pot
A brilliant colored waving plot
In place of present muddy lot.

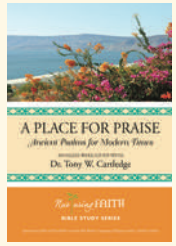
Envision blooms soon high astride
A latticed wall securely tied
And flowers shouting out with pride,
Replacing earth tone's wintry side.

I know what pleasure gardens bring,
Because the joy is not just spring;
But souls in early winter sing
Of future plans for gardening.

So nurture now your soulfulness,
And plan ahead for loveliness.

—David Jordan

EDITOR'S NOTE: This poem by David Jordan, teaching pastor at Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C., is offered as inspiration for the Lenten journey.



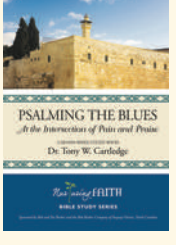
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Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1909)

By Bruce Gourley

Born into a rich New York City family in 1858, sickness plagued Theodore Roosevelt during his boyhood. Aspiring to overcome his frailty, a teenage Roosevelt avidly explored nature, embraced gymnastics and took up weightlifting in a successful effort to build up his strength.

Roosevelt thereafter graduated from Harvard, married Alice Hathaway Lee, and briefly enrolled in the Columbia University Law School. Politics, however, beguiled the increasingly confident young man.

Dropping out of law school, Roosevelt in 1881 at the age of 23 successfully ran for the New York State Assembly as a reformist Republican. While in office and in the face of stiff opposition, he worked hard to make state government more honest and efficient, boldly exposing corruption among the state's rich and powerful. Roosevelt's fearless reformist crusade made for good copy in local newspapers and resulted in his reelection in 1883.

At the same time, his fascination with the outdoors remained. In 1883 and at the height of his early and celebrated political career in New York, Roosevelt staked out a western ranch on unclaimed, remote land in Dakota Territory (present-day North Dakota). There, the buffalo, or American bison, once numbering some 60 million in North America, yet roamed, albeit nearing extermination in the face of commercial hunting.

Then, unexpectedly, tragedy struck. On Valentine's Day in 1884, Roosevelt's wife and mother both died. Grieving, his early political ambitions receded.

Seeking solace, the young widower left politics, returned to the land of the Dakotas and staked out a second ranch. The Elkhorn



Ranch, north of the town of Medora, became his home away from New York.

The ranch's name, coined by Roosevelt, served as a metaphor for his life and philosophy. On the ranch he found the intertwined horns of two male elk. Locked in battle and unable to separate themselves, they had died of starvation. Elkhorn served as a tribute to the determined bulls and a mirror into Roosevelt's combatant, persistent and restless spirit.

Far away from city life, Roosevelt immersed himself in the wild landscape. Ranging horseback across the rugged vastness, he herded cattle, roped strays and hunted big game.

When not outdoors, Roosevelt wrote in his cabin. Wandering and reflecting stirred within him the early flames of what would soon become a passionate and prominent pursuit of land and wildlife conservation,

including a lead role in saving the buffalo.

In 1886, his mental and physical health sharpened by two years of outdoor life, Roosevelt remarried and returned to politics, running unsuccessfully for mayor of New York City. Shortly thereafter, his loyalty to the Republican Party led to an 1889 appointment by President Benjamin Harrison as U.S. Civil Service Commissioner, whereupon Roosevelt set about rooting out political abuse and corruption within the federal government.

Having established himself as a determined and effective political reformer, in 1895 Roosevelt became president of the New York City Board of Commissioners. In this capacity he met and befriended fellow New Yorker and newspaper journalist Jacob Riis, known for his sensational investigative exposés of extreme poverty in the city. Together, Roosevelt and Riis enacted

This is the 26th 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 Nurturing Faith Journal and director of Nurturing Faith's Jesus Worldview Initiative.

legislation reforming labor laws and housing oversight, making life better for many of the city's poorest residents.

A second federal appointment followed in 1897 when President William McKinley elevated Roosevelt to the position of U.S. Secretary of Navy. Again, he did not long remain in office. The Spanish-American War, erupting in 1898, led Roosevelt to resign his position as naval secretary to become colonel of the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, known as the "Rough Riders." The U.S. press followed him to the war zone.

In Cuba, Colonel Roosevelt's leadership and bravery shone brightly. Leading a dangerous and bloody charge up a hillside in the crucial Battle of San Juan, he emerged victorious on the battlefield. Celebrated in newspaper headlines, he returned home a hero with national political ambitions.

Within months Roosevelt won election as the governor of New York. The following year he was selected as sitting President McKinley's new vice-presidential running mate, a ticket that easily won office in November 1900.

The following September a second-termed McKinley suddenly fell victim to an assassin's bullet, unexpectedly ushering Theodore Roosevelt into the White House as America's 26th president. The youngest president to date, the New Yorker was also the first with experience in living on the western frontier.

Thrust into the Oval Office, the politically progressive Roosevelt took the helm of America at a crucial point in history.

Public opposition to decades of Gilded Age corporate opulence and corruption, manifested in labor suppression and wealth inequality, had risen to unprecedented levels. At the same time, racial apartheid enveloped the southern states. As president, the battle-tested, reform-committed Roosevelt strove to rise to the occasion.

During his eight-year presidency that spanned two terms of service, the people's president enacted regulation of railroads and other predatory commercial markets, prosecuted corruption in several government departments, created the Department of Commerce and Labor, and passed food safety legislation.

Racial inequality, however, proved more daunting. Within weeks of assuming office Roosevelt invited a friend, Booker T. Washington, the well-known black educator, to the White House for dinner. The event outraged many southern whites, who thereafter criticized the president publicly, mercilessly and relentlessly. Uncharacteristically, a chastised Roosevelt backed away from any further meaningful efforts to challenge southern racial apartheid.

Of more lasting consequence, President Roosevelt's proudest accomplishment had roots in his love of the American West. Despite stiff opposition from some members of Congress, a determined Roosevelt enacted a series of conservation bills protecting wild land and wildlife.

Collectively, the man who became known as the "Conservation President" signed legislation creating the U.S. Forest Service, five national parks, and the Antiquities Act (under which he established 18 national monuments). He also created 51 bird reserves (a first for the United States), four game preserves, and 150 national forests, of which the Shoshone National Forest in Wyoming, adjacent to Yellowstone National Park, became the nation's first.

In addition, while in the White House, Roosevelt personally intervened to help buffalo recover from the brink of extinction by serving as president of the newly-formed American Bison Society.

On the world stage, meanwhile, Roosevelt flexed American military and diplomatic muscle in a successful projection of global power. Under the maxim "Speak softly and carry a big stick," he strategically co-mingled force and persuasion. The Panama Canal, wrangled through diplomatic and military means, became his greatest foreign policy accomplishment.

Despite many successes during his first term, Theodore Roosevelt's aggressively reformist and increasingly left-leaning agenda on the domestic front met increasing opposition from his own Republican Party during his second term as president. Having established himself as the national leader of the early 20th-century Progressive movement, he declined to run for a third term.

The Republican Party in the years following Roosevelt, however, abandoned his progressive ideals. Angered, Roosevelt returned to presidential politics as the 1912 candidate of the Progressive Party. A platform including woman's suffrage and child labor laws netted him more votes than the Republican candidate, sitting president Howard Taft, but less than the progressive-minded Democrat contender, Woodrow Wilson.

Even in defeat, Roosevelt took comfort that his legacy of progressiveness propelled Wilson to the White House. Turning his attention elsewhere, the ever-adventurous ex-president, supported by the American Museum of Natural History, in 1913-14 co-led an expedition into the largely-unknown Brazilian jungle.

Amid mishaps and illness, the expedition navigated some 625 miles of a previously uncharted river later renamed Roosevelt River. Although returning home yet again a national hero, a weakened and emaciated Roosevelt never fully recovered his health, passing away at the relatively young age of 60 in 1919.

Upon his passing, Roosevelt's son Archibald declared, "The old lion is dead."

Never personally devout, Roosevelt left behind a subtle spiritual legacy reflective of his muscular image and progressive convictions that stood apart from his predecessors.

His Dutch Reformed Church upbringing and occasional church attendance as an adult instilled within Roosevelt a familiarity with the Bible that he appropriated in the service of country, humankind and planet Earth.

In a 1903 speech at the dedication ceremony of Grace Reformed Church in Washington, D.C., the church he sometimes attended while president, President Roosevelt gave voice to an earthly-focused faith, declaring:

"This church is consecrated here today to duty and service, to the worship of the Creator, and to an earnest effort on our part so to shape our lives among ourselves and in relation to the outside world that we may feel that we have done our part in ringing a little nearer the day when there shall be on this earth a genuine brotherhood of man."

“Speak softly and carry a big stick,” he strategically co-mingled force and persuasion.

Also in 1903, while speaking in the Washington National Cathedral, Roosevelt insisted that “[W]e must fit ourselves mentally and physically, fit ourselves to work with the weapons necessary for dealing with this life no less than with the higher, spiritual weapons.”

Righting earthly wrongs remained Roosevelt’s obsession. In 1917 the ex-president, called upon to include an inscription in New Testaments given to soldiers entering World War I, quoted Micah 6:8 — “What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”

He then explained his understanding of biblical social morality:

Love mercy; treat your enemies well, suffer the afflicted, treat every woman as though she were your sister, care for the little children, rescue the perishing, and be tender

with the old and helpless. Walk humbly; you will do so if you study the life and teaching of the Savior, walking in His steps. Remember, the most perfect machinery of government will not keep us as a nation if there is not within us a soul, no abounding of material prosperity shall avail us if our spiritual sense is atrophied. The foes of our own household will surely prevail against us unless there be in our people an inner life which finds its outward expression in a morality like unto that preached by the seers and the prophets of God when the grandeur that was Greece and the glory that was Rome still lay in the future.

Upon Roosevelt’s death, his friend and naturalist Gifford Pinchot succinctly voiced how the former president embodied a

national religion of socially progressive morality, manliness and conservation:

Roosevelt was the greatest preacher of righteousness in modern time. Deeply religious beneath the surface, he made right living seem the natural thing, and there was no man beyond the reach of his preaching and example.... Unless we may except his Conservation Policies, Roosevelt’s greatest service during his presidency was the inspiration he gave young men. To them he was the leader in all they hoped to be and do for the common good.

Never again would a U.S. president simultaneously imbue a passion for progressive social morality alongside personal strength and rugged manliness. Theodore Roosevelt was a man of his times who shaped a unique era in American politics and identity. **NFJ**

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Responding spiritually to anxiety and envy

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Sometimes my reading runs together in unexpected but interesting ways. Such is the case recently involving three books.

British journalist Ruth Whippman moved to the U.S. — California’s Silicone Valley, in particular — and discovered America’s obsessive pursuit of happiness.

“It seems as though happiness in America has become the overachiever’s ultimate trophy,” she writes in *America the Anxious: How Our Pursuit of Happiness Is Creating a Nation of Nervous Wrecks* (2016, St. Martin’s Press).

While writing not from a particular faith perspective (though some Jewish-flavored agnosticism and fascination with Mormonism appear), there are helpful insights for persons of particular faiths to grasp.

Whippman identifies two “broad categories” for discussing the happiness she encountered in America: “the agonizing kind and the evangelical kind.”

The latter, defined as “people who have found the answers,” is more widely applied than the common category of evangelical Christians (and gives further verification that “evangelical” has gained pejorative and often unflattering meaning).

Whippman, however, is referring to those who passionately promote their discovered “answers” to others whether yoga, meditation, journaling or Jesus.

She notes that professional success, societal achievements and even healthy relationships with family and friends don’t satisfy Americans who are continually reaching for elusive happiness.

While Whippman displays biting British humor, she gets serious about the damaging effects of the resulting anxiety, including suicide. She notes how hard it is for persons with mental illness to admit or discuss their struggles “in a culture that prizes happiness as the ultimate goal and mark of success.”

Because of this obsession, she notes, it’s not uncommon for people to act happier

than they really are.

Her humor spills forth in describing her own experiences of motherhood and happiness:

“Giving birth, for me, was like emerging from a car wreck to find myself inexplicably in love with Vladimir Putin,” she writes of having her first child. “Babies are petty despots, blindly self-centered with megalomaniac life- and space-annexing aspirations.”



She confesses that, “Solly’s happiness became my driving priority...” After a second child, however, she writes: “Freed from the self-imposed crushing belief that my child’s entire future happiness hinges on my own performance, motherhood the second time around is much more enjoyable... With Zeph, I’m not even trying to optimize him and instead can just enjoy him.”

She acknowledges studies showing an increased sense of happiness among those who believe in God and are engaged in faith communities. Overall, she concludes that social connections and personal relationships are what bring happiness.

Presbyterian minister Gordon C. Stewart, in *Be Still: Departure from Collective Madness* (2017, Wipf & Stock), looks to theologian Paul Tillich to distinguish anxiety from fear, noting that fear has an object — an enemy. However, “anxiety is the self-awareness that we are mortal... We are excluded from an infinite, imperishable future.”

Stewart notes that “the appeal of fundamentalist certainty” is an effort to escape life’s ambiguities and to find a firm

foothold. Yet this ill-conceived faith causes one to identify enemies as the causes of anxiety rather than learning through spiritual discipline to cope with “life’s inherent ambiguities.”

As if fear and anxiety don’t present enough challenges, Mary Louise Bringle, religion and philosophy professor at Brevard College in North Carolina, reminds readers of the appeal of envy — although the only one of the seven deadly sins that provides no pleasure.

In *Envy: Exposing a Secret Sin* (2016, Westminster John Knox Press), she writes: “Insofar as most of us want happiness in our lives, not only for ourselves but also for others, we stand to benefit from learning about the habits that promote human flourishing — and, though less pleasantly, the ones that get in the way.”

She describes envy as a sin that “festers in secrecy” yet gives a wide range of examples of how it manifests in public from overzealous parents at their children’s recreation events to the Olympic-sized “Tonya Harding / Nancy Kerrigan knee-whack scandal” of the 1990s.

Bringle notes that envy “corrodes our spirits, gnawing away at our hearts from the inside.” She insightfully adds: “Once we let the cattiness [of envy] out of the bag... its claws can wreak havoc of unanticipated proportions...”

Bringle digs deeply into this topic — applying a wide range of scholarship. Yet she is clear that the antidote to envy is gratitude: “Psychologists and theologians thus agree that global gratitude is good for our individual and communal health.”

Gratitude, she notes, can only exist where envy does not.

Stewart, in *Be Still*, offers help in noting how one’s view of God impacts the way one lives in the presence of fear, anxiety, envy and other factors that negatively impact daily living. Drawing on the work of Benedictine Monk Dom Sebastian Moore, he writes: “Every real conversion is the turning from God the policeman to God the lover.” **NFJ**

Questions Christians ask scientists

How can we understand Jesus in light of evolution?

Often I speak to church groups about faith and science. Perspectives from Old Testament books such as Genesis, Job and Ecclesiastes are part of the discussion, but the New Testament says comparatively little about creation, so I mostly leave it out.

Therefore it's not surprising that during the dialogue time I get asked some version of this question. Most often, the question expresses a concern that science in general, and evolution in particular, pose a threat to the centrality of Jesus Christ.

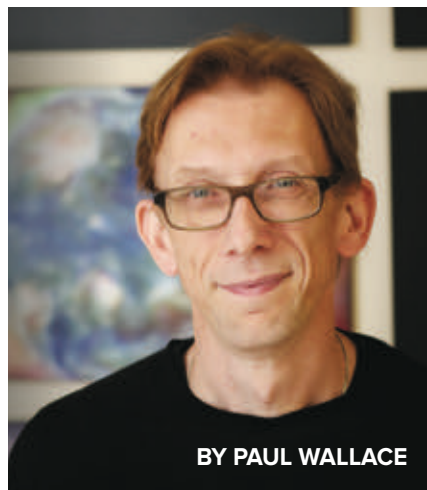
They certainly change his context: When you consider billions of years of deep time, the births and deaths of stars, the great stream of evolution, the comings and goings of countless species, and the tininess and transience of human existence, where indeed does the carpenter from Nazareth fit in?

Before we start I'd like to insist on a few fixed points about Jesus, with or without evolution.

Virtually all Christian creeds affirm that Jesus (1) was born of a virgin and was simultaneously fully human and fully divine, (2) lived and taught in full accordance with the will of God, (3) suffered and died under Pontius Pilate, and (4) was resurrected from the dead on the third day.

The large majority of non-creedal believers, like Baptists, also affirm these points. For the purposes of this article we will accept these traditional Christian claims.

We are free to do this because science (including evolution) does not disprove the virgin birth or the resurrection or any other particular miracle. We do not need modern science to tell us that babies are not normally born without a biological father,



Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to editor@nurturingfaith.net.

or that dead bodies normally stay dead. Jesus' birth and resurrection surely seemed as unlikely and as surprising in 1st-century Palestine as they do in 21st-century America.

Science tells us — often in great detail — what *usually* happens, not what *always* happens, and the idea of a miracle is more of a theological question than a scientific one. Evolution poses no logical threat to the story outlined above.

But what does this Jesus story mean? There are no limits to the ways it might be interpreted, but traditionally we Christians have said that something about his birth, life, death and resurrection reconciles us to God.

Reconciliation is necessary because something happened back there in the garden, something that alienated us from God. The fall of Adam and Eve opened a great chasm between humanity and God, a chasm God has been trying to bridge ever since, and Jesus is the ultimate bridge.

In particular, God reaches out to us in the Incarnation (point 1 in the story), and embraces us in the Resurrection (point 4). In this way God restores the possibility of full communion with us.

But this brief synopsis of the faith, familiar to so many, leaves out something important: creation. And Genesis 3 suggests that creation too needs reconciling.

In that chapter humanity is estranged from God, but so is the natural world. "Cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures," God says to the serpent in verse 14. "Dust you shall eat all the days of your life."

Reproduction, the central creative act of creatures, becomes painful (v. 16). The ground itself is also cursed. "In toil you shall eat of it; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth," God says to Adam (vv. 17-18).

Therefore creation is not just set against humanity; it is also alienated from God. After Gen. 3:8, the Lord, so intimate with creation before the fall, no longer walks the earth "at the time of the evening breeze."

In other words, whatever happened in the garden separated not only human beings and God but also separated creation from God and from us. If you visualize God, humanity and creation as the points of a triangle, the fall breaks the connections between all three points, and not just between God and us.

Jesus, being fully divine and fully human, naturally spans the gap between God and human beings. But does he span the gap between God and all creation? That is more difficult to see.

In Jesus, God certainly entered into creation and experienced life within the material order, but only as a human being. So the third point on the triangle — all nonhuman creatures and virtually all of created reality — is seemingly left out of God's plan of redemption.

This is where evolution comes in. Darwin's theory says that Jesus is not only related to all human beings (through Mary) but to *all of creation* (also through Mary). This is because evolution proposes that all life (including Mary) is connected to all other life.

This is one of the foundational ideas of evolution and of biology itself: If you trace our ancestry back far enough, you will see that we are related — in a literal, material way — to all life, whatever form that life takes or has taken.

Therefore since Jesus is born into the flow of evolution — that is, since he is human — then he is intimately bound up not only with his human forebears but also with every single creature that has ever lived, no matter how alien or insignificant.

There is more: Jesus, like us, is also related to creation as a whole, and everything in it, with no exceptions. This is because biological evolution is only one part of an overarching *cosmic* evolution that got started many billions of years before life began on earth.

In other words, Jesus is related to not only all life but also to all things. In Jesus the divine is expressed in atoms that were formed inside stars billions of years ago, in molecules that predate life itself, in the DNA common to thousands of non-human and human generations.

When we accept the basic tenants of evolution, we see in a new way that the Incarnation is not only a mystery of how God became human, but also a mystery of how God became woven into the very fabric of all material existence.

It is a mystery about God's intimacy and love for all creation, not just the human or even the conscious part of it. And the resurrection is not only about God's reconciliation with all human beings, but with all life, all creatures, and all things.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the theological idea of life arising from death, so clearly a part of our faith, is echoed in the world of evolutionary science. Evolution is a brutal and bloody process, driven by death, red in tooth and claw. Every existing species and every existing creature is a result of

innumerable deaths over billions of years.

Yet death is the seat of nature's creativity. Without death there is no new life. Without death no new thing happens.

The beauty of evolution's creativity was not lost on its discoverer. "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved," wrote Darwin.

The life of the new springs continually from the death of the old, yet the new carries the mark of the old within it.

This is true in evolution just as it is in theology: Jesus' resurrected body, clearly made new, was not free of scars. Yet he walked again, spoke again, laughed again, ate again and loved again. He *lived* again and lives still, tipping the cosmic scales away from death and toward life.

What we learn from Jesus is that death, which is so terribly present both in creation and in our personal lives, is finally no match for life. **NFJ**

"Paul Wallace is an astrophysicist who writes with magic . . ."

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Day of Contrasts

Fools for Christ or just plain fools?

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The contrast is striking: One is a day for silly pranks while the other commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ. One calls for tying someone's shoelaces together while the other marks the hope of eternal life.

When Easter falls on April Fools' Day, as it does this year, one may wonder: Is there any relationship between the two?

Not much, it seems, except that both are tied to some early calendaring and to shifting traditions. The result, coincidentally, is that sometimes the moveable date of Easter lands on the fixed date of April Fools' Day.

NEW YEAR

Long before fireworks and football, beginning the New Year on the first day of January began to take hold in 45 BCE, thanks to Roman dictator Julius Caesar. He sought to make some adjustments to a calendar that had gotten out of sync with the seasons.

These adjustments included a first month to honor Janus, the god of new beginnings. However, observing this designated New Year's Day lacked consistency over time.

Eventually, some scientific miscalculations were discovered and the celebration fell out of favor during the Middle Ages.

Some Christians argued for setting the first day of the New Year on or near the first day of April — closer to Easter. Others thought April 1 to be a better choice since it was closer to the vernal equinox when the earth springs forth with new life.

Thanks to 16th-century Pope Gregory XIII, who wanted everyone on the same calendar page, oddly Janus won out over Jesus as the starting gate for the New Year. But news moved slowly at the time and not



everyone was persuaded.

Some Europeans, especially British Christians, celebrated the New Year commencing on March 25, the date of the Feast of Annunciation, an important celebration that could continue until April 1.

Interestingly, that tradition came to America too. As late as the early 1700s at least one New England town, Boston, still celebrated the new year on March 25.

More largely speaking, however, those who resisted the January 1 designation of New Year's Day — either out of conviction or confusion following the implementation of the Gregorian calendar in 1582 — were ridiculed as fools, so one story goes.

While the full origin of this practice is as mysterious as most pranksters seek to be on April 1, one early prank called for placing a paper fish (perhaps a predecessor to the later "Kick me!" sign) on the back of some unsuspecting person.

This young fish — one that could be more easily caught than its experienced elders — symbolized a gullible person who had not caught up with the times.

PRANKS

April 1 as a day for pulling someone's leg or playing a prank gained multicultural appeal — with various expressions in Brazil, Canada, England, the U.S., and elsewhere. There is even a top-100 listing of April Fools' Day pranks selected by the San Diego-based Museum of Hoaxes that opened in 1997.

Holding the top spot is a British TV news program called *Panorama* that on April Fools' Day 1957 reported on the great Swiss Spaghetti Harvest.

The segment showed people in trees pulling down strings of noodles — while noting an abundant harvest thanks to a mild winter and the successful reduction of the spaghetti weevil.

Gullibility proved to be as abundant as the tree-borne pasta. Numerous viewers called in requesting the offered information on growing their own trees by placing a sprig of spaghetti in a can of tomato sauce.

It seems appropriate that the winning entry would be found where English pranksters on April 1, 1700 highly popularized the tradition of April Fools' Day.

However, the practice of April Fools' pranking has broad, ongoing appeal. For example, many Americans in the 1990s fell for April 1 announcements that Taco Bell had purchased and renamed the Liberty Bell and that Burger King was offering left-handed Whoppers.

FOOLS

The English word "fool" can be a bit confusing and even troubling — at least it was for me as a youngster. Once, after overhearing me call one of my brothers a fool, my parents were quite alarmed and created deep fear within me.

They grabbed a Bible and pointed to Jesus' warning in Matt. 5:22 that anyone who calls another a fool "shall be in danger of hell fire." As a result I begged for divine forgiveness of this seemingly oversized sin.

And, for good measure, I apologized to my brother as well — and switched to calling him names that would bring only temporal rather than eternal punishment.

The word "fool" gets a good bit of play in the Bible — especially in the Proverbs. Fools are usually contrasted with those who are wise. And the Psalmist notes that only a fool says there is no God.

The Apostle Paul, however, calls for followers of Jesus to be "fools for Christ" — or "for Christ's sake" (1 Cor. 4:10).

The idea seems to be that taking up a cross, loving enemies, walking an extra mile, giving away one's coat and the other hard things Jesus called his followers to do are countercultural, even foolish, when compared to the more common mindset of those who look out for themselves and seek to get ahead at the expense of others.

Apparently, there's a biblical way to be a good kind of fool. I just wish I'd had that additional reference when my parents brought the wrath of God via the Authorized King James Version down on me one night long ago.

ROOTS

The resurrection of Jesus is clearly expressed in the New Testament as the pinnacle of eternal hope for Christian believers. Yet its celebration in the form of Easter Sunday has been shaped over time while growing out of obscure origins.

Some trace the roots to pagan celebrations of spring and fertility — while others reference early baptismal rites giving form to some current practices. Even the origin of the word "Easter" is debated.

Easter, though, is a moveable holiday celebrated in the West on the first Sunday after the full moon after the vernal equinox on March 21. That makes it quiet moveable, ranging from as early as March 22 to as late as April 25.

This year it lands on April 1 to coincide with April Fools' Day. For Christians, however, the resurrection of Jesus is

the most important celebration and not a hoax that some have believed it to be.

While Easter may have arisen (pun intended) from pagan rituals, it retains its great significance as the holiest day of the year in which Christians most fully celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Such good news far exceeds any concerns about evolving calendars and practices.

EASTERTIDE

Easter Sunday, for many of us, begins with a sunrise service and moves on to a glorious, sanctuary-filled celebration of worship by parishioners in bright, new clothing, and then continues through an afternoon of abundant food and the hiding and finding of colored eggs — all traditions with histories of their own.

However, those who pay attention to the cycle of the Christian calendar know that the church's year really begins with Advent rather than January 1 or Easter. And, for many Christians, both the Christmas and Easter experiences are more meaningful when the contemplative times leading up to these grand celebrations receive careful attention.

In the same way the Advent season readies believers to more fully experience Christmas, Lent and Holy Week prepare them for the fuller celebration of the resurrection — regardless of the date on which Easter falls.

And while Easter Sunday is a widely observed day, Eastertide extends for a season that includes Jesus' ascension into heaven. And, for people of faith, every Sunday is a reminder of Jesus' resurrection on that first day of the week and is a cause for worship and hope. **NFJ**



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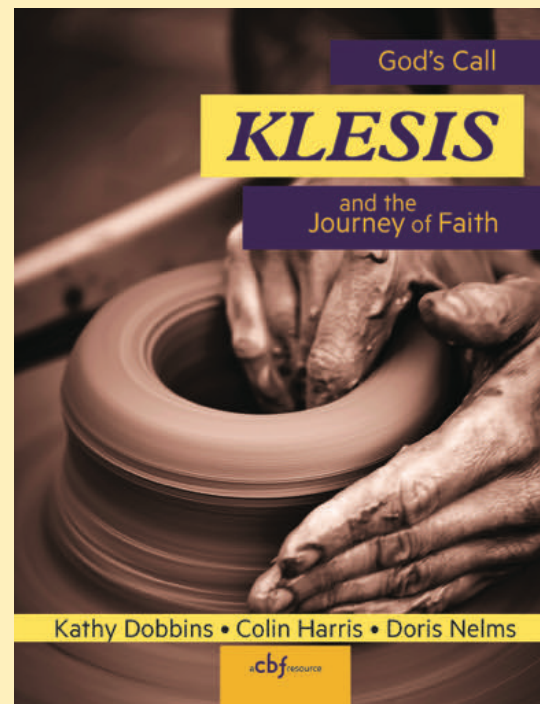
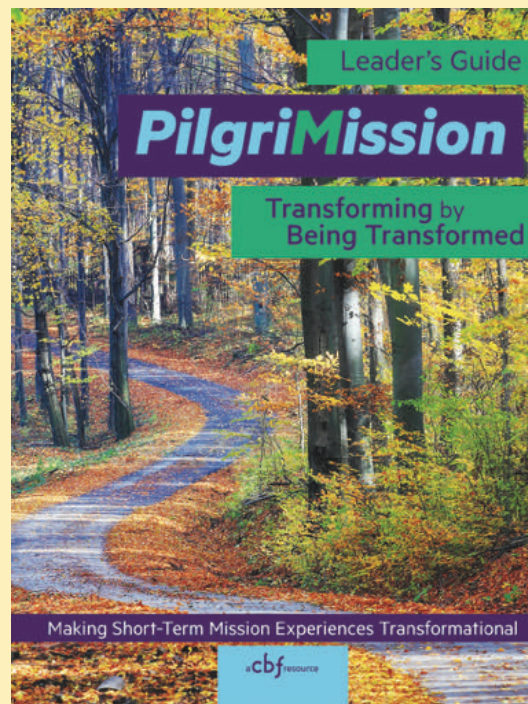
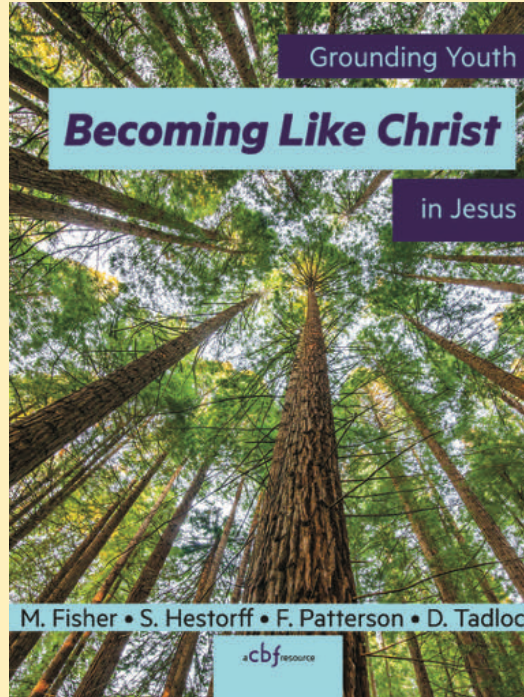
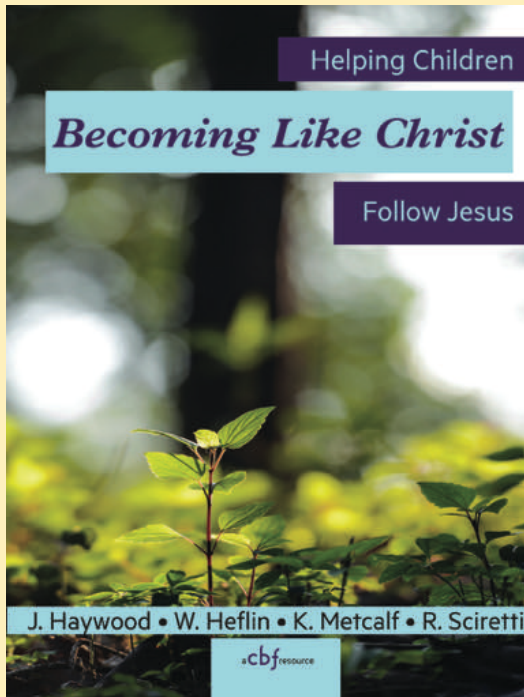
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