

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2018

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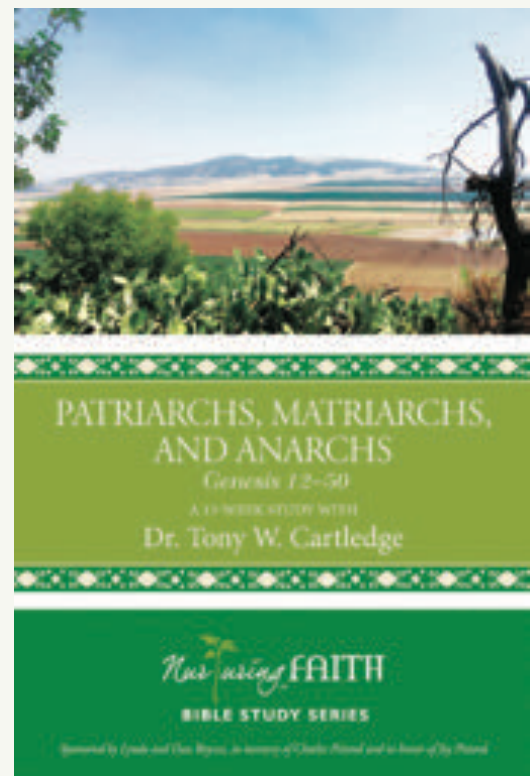
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LAMENT & LIGHT**

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the slow train of justice,
but not hope
By John D. Pierce

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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. Lighthouses have become symbols of faith for many seeking to navigate the turbulences of life while moving toward a safe harbor. Cape Mears Light, on the Oregon coast, will be visited as part of the Nurturing Faith Experience: Pacific Northwest, July 20-27, 2019. See page 15.



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Worth Repeating

“If you’re asking yourself, ‘How in the hell can I be happy in retirement?’ I say, try a little heaven.”

Financial planner **Wes Moss**, whose national survey of thousands of retirees showed that religious practice enhances happiness
(Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

“All American Christians must work together these days to distinguish religious liberty from religious privilege.”

Church historian **Bill Leonard** of Wake Forest University
(Baptist News Global)

“We appreciate the price that you have paid to walk in the high calling. History will record the greatness that you have brought for generations.”

Inscription in a Bible signed by more than 100 fundamentalist/evangelical leaders and presented to President Trump by evangelist **Paula White** at a White House dinner in August

“If only white evangelicals wanted to get free, rather than get power.”

Austin Channing Brown, author of *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* *(Twitter)*

“Jewish Americans are the only religious group with substantial contingents at each end of the typology.”

From a Pew Research study showing nearly half of U.S. Jews don’t identify with organized religion, while nearly one-fifth are congregational “stalwarts” *(Times of Israel)*

“Once upon a time, American evangelicals saw the Soviet Union and other communist countries as the world’s greatest threat to their faith. They carried out dramatic and illegal activities, smuggling Bibles and other Christian literature across borders. And yet, today, Russia is their crucial ally.”

Melani McAlister, professor of American Studies and International Affairs at George Washington University *(RNS)*

“If you do something wrong in South Carolina, you’re not going to get to do it again in North Carolina or California or Florida.”

Ryan Brown of the South Carolina Department of Education on school districts sharing sexual assault allegations, a practice some say church organizations should adopt to reduce repeat offenders *(Greenville News)*

“Younger evangelicals ... love their country. They love their faith. They just don’t want those things inappropriately mixed.”

Ed Stetzer, executive director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College *(The New Yorker)*

“I don’t care if you want to call it erosion or sea-level rise or Aunt Sadie’s butt-boil. It doesn’t matter what’s causing it. The point is that this disaster is happening, and these people need help.”

An unnamed resident of Virginia’s sinking Tangier Island in Chesapeake Bay, where faith and science are often at odds in explaining the crisis *(Undark)*

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Using the Bible to avoid Jesus

By John D. Pierce

It is a seemingly odd thing to do: to express a strong commitment to biblical truth as a way of avoiding Jesus. Yet that is precisely what many fundamentalist-evangelical leaders are doing.

A prime example comes from pastor Robert Jeffress of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, who is much in the news as a political operative. Consider these words he wrote in a commentary for Religion News Service:

“And since Jesus fully affirmed every word of Scripture, we can assume asking ‘What would Jesus do about immigration?’ is the same as asking ‘What does the Bible really teach about immigration?’”

I see what you did there, pastor. You tagged Jesus and then ran elsewhere in search of biblical justification for your preconceived ideas about immigration.

Though an important topic worthy of informed discussion and biblical study, the larger point here is not the pastor’s take on

immigration. It’s his take on Jesus.

“The Jeffress Pivot,” as I deem it, is a typical ploy by those who really don’t want to face up to what Jesus taught and lived — but want to claim to be biblical, even Christian.

No, pastor, we cannot assume that asking what Jesus would do is the same as asking what justification you can mine from selective biblical texts. Jesus matters most.

It is not enough to embrace Jesus as the source of salvation and then run from his high but hard calling in revealing God to humanity. It’s not enough to name a political movement after him and seek government help in advancing it.

If Jesus is the fullest revelation of God, and the one affirmed as both Savior and Lord, why tag, turn and run when seeking the truth about how we are to treat other people or other basic concerns?

Those who do so have constructed

constrictive and controlling theories of biblical inspiration that allow for reducing the role of Jesus. Southern Baptist leadership did that formally in 2000 by removing the important interpretive lens — “The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ” — from their once guiding and now imposed doctrinal statement.

Instead of seeing the Bible as culminating in Jesus, it becomes a flat book that allows for ignoring the hard-to-do teachings of Jesus in favor of a preferred politically pleasing course stitched together from even the most obscure, unrelated verses.

A flat view of the Bible is flat-out wrong. It doesn’t take Jesus seriously enough. It allows for elevating one’s proof-texted opinions above the fullest revelation of God.

Call your theory of biblical inspiration “inerrancy” or anything else you want. But if it diminishes Jesus as the fullest expression of God’s love and grace, it is a diminished view and use of the Bible.

We who bear the name of Christ should be pivoting toward Jesus. **NFJ**



The Nurturing Faith Board of Directors and Publishing Team are thankful for our many faithful readers, supporters and friends. We wish for you a meaningful journey through the Advent season and a joyful celebration of Christmas.

Old Trail Town in Cody, Wyo.
Photo by John D. Pierce

Sacred Landscapes

Religion and the American West

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Far upon the plains of Wyoming is the Old West town of Medicine Bow, a tiny community of some 300 people. In this remote locale I lived one summer as a young man.

Founded in 1869, Medicine Bow, Wyo., in the early 20th century boasted two saloons, a general store and the largest hotel between Denver and Colorado. Today, there are two saloons, a convenience store/gas station, and the same hotel, recently expanded and now consisting of 56 rooms.

The Virginian Hotel is named after the novel *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*. Written by Owen Wister in 1902, the book is widely considered to be the first western novel.

FOLK HERO

Set in the 1880s, *The Virginian* is the story of a hard-working but suave southern trans-

plant — the Virginian — who settles on a ranch outside of Medicine Bow following the Civil War. Initially employed as a hired hand, in time he becomes part owner of the ranch and an important man in Wyoming territory.

Written a decade after the closing of the western frontier, the book immortalized the fading American cowboy as a legendary Anglo-Saxon folk hero. Sculpted by the rugged landscape, the Virginian became the personification of the true American man.

Within sight of anywhere in town, the wind-swept prairie landscape of Wister's day and the present is vast, silent, raw and untamed. Far in the distance a great blue dome of sky encases a world within which humanity is but a speck.

"[A] land without end, a space across which Noah and Adam might come straight from Genesis," says Tenderfoot, the narrator in Wister's novel. Upon the plains are "prairie-dogs and the pale herds of antelope," air "pure as water and strong as wine" as "sunlight flooded the world."

Like many newcomers, real and imagined across generations, during my

summer in Medicine Bow I gradually came to realize that the landscape itself defined the American West.

THE LAND

Eleven states are generally identified as comprising the contiguous American West: namely, the Rocky Mountain states of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Idaho, Utah, Arizona and Nevada, along with the Pacific states of Washington, Oregon and California.

Collectively, these states represent approximately one-third of the land area of the contiguous United States. The sheer size of the region hints at West's defining characteristic: the landscape.

Outside the city limits of the small towns and large metropolises of the West is the people's land. Nearly one-half of all western acreage is owned by the American public and managed by the United States government: national parks, national monuments, national forests and other federal lands.

In these protected places the American

West of ancient times remains largely untouched, protected from the excesses of capitalism.

A region of great mystery to Euro-Americans prior to the famed Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1803–1806, the arid Far West, walled off by the imposing Rocky Mountains, was the domain of native people, vast numbers of large wildlife, and unspoiled mountains, forests and plains.

EXPANSION

In the decades following, this frontier region became a place of rapid commercial exploitation. Early traders and trappers sought fortunes in furs. The trails they blazed became wagon routes, opening the interior to desperate families seeking new beginnings.

Pioneering Mormons, driven from the East and Midwest due to the often abusive nature of their religion, settled in the Great Salt Lake Valley in 1847. Diverting mountain streams, they turned the dry valley into fertile agricultural land, modeling the art of harnessing water for irrigation, a practice that was and remains critical to the survival of western communities.

A gold strike in California the following year drew hordes of prospectors to the West. In the decades thereafter, rivers and streams were disrupted and mountains and hills denuded in the search for precious metals.

Realizing the vast economic value of natural resources in the West, the U.S. government in 1862 encouraged large-scale settlement by granting free acreage to settlers.

Miners, foresters, farmers, ranchers, hunters and speculators poured across the mountains. The first large cattle drive, originating in Texas, arrived in Montana in 1866.

To protect citizens and access to natural resources, the federal government intensified efforts, often violent, to contain native peoples on shrinking reservation lands of poor quality. Federal financing constructed the first Transcontinental Railroad in 1869. Rail cars transported huge quantities of wood, animal furs and other western commodities to markets in the East.

WONDERLAND

Amid the commercial pillaging, in 1872 a few forward-thinking individuals convinced the federal government to establish the world's first national park, Yellowstone National Park. Protected from miners, ranchers, farmers and developers, the park, often referred to as Wonderland, drew an emerging generation of nature seekers from crowded, polluted eastern and mid-western cities.

Yellowstone's example and success eventually spurred the creation of many more western national parks. Nonetheless, Yellowstone in the early years was an exception.

By the 1880s much of the West had been reconstructed or ruined: free-flowing water sources diverted for agriculture, rivers and hillsides polluted from mining, forests chopped down, native grasses plowed under, vast herds of buffalo slaughtered to the near extinction of the species, grizzly bear numbers and range greatly reduced.

In short order, the West had been conquered. In 1890 the U.S. Census superintendent declared "there can hardly be said to be a frontier line."

Three years later, Frederick Jackson Turner, a historian from the University of Wisconsin, pointed to the conquest of the western frontier as the national formative experience. In Jackson's "frontier thesis," western expansion imbued Americans with optimism, rugged independence, adaptability, inventiveness, materialism, mobility and self-reliance.

RELIGION

With the closing of the western frontier lands, institutional religion eyed new opportunities in the American West. When most Americans think of religion, images of churches, cathedrals, synagogues or mosques come to mind. Except in the American West.

Writing of the post-Civil War American West, novelist Wister put these words in the mouth of a newly-arrived-out-West character.

"I was informed before undertaking my journey that I should find a desolate and mainly godless country. But nobody gave

me to understand that from Medicine Bow I was to drive 300 miles and pass no church of any faith."

During the 1890s and first decade of the 20th century a flurry of church building construction in the West stirred a lot of dust but barely dented the religiously barren landscape of which Wister spoke.

In 1914 professor E.J. Klemme of Washington State Normal School reflected upon the manner in which the irreligious West transformed early settlers from eastern Christians into western secularists:

"In the East they were faithful church members; now they are not even church [at] tenders," Klemme lamented. "The ascent of the Great Divide seemed too steep for church letters. The air of the Northwest seemed too rare for prayer. We have hurried forth to conquer the wilderness, but we have been conquered by it."

MILES APART

Klemme, focusing on Protestantism, paid scant attention to indigenous religions, Mormons, and the growing number of Jewish and Buddhist temples on the West coast. Nonetheless, more than a century later and apart from the West coast and Utah, one can still drive hundreds of miles across much of the West and fail to see a religious building of any kind.

And in the world of literature, novels and scholarly histories of the West rarely have much to say about religion. It is as if the religious frontier of the West remains just that.

Currently on the faculty of Hamilton College in Hamilton, N.Y., Oregon-born Western historian Qujncy D. Newell teaches a course on "Religion in the American West." A website accompanying the class contains many images, but few are of religious buildings.

Instead, the homepage features a landscape image of sky, prairie, an open and empty road, and, in the distance, the red cliffs of Monument Valley in Arizona.

Other landscape images on the site are of national parks and monuments: Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore and Devil's Tower. Additional landscape images include Native American reservations.

Browse through the relative handful of scholarly books written about religion and the American West, and you'll see the same pattern: cover images of landscapes, or Native American peoples or objects. Book titles often incorporate words such as "land," "landscapes," "place," "space," "sacred," "spirituality," and names of national parks and monuments.

SACRED

Apart from the region's cities, vast swathes of ancient landscape awe the senses. Upon this rugged canvas, indigenous peoples have lived for merely thousands of years, and non-natives for only hundreds.

Native peoples revere the landscape of the West as powerful, mystical, and rooted in the sacred. Joseph Toledo, a Jemez Pueblo tribal leader, observes that Native Americans view sacred sites as "places of great healing and magnetism."

Among many sites sacred to tribes is Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, "a place of great healing, wholeness and spiritual value not only to the region but to the nation as a whole," according to Presbyterian minister Andrew Black, who works with tribal leaders across the West to preserve sites sacred to Native Americans.

Earlier this year in Yellowstone and away from crowds of tourists, I witnessed a tribal elder chanting prayers of protection and blessing upon land sacred to his people.

Yellowstone is a place I, too, believe to be sacred. Likewise, many Americans of various ethnicities perceive western national parks and other wilderness landscapes as spiritual places, a fact long recognized by the National Park Service.

SPACE, PLACE

In Freeman Tilden's *Interpreting Our Heritage*, considered the most widely read book among contemporary Park Service interpreters and revised multiple times since its original publication date of 1957, the author states:

"Thousands of naturalists, historians, archaeologists and other specialists are engaged in the work of revealing, to such visitors as desire the service, something of



"The Teepees" in Petrified Forest National Park. Photo by John. D. Pierce

the beauty and wonder, the inspiration and spiritual meaning that lie behind what the visitor with his senses perceives."

The Park Service interpreter, Tilden notes, is someone who facilitates the "enrichment of the human spirit and mind."

Western religion, rather than grounded in buildings, is rooted in space and place — the vast landscape that is the heart of the American West, the visually-rich embodiment of divine creation in Native American and institutional religious traditions.

Even in the modern western era of urban development, commercial exploitation and widespread immigration, sacred landscapes remain. While cityscapes of the West offer a diverse array of houses of worship, the American West remains the most institutionally non-religious region of the United States.

With the exception of Utah, no more than a third of the population of the vast majority of western counties attends religious services.

Religion in the West is largely spiritual in nature, an experiencing of the transcendent in the landscapes of the region. Churches, mosques and temples exist on the periphery.

SPIRITUALITY

Community is primarily found not in organized religion, but in authentic friendships, conversations and caring that take place on hiking trails and in affinity groups, bars, coffee shops, neighborhoods and homes.

Fewer wedding ceremonies occur in religious buildings. Philanthropy is primarily oriented toward serving humanity and preserving the natural environment.

And in a reversal of the 19th-century western themes of migration and exploitation, the American West of the 21st century is exporting eastward nature-infused spirituality and religion.

Religious "nones," always a staple of the American West, are now common in the East, North and South. Roughly 30 percent of Americans are unaffiliated with any organized religion, a number trending rapidly upward.

Studies indicate the decline in organized religion correlates with a growing perception among Americans that many religious institutions have for too long opposed objective truth, relegated women to secondary class status, protected pedophiles, fostered harmful politicization, led cultural wars, and stoked ethnic hatred and racial divisions.

At the same time, the number of Americans describing themselves as "spiritual but not religious" has increased by 50 percent over the past five years and will soon numerically surpass Protestantism, the largest religious group in America.

NATURE

Amid religion's failures, social and cultural upheavals and technological saturation, many Americans speak of nature as inspirational or spiritual. However, it has long been such a sustaining source.

Religious literature ancient and modern, Protestant and Catholic, Jewish and Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu is replete with stories and teachings of the importance of wilderness experiences in the healing and restoration of the soul, body and mind.

Native American youth for generations unknown have sought divine guidance through wilderness vision quests, or journeys.

The Jewish Torah and biblical Old Testament speak of the land of Israel as a sacred place given to the Hebrews from Creator God.

In the Gospels, Jesus sought personal respite as well as deeper understanding and direction from God in wilderness wanderings.

For people of all faiths, religious or spiritual, the landscapes of the American West beckon. **NFJ**



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Of the 375 lessons, drawn from

Lectionary readings, 171 came from the Old Testament and 204 focused on New Testament texts. Additionally, Tony has written lessons to supplement five books of short-term Bible studies that include background/teaching materials. (See page 1 for titles and ordering information.)

Persons seeking superb, trusted weekly Bible studies should look no further than those volumes of short-term lessons — or the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies in the center of this journal with teaching resources online.

Here's a preview of the texts and topics coming in 2019.

Epiphany

What Are We Praying For?

Jan. 6, 2019

Psalm 72

A Prayer for Justice

Jan. 13, 2019

Psalm 29

A Prayer for Peace

Jan. 20, 2019

Psalm 36

A Prayer for Love

Jan. 27, 2019

Psalm 19

A Prayer for Goodness

Feb. 3, 2019

Psalm 71:1-6

A Prayer for Deliverance

Not Your Typical Teacher

Feb. 10, 2019

Luke 5:1-11

Going Deep

Feb. 17, 2019

Luke 6:17-26

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Feb. 24, 2019

Luke 6:27-38
Being Kind

Mar. 3, 2019

Luke 9:28-43
Climbing Higher

Lent

Deliberate Devotion

March 10, 2019

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
A Joyous Confession

March 17, 2019

Genesis 15:1-21
A Hair-Raising Prediction

March 24, 2019

Isaiah 55:1-9
A Stunning Invitation

March 31, 2019

Joshua 5:1-12
A Cutting Reaffirmation

Purposeful Love

April 7, 2019

John 12:1-8
The Scent of Love

April 14, 2019

Luke 22:14-23:56
Of Passion and Pain

Easter

April 21, 2019

John 20:1-8
Best. News. Ever.

Resurrection Realities

April 28, 2019

Acts 5:27-32
First Allegiance

May 5, 2019

Acts 9:1-20
Blind Devotion

May 12, 2019

Acts 9:36-43
Shocking Faith

May 19, 2019

Acts 11:1-18
Stunned Silence

May 26, 2019

Acts 16:9-15
Eager Acceptance

June 2, 2019

Acts 16:16-34
Doubled Deliverance

Pentecost

June 9, 2019

Genesis 11:1-9
What Did You Say?

Season After Pentecost

June 16, 2019

Romans 5:1-5
Imaginary Numbers

On the Road with Jesus

June 23, 2019

Luke 8:26-39
A Bad Day for Pigs

June 30, 2019

Luke 9:51-62
A Hard Row to Hoe

July 7, 2019

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
A Mission Trip to Remember

July 14, 2019

Luke 10:25-37
A Wonder on the Road

July 21, 2019

Luke 10:38-42
A Better Way to Go

July 28, 2019

Luke 11:1-13
A Good Way to Pray

Aug. 4, 2019

Luke 12:13-21
An Investment Gone Bad

Aug. 11, 2019

Luke 12:32-40
A Word to the Wise

Aug. 18, 2019

Luke 12:49-56
A Really Sharp Word

Aug. 25, 2019

Luke 13:10-17
A Straight-up Answer

Sept. 1, 2019

Luke 14:1-14
A Way to the Top

Choices That Matter

Sept. 8, 2019

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Make the Right Choice!

Sept. 15, 2019

Jeremiah 4:11-28
Delay and You'll Pay

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Nature & nurture

Adventure meets inspiration in shared, small-group experiences

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

It has become something of a mantra: “We don’t do tours; we provide shared experiences.”

There’s no herding a large group in matching T-shirts, or meals of rubber chicken with banquet bullets (green peas); no memorized tour commentary, but instead thoughtful insights and personal engagement.

Since 2014 many *Nurturing Faith Journal* readers, supporters and friends from North Carolina to Northern Ireland and many other places have participated in these unique opportunities for inspiration and exploration called Nurturing Faith Experiences. These carefully planned, small-group excursions are personal and pleasing.

Most experiences take place in and around western national parks where nature is on grand display. Local knowledge allows for smooth arrangements, good contacts and thoughtful interpretation.

INSPIRATION

Of course, the handiwork of God speaks most clearly and fully to those who take in the wonderment around every bend and over every peak.

“Our pilgrimage brought strangers together who quickly became friends,” said Michael Helms, a Georgia pastor, who along with his wife Tina participated in the 2015 experience to Glacier National Park. “That’s not hard to do when you share a love for God and nature.”

While brief times for reflection and sharing are included in the schedule — usually a psalm and prayer for the day — each person experiences God in his or her



INSIDER INFORMATION — Yellowstone expert Bruce Gourley explains some of the unique features of the park’s 10,000 thermal features to John Roy (second from left) and Jim and Susan McConnell during a Nurturing Faith Experience.

own encounters with the oft-overwhelming natural beauty. And evenings allow for informal conversations about the experiences of the day.

Singer/songwriter Scott Willis of Murfreesboro, Tenn., along with his wife Vickie who works in Nashville’s music industry, have participated in Nurturing Faith Experiences to both Glacier and Yellowstone parks.

The grandeur of nature has inspired Scott’s songwriting including these lyrics: “Lord, compel us to honor your creation / see the beauty with new eyes / stop abusing by our own choosing / live to care for what you provide.”

Seeing the beauty of creation with “new eyes” was the result of this summer’s experience in Yellowstone, he said.

“The sheer scale of the mountains and valleys stirred my imagination,” he said. “The unusual and unique natural features of the park increased my sense of wonder.”

OUT WEST

This grand idea arose when Nurturing Faith’s online editor and contributing writer Bruce Gourley asked five years ago: “Do you think some of our readers would like to come out to Yellowstone?”

Bruce, an expert on the park, lives in nearby Bozeman, Mont., and is editor of *Yellowstone History Journal*. The first Nurturing Faith Experience, held in Yellowstone in 2014, took advantage of his local knowledge and connections.

The western experiences have a personal touch — from arrival to departure — with high-demand, close-in lodging secured more than a year in advance and limited to 18 persons. Bruce shares his deep knowledge throughout the week including during delicious meals and evening conversations.

Participants in the first experience were eager for another, leading to three experiences thus far to Glacier National Park in

northern Montana. Experiences are planned to allow for optional activities for those seeking more or less physical activity.

The vast, varied and unspoiled landscapes of the West allow for quiet reflection and spiritual renewal — shared with a small, caring group that quickly becomes friends.

Patsy Perritt of Baton Rouge, La., along with her husband Ron, participated in the Glacier experience last year and the Yellowstone/Tetons experience this summer. She found new meaning in the ancient Psalms through these experiences.

“God renews us and continues to shape us for new purposes as we saw in the many acts of nature,” said Patsy. “The vast spaces help to ‘blow away the cobwebs’ to give me a wider vision and a bigger heart.”

FAITH/SCIENCE

An experience was held last March on the Big Island of Hawaii with astrophysicist Paul Wallace, the faith/science writer for this journal. His expertise and insights brought a unique dynamic to the experience.

Next summer (June 8-15, 2019), Paul will join the experience to Yellowstone and Grand Teton parks to lead faith/science discussions and explain the celestial surroundings of Big Sky Country. Details are found on page 14 and online at nurturingfaith.net/experiences.

Often writers and readers have unique, but impersonal relationships that build over time. These experiences bring those relationships to a personal level in which

dialogue and friendship develop.

In addition to these weeklong faith/science explorations, three briefer Nurturing Faith Experiences have been held to focus on other topics of interest.

These explored Religion and the American Civil War (2015, Chattanooga), Religion in Colonial America (2016, Williamsburg) and Personal Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement (2017, Atlanta).

PARK CULTURE

Out West, lodging is secured inside or very near the national parks being explored for the fullest possible experience. Not only are these inns or cabins the closest in proximity to the wonders of nature, but they also offer a rustic, reflective and comfortable setting.

Participants don't have to fret over reservations or directions. In fact, from arrival at the designated airport until departure, the only struggle is whether to order the fresh trout, bison tenderloin or just about anything that includes huckleberries.

“The whole experience could not have been more rewarding thanks to careful planning by Nurturing Faith,” said Eugene Worley, a retired engineer from Huntsville, Ala., who along with his wife, Lynda, joined the recent Yellowstone experience. “And the surroundings could have not been more spectacular thanks to an all-loving God.”

The two Nurturing Faith Experiences in the West planned for next year will certainly follow this format. In addition to the faith-science Big Sky experience

(June 8-15), Nurturing Faith editors and writers will host the first-ever experience to the Pacific Northwest.

The July 20-27, 2019 experience will feature Washington's Olympic National Park and Oregon's scenic coastline. More information is available on page 15 with itinerary and registration online.

The three Nurturing Faith Experiences planned for next year — Israel/West Bank, Yellowstone/Tetons and Pacific Northwest — will mark five years of exploring, learning and sharing inspirational moments and lasting friendships.

HOLY LAND

Also turning to in-house expertise, Nurturing Faith held an experience in 2014 to Israel and the West Bank led by Tony Cartledge, writer of the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies and a professor at Campbell University Divinity School.

Using a different model, this experience involved nearly 50 participants — many who study Tony's weekly Bible study curriculum in this publication — who traveled throughout Israel and the West Bank with insights from Tony and veteran guide Doron Heiliger.

Since then, Nurturing Faith has collaborated with Campbell University Divinity School to provide opportunities for readers and friends to join Tony, Doron and others in this unique opportunity.

After digging up 2,200-year-old pottery from a Maccabean period site, Doron noted that he had been giving tours of Israel for 40 years, “but only Tony's groups come here.” Tony also relies on friendships at Bethlehem Bible College to give participants a better understanding of life from a Palestinian Christian perspective.

“I have worn out my friends telling them about the trip,” said Bob Rollins of Little Rock, Ark., following the 2014 experience to Israel/West Bank. “I wish I could give you some ideas on how to do it better, but you just can't improve on perfection.”

Information on the Israel experience set for May 11-23, 2019 may be found on page 9 and online at nurturingfaith.net/experiences. **NFJ**



NOT A TOUR — Nurturing Faith provides personal, small-group experiences such as for these participants who visited Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks.



NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCES

BIG SKY

Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks

June 8–15, 2019



Hosted by editors Bruce Gourley and John Pierce, along with faith/science columnist and astrophysicist Paul Wallace, author of *Stars Beneath Us: Finding God in the Evolving Cosmos*. Explore the grandeur of two amazing national parks — filled with wildlife, thermal features, mountains, lakes, rivers and valleys — with Bruce’s local knowledge and experience Paul’s personal “tour” of the night skies.



Superb in-park lodging and delicious meals. Optional activities for those desiring more or less physical activity.

Full itinerary and registration information at nurturingfaith.net/experiences

COST: \$3,400 per person double occupancy (\$800 single supplement) / Includes all lodging, food, ground transportation, activities and programming from arrival to departure / Participants are responsible for travel to and from Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport.



PACIFIC NORTHWEST

July 20–27, 2019

*Beginning and ending
in Portland, Oregon*

Explore nature at its best from unspoiled coastlines with towering sea stacks and colorful tidal pools to fern-filled rainforests with towering, moss-draped trees to glacier-topped peaks including Mount Olympus. This experience, hosted by Bruce Gourley and John Pierce, includes whale watching, historic lighthouses and Lewis & Clark's end-of-the-trail sites.

Excellent coastal lodging and delicious meals add to the memorable small-group experience. Personal attention, knowledgeable hosts, enjoyable interaction, inspiring moments and unique opportunities are the marks of Nurturing Faith Experiences. Optional activities for those desiring more or less physical activity.

**Full itinerary and registration
information at nurturing-faith.net/experiences**

Featuring Washington's Olympic National Park and Oregon's Cannon Beach — two of the "50 Most Beautiful Places in the World" according to National Geographic



COST: \$3,800 person (double occupancy) includes all food, lodging, activities, ground transportation, hospitality and programming — from airport arrival until departure. Participants are responsible for their own travel to and from Portland International Airport [Add \$1,000 for a single person without a roommate.]

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

Leaders come to peace with the pruning

BY LES HOLLON

Nine years ago the Spirit whispered to me, “Trust me. I am calling you to Trinity. And I will prune you.” Pain, not pleasure, seemed to control the pruning metaphor of John 15:2. Because it was a Jesus teaching, I said “yes” to the pruning by moving from Louisville to San Antonio.

This is a good calling, and I’ve come to peace with the pruning. The two are inseparable. Pruning is the ongoing work of being a called leader.



We must grow to help others grow.

Which is why Jesus included the second half of the 15:2 dictum. He prunes the branch so that it will be even more fruitful. Producing more of God’s promise in our world and in people means that more of God must be at work in the leader.

Our false sense of self must be uprooted. Our ego must be strong and healthy by the awareness that life includes us but is not just about us. God’s pruning ways include:

1) **LISTENING through prayer.** Sometimes I’ll pray for minutes on end without any sense of connecting to God. Then the Spirit seems to prune with, “Okay now that you’ve prayed out your agenda, are you ready just to be with me?” Early Christians called this *kenosis*, the emptying of oneself before God. This detaches us from our personal agendas

long enough to be refined by spiritual examination.

2) **TALKING *with*, not just *to* people.** Receive affirmation and criticism with equal humility. The good is not to puff up the ego but to encourage you to stay true. The criticism is food for thought. Stand in the shoes of the critic to grasp the truth of their message and to let go of the sting. Be pruned by applying the truth and discarding the “noise.”

3) **CREATING Q & A sessions.** At the end of your presentations in meetings, don’t walk away until you’ve asked for responses. Your willingness conveys transparency that in turn builds trust. Some people will sharpen your perspective and be a needed reality check. Others will feel heard and therefore included. Those bent on just being troublemakers will expose themselves. Be pruned by conversation.

4) **MEDITATING on Scripture.** The apostle Paul’s admonition to Timothy connects us to a needed practice: seeing that Scripture is God’s inspired pruning message for “profit, correction, and instruction in righteousness.” Spend time in the Word so your words will be worthy.

5) **SMILING when you hear your predecessor’s name.** My three predecessors at Trinity were strong personalities and very gifted. Be encouraged that you are included in the conversation. Be pruned by letting others be praised. Celebrate in the part of their work that still helps the church today. Remember

that one day you will be a predecessor.

6) **FEELING the needs of people.** Ultimately leadership and ministry are about relationships. Be available for people to connect with you. Visit in their homes, workplaces, or over coffee or by texting, phone and emails. We must prune our schedules for solitude and community. By crying and laughing with people, we are pruned by their hurts and hopes.

7) **STUDYING best practices and discerning transferable principles.** We build on the best of what we know by learning what we need to know but don’t yet comprehend. Be pruned of ignorance. Let a child teach you technology. Let an older person teach you wisdom. Read to learn. Listen to podcasts for growth. Ask your peers how they do what they do. Be the best version of yourself by learning from the best of others.

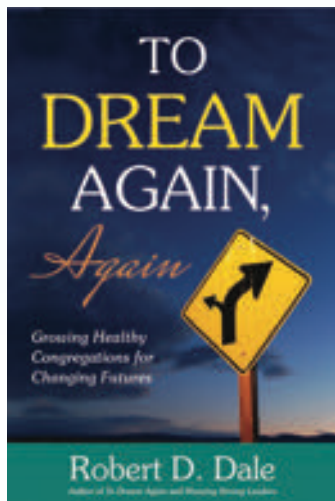
8) **MENTORING the next generation.** Be pruned of feeling irreplaceable. Build your legacy one day at a time by daily investing in others. Help others to surpass you. Be smart about it. Don’t give away what is yours to do from the uniqueness of who you are. But don’t cling to opportunities to be shared with others so they can thrive and the gospel can win. Be generous.

Pruning is yielding to God’s best so we can be our best. The pain is temporary. The pleasure is eternal. **NFJ**

—Les Hollon is pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas.



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—George Mason, Pastor
Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

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The church as a foretaste of the kingdom

By John R. Franke

In addition to its calling to be a sign and instrument of the kingdom of God, the church is sent into the world by Jesus (John 20:21) to be the dwelling place of the Spirit as a foretaste of that kingdom.

The Spirit is given to the church to empower it for participation in God's mission to establish a new community that transcends the divisions that so easily divide and cause hostility and suspicion among human beings made in God's image.

The letter to the Ephesians asserts that the establishment of this inclusive community is part of the eternal purpose of God in order to establish peace in the world. God "has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:9-10).

This plan for the fullness of time is nothing less than a divine peace mission to humanity intended to bring unity to that which is currently scattered and fragmented in order to restore harmony to creation. It is the power of God working through Christ and the church, which is intended by God to be a foretaste of the future cosmic peace and harmony envisioned by God from the beginning.

For this reason, unity is of paramount importance in the church as the foretaste of God's intention to bring peace and harmony to the world:

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:1-6).



A central feature of this new community gathered together in the name of Jesus is corporate worship. In the worship of God, the community comes together as one body and declares its adoration of God and thankfulness for the gifts of faith, hope and love as well as its dependence on God for its witness in the world.

Worship is a central element of the witness of the church to the reign of God in the world. As the church gathers together in worship, we celebrate God's presence, share concerns, pray, and seek the strength to continue on in faithful witness. As such, worship is a fundamental expression of the mission of the church and not an activity separate from that mission.

Worship is a part of the comprehensive calling for which the church has been sent into the world to bear witness in thought, word and deed to the love of God for the world. In this way the church is a foretaste of the vision from Rev. 7:9-10 in which "a great multitude that no one could count,

from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" stands before God and gives thanks in worship and praise for the salvation of God in Jesus Christ.

Through a new life together of interdependent relationality and corporate worship, the church bears witness to a new world that finds its coherence in the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ and attested by the power of the Spirit. This life is a foretaste of the world as it is willed to be by God.

However, the world as God wills it to be is not a present reality, but rather lies in the eschatological future. Hence, Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9-10).

This is a prayer to bring into being a new reality when God will put everything right and order the cosmos in accordance with the intentions of creation. Because this future reality is God's determined will for creation, as that which cannot be shaken (Heb. 12:26-28), it is far more real, objective and actual than the present world, which is even now passing away (1 Cor. 7:31).

The church in the present is called to be a foretaste of the manifestation of this future eschatological reality for which we live, work, hope and pray — a provisional demonstration of God's will in which all of creation finds its connectedness in Jesus Christ (Col. 1:17). **NFJ**

—John R. Franke, theologian in residence at Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis and general coordinator of the Gospel and Our Culture Network, is helping shape the Jesus Worldview Initiative for Nurturing Faith.

Unless we stop saying 'unless'

Here am I, Lord, send me...

Unless it's to Africa or the Middle East or some other faraway place. After all, God, I don't know the language or the culture. And what about my safety? Some of these places are dangerous.



Here am I, Lord, send me...

Unless it's to the hospital to visit the sick or the hospice facility to visit the dying. You know how heart-broken it makes me feel seeing this kind of suffering, Lord. It's too hard to look into the eyes of those who are hurting and not know what to say or how to act.

Here am I, Lord, send me...

Unless it's to my neighbors across the street whose political banner is waving proudly for the "wrong" person. God, clearly we don't see eye to eye. What kind of people must they be to have voted that way?

Here am I, Lord, send me...

Unless it's to the one who acts out in rebellion, the one who is in prison, the one who curses up a storm, the one who is a different ethnicity or economic demographic. God, who am I to talk with "those" people? What would I say? Besides, they wouldn't listen to someone like me; it would be a complete waste of my time.

Here am I, Lord, send me...unless.

Isn't this how we often approach God? We say we want to do God's will. We say we want to serve. But if we're completely honest, "unless" is a significant part of the equation.

We want to serve ... unless it's hard.

We want to serve ... unless it's uncomfortable.

We want to serve ... unless it's inconvenient.

We want to serve ... unless it involves change.

We want to serve ... unless it stretches us.

We want to serve ... unless it requires sacrifice.


We need to remember that we will never live as God intended "unless" we are willing to surrender our entire life. We will never know God's full abundance nor a true measure of God's peace "unless" we are willing to follow God with all our heart.

This means going where God wants us to go, serving as God wants us to serve, and loving as God wants us to love.

Here am I, Lord, send me. Period.

—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 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 



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Inspired Creativity

Gracia a Dios por gente amable (Thank God for kind people)

By Brett Younger

A month ago two of our favorite people visited from Texas. We loved having them here, but they are *really* friendly. That they are not New Yorkers was most evident on the subway.

Our friends get on the train, sit across from each other, and begin a conversation. At first they talk about how much fun it is to ride the subway, so I nod my silent approval, but then they start talking about the president. We are in Manhattan, so their liberal opinions are probably safe to share, but just to be careful I act like I do not know them.

New Yorkers have good reasons not to talk in the subway. When this many people live this close together, we need to give each other space. Etiquette is different in a city of eight million. We spend lots of time in small boxes filled with people. We avoid unnecessary contact, conversation and interaction.

We have our own ways of being friendly. We give up our seat to pregnant women. We do not hold hands when we walk on a narrow sidewalk. When we are next to the buttons on the elevator, we decide quickly if there is room for another person. We do not get to the front of the line without knowing exactly what we want. We do not stare at celebrities. We stay out of everyone's way.

But sometimes we wonder what we lose when we ignore one another. What do we miss when we stop making eye contact? Is it possible that being kind is more important than we realize?

Shortly after we moved to Brooklyn, I became addicted. I started small — one every now and then — but it is five days a week now. I go each morning to the cart at a nearby subway station for an iced coffee.



The first day I got in line behind a person who ordered in Spanish. I do not like to brag, but I had two years of high school Spanish, so I decided to show off, “*Café helado, por favor.*”

A kind but seemingly gullible young woman said, “You speak Spanish.”

I lied, “*Si.*”

This became our routine. Each morning I tried to say something in Spanish, and she pretended I said it correctly.

“*¿Cuándo empiezas a trabajar?*” (When do you start work?)

“*Tres en punto.*”

I understood that was three o'clock in the morning, but did not know the Spanish word for horrible, so I rolled my eyes. I later learned that the word is *horrible*.

The next day I asked, “*¿Qué hora es más concurrida?*” (What time is busiest?)

“*Seis y media.*”

I thought it was 6:30, but I was not sure, so I rolled my eyes again. Rolling my eyes became my go-to move when I did not know what to say.

“*Gracias por perdonar mi Español.*” (Thank you for forgiving my Spanish.)

“*Tu acento es bueno.*” (Your accent is good.)

We both knew this was not true, but it was kind.

Her mother-in-law, who also works at the cart, is not as forgiving.

Once on a hot day, I looked up “Stay cool” on Google Translate and said, “*Mantenerse fresco.*”

Joanna replied, “Nobody says that.”

One afternoon when the cart was not there, I went to a coffee shop and ordered a “*café helado.*”

The man behind the counter said, “I’m from the Philippines.”

When I got back to my regular barista I asked, “*¿Te gusta tu trabajo?*” (Do you like your job?)

She said, “I am going to night school to study engineering.”

“That’s great.”

She knows exactly how I like my coffee — too much cream, too much sugar. A couple of times when there was a long line, I got a clandestine gesture inviting me to the edge of the counter where I was handed a surreptitious coffee — which made me feel like a big deal.

I would estimate we have had 200 short conversations. None of them have been dramatic. They did not seem significant.

Two weeks ago my friend said, “This is my last day. I got an engineering internship.”

“I’m happy for you. I hope it’s wonderful.”

“Thank you. I will miss you.”

I said, “I will miss you, too.”

I teared up a little, because it was true. So many people make us feel unimportant. The ones who treat us with kindness are gifts from God. **NFJ**

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



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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- > The updated Nurturing Faith web site (nurturingfaith.net) provides a fresh look and easy access to the Teaching Resources to support these Weekly Lessons. Subscribers may log into the online resources (video overview, lesson plans, Digging Deeper, Hardest Question) by using the password.
- > Simply click the “Teachers” button in the orange bar at the very top of the homepage. This will take you to where you enter the November password (**teach**) or the December password (**grateful**) and access the Teaching Resources. You will find the current password on page 21 (this page) in each issue of the journal for use by subscribers only.



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.

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Thanks, sponsors! These Bible studies for adults and youth are sponsored through generous gifts from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation. Thank you!

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 4, 2018

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Remembering Always

The Old Testament contains many notable passages. If asked to name some of our favorite texts, we might come up with familiar ones like the creation stories in Genesis 1–2, comforting poems such as Psalm 23, or prophetic promises like Isaiah 53.

If you were challenged to choose one passage from the Old Testament as a guide for life, rather than a more sentimental favorite, what would it be? It's hard to choose a better text than the challenging charge credited to Moses in Deuteronomy 6:1-9. At its heart is what came to be known as "the Great Commandment," and there is good reason for the name.

A pivotal command (vv. 1-3)

The book of Deuteronomy probably came into its final form in the early sixth century. Although it addresses issues that didn't arise until long after Moses, it purports to record a series of sermons given by the great hero as he and those who had survived the wilderness were about to enter the land of promise.


The first three chapters comprise a summary reminder of how God had mercifully delivered Israel from Egypt

*"O Israel: The LORD is our God,
the LORD alone." (Deut. 6:4)*

through a series of mighty works, called Israel into a special covenant relationship, and saw them safely through the wilderness despite their frequent rebellions, complaints, and lack of faith.

Moses knew, according to the last few verses of chapter 3, that he would not be allowed to lead Israel into Canaan, but before he turned things over to Joshua, he was determined to have the last word – actually many, many words. At least, that's how the later narrator portrays the scene.

Having set the stage, Moses embarked on a reminder of Israel's covenant obligations to God, including a repetition of the Ten Commandments in chapter 5, slightly revised from the version found in Exodus 20.

Chapter 6 begins a lengthy exposition of how the Israelites were to live out the covenant in daily life through obedience to a growing list of "commandments," "statutes," and "ordinances" (v. 1). 

The central tenet of Deuteronomy is expressed in the next verse – that Moses' hearers and their descendants were to remember and pass on these commands, so they would learn to "fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long" (v. 2).


The writer's reputation for repetition and wordiness is evident here, but also his primary concern: "that your days may be long."

The Deuteronomist believed that God and Israel lived in a transactional, *quid pro quo* relationship: as long as the people proved faithful, God would bless them with health, wealth, victory in battle, and long lives. In contrast, disobedience would lead to disease, poverty, defeat, and death. To see this spelled out in great detail, read Deuteronomy 28 – and note that promises of blessings for obedience (vv. 1-14) are dwarfed by the threats of punishment for disobedience (vv. 15-68).

In such a system, it would be imperative for those who sought prosperity to listen closely and observe the commands with great diligence, "so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you" (v. 3).

An all-encompassing love (vv. 4-5)

This brings us to v. 4, the "Great Commandment" that would later be interpreted by the rabbis as a directive to be recited twice every day. The command became known as the "*Shema*" (pronounced "sheh-MA"), after the first word in the Hebrew text.

Shema is an imperative form of the verb meaning "to hear," or "to listen," but its meaning is not limited to auditory reception. Biblical Hebrew has no special word meaning "to obey," but routinely uses the verb *sham'a* for both "hear" and "obey." 

The *Shema* begins with these formidable words: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD (is) our God, the LORD alone" (NRSV, v. 4), or optionally, "the LORD is one" (NIV 11, HCSB).

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It is likely that the verse is not so much about monotheism as it intends to stress Israel's call to worship Yahweh exclusively.

Israel was not only to acknowledge Yahweh alone, but also to actively live into the belief that God had called them into covenant: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (v. 5).

Several significant words cry out for exposition. The word for "love" could have sentimental overtones, but often it primarily indicated loyalty. In ancient Near Eastern treaty language, vassal states were to "love" the liege who had just conquered them. Obviously, a triumphant king could not command warm feelings from people his armies had defeated, but he could demand loyalty.

One would hope that God's people might have feelings of affection toward the God who has loved and redeemed them, but there are times when we may be angry with God, confused by life and unsure of what lies ahead. Even when we don't feel warmly toward God, however, we are called to be loyal.

And how are we to express that love? With our hearts, our souls, and our might (NRSV). The Hebrews did not consider the heart to be the seat of emotions, but of the will. It is the heart that perceives, understands, and decides. When our English translations render Deut. 29:4 (Heb. v. 3) as "the LORD has not given you a mind to understand," the word translated "mind" is *lēb*, the word for heart. Citations in the New Testament add the word "mind" in deference to Greek thought (Matt. 22:38, Mark 12:30).

To love God with all one's heart is to be fully committed to God's way, making decisions based on what we believe is the divine desire for us.

The word "soul" is misleading if we think of it in the later Greek sense of an inner spirit separate from the body. The Hebrew word is *nephesh*, and it really means "life," the essence of one's vitality. The creation account of Genesis 2 says that when God breathed into the man's nostrils the breath of life, he "became a living being" – a *nephesh chayah*. We are to love God with the fullness of our being. 📖

The third challenge is to love God with all of our "might." The Hebrew word is *m'ōd*, a word whose basic meaning is "muchness." 📖 Our abilities, our talents, our energy, and our ability to act – along with our resources – are all elements of our "muchness," our "might." We are different people, with different interests, abilities, energy levels, and financial resources – yet all of us are called to employ all of our "muchness" in showing love and loyalty to God. 📖

A daily reminder (vv. 6-9)

We can only follow the "Great Commandment" if we remember it, and future generations will know it only if we teach it to them – thus the instruction to "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart" (v. 6), and to "Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (v. 7).

Love and faithfulness to God are not exercises for certain times and certain places only. We are not to exercise our mind, life, and muchness on Sunday mornings alone, but to imbed them in our hearts and live them out at all times and in all places, teaching our children to do the same.

Verses 7-8, probably intended as a metaphor but taken literally by many Orthodox and other observant Jews,

calls for binding the commands as a sign on one's hand and forehead, while also writing them "on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (vv. 8-9).

The command calls to mind Prov. 6:20-22, which instructs a son to keep his parents' teachings: "Bind them upon your heart always," and "tie them around your neck."

Orthodox Jewish men keep with them special aids to prayer when repeating the Shema each weekday morning; not only a prayer shawl (*tallit*), but also small leather boxes called *tefillin* (also called phylacteries). The boxes contain small scrolls with biblical texts written by a scribe. 📖

One is bound around the head so that it sits on the forehead. The other is tied around the upper left arm, with long leather strips laced seven times around the arm and in a symbolic pattern around the fingers. Along with these prayer aids, the worshipers often bob back and forth while praying as a reminder to pray with their whole body – with all their "muchness."

Even unobservant Jews typically indicate their heritage by mounting a *mezuzah* on the doorframe of their houses: hotels typically mount one outside each guest room as well. *Mezuzahs* can be simple or elaborate, and fashioned of wood, metal, or ceramic.

Traditionally, *mezuzahs* are always mounted at a slight angle, rather than straight up and down, to indicate that we are all crooked before God.

Tying on *tefillin* or mounting a *mezuzah* is not difficult: what is hard is living the kind of life that declares genuine love for God, a love expressed through every aspect of our being. Our faith should not require the wearing of badges or labels, but should be evident in our daily lives.

How's that working out in *your* life? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 11, 2018

1 Kings 17:1-24

Doing Faith

The prophet Elijah was a character – but maybe not your favorite character. He shows up in 1–2 Kings as a transitional figure, not like the frenetic bands of ecstatic prophets that Saul was known to join (1 Sam. 10:9-13, 19:18-24), or the calmer prophets Nathan and Gad who advised David. Elijah was more like Samuel – occasionally irascible and prone to anger when things didn't go his way, even capable of considerable violence (1 Sam. 15:32-33; 1 Kgs. 18:40, 19:1).

Both occasionally spoke of things to come, but mainly stood up for Yahweh, preaching sermons that called the people of Israel to faithfulness. And, both were also known as agents of miraculous works, especially Elijah. ↓

Knowing his reputation, you might have wanted to keep your distance from Elijah, but today's text is the story of a poor woman who showed no fear of him, and even dared to confront him. She already felt near death, and had little to lose by entertaining the prophet who just might have the power to save her life. ↓

Drought for a king (vv. 1-7)

First Kings 17 records Elijah's first appearance in scripture, as he came

*"For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth."
(1 Kgs. 17:14)*

full-blown onto the scene as a rustic prophet who dared to challenge King Ahab with a strongly worded oath, declaring that the rains and even morning dew would cease until he gave the word (v. 1).

Interestingly, the narrator does not immediately describe Elijah as a prophet or a "man of God," but only as "Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead." Elijah's identity is found in his name *'eli-yahu*, which means "My God is Yahweh." Confirmation of his identity as a Yahweh's prophet would be revealed by his actions, not by means of a title.

At this point in the story, we know little more about Ahab, who was introduced at the end of the previous chapter. The narrator's summary judgment insists that he was a wicked king who had married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon, and allowed her to promote the worship of Baal, sacred to her people. Ahab had reportedly built a temple to Baal and erected a sacred pole to Asherah, acts that should be anathema to a worshiper of Yahweh (16:29-34).

If Ahab recognized Elijah or offered any response, we don't know what it was, because the next verse declares that "the word of the LORD" sent Elijah to hide out by a brook called "Cherith," a tributary of the Jordan. We no longer know the location, but the word "*kerith*" means "cutting," and it

probably refers to a deep ravine cut by seasonal rains. Several such ravines are found along the Jordan valley, and any one of them would have provided an ideal, isolated place for Elijah to hide from the angry king. ↓

Searchers would not have expected that anyone could survive in such rugged surroundings, but Yahweh appointed ravens to bring him food, and Elijah did not have to emerge from hiding until the brook eventually ran dry (17:2-7).

Food for a prophet (vv. 8-16)

Acting again on "the word of the LORD," Elijah left the brook and hiked a considerable distance north and west to a town called Zarephath, located near the coastal city of Sidon, north of Israel proper and within the kingdom of Jezebel's father (vv. 8-9).

We learn later that Ahab and Jezebel had sought diligently for Elijah during the period of the drought, even into foreign lands (18:10), but had been unable to find him. Jezebel would have been particularly aggravated to know that her nemesis had relocated near her own hometown.

No one would expect to find Elijah staying in the home of a poor Phoenician widow – including the widow herself, who was taken aback by Elijah's sudden appearance and request for food and water (vv. 10-11). The NRSV translation implies that Elijah was brusque and demanding, but the Hebrew construction suggests a more polite query, on the order of "Would you please give me a little water in a cup?" and "Would you please bring me a handful of bread?"

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Elijah asked for very little. Unfortunately, that's all the woman had: Elijah met the poor widow as she was gathering a bit of firewood to prepare a final meager hoecake for herself and her son before the last of her flour and oil was gone.

It seemed that Elijah had left a location with food but no water only to find a place with water but no food. Once again, a miracle would be required if he was to find sustenance.

The widow did not hesitate to fetch Elijah a drink, but was slower to comply with his request for bread. She explained the pitiful state of her vanishing resources (v. 12),^U but Elijah challenged her to feed him first nevertheless, promising that her paltry supply of grain and oil would last for as long as the drought, not failing until the rains returned and she could replenish her larder with grain (vv. 13-14).

How would you have responded to such a request, however polite? Elijah would no doubt have looked like an unkempt oddball after his long trek. A widow living near Sidon would not be expected to worship Yahweh (the LORD) or look after Yahweh's prophet, though God told Elijah that the woman had been instructed to provide for him. Why should she trust this strange man?

But why should she not? The story implies that the poor widow and her son were down to their last piece of bread, with no other prospect than starvation beyond. As wild and crazy as Elijah's request may have seemed, it did offer a breath of hope, and that was more than the woman had before. So, we read, "she went and did as Elijah said," and Elijah's prediction proved true, so that he lived with the widow and her son "for many days" and the story declares that all of them had bread to eat for the entire time (vv. 15-17).^U

Life for a son (vv. 17-24)

Like v. 7, v. 17 jumps forward in time. Elijah had dwelt with the widow and her son for an unknown period when tragedy struck: the boy grew ill and died. Yahweh's provision of grain and oil through Elijah's presence had extended the boy's life and filled the woman with hope that the child would not starve – but he died anyway!^U

In her grief, the woman turned to Elijah with a sharp accusation. She called him a "man of God," but implicitly accused him of being complicit in her son's death. "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" (v. 18).

The primary theology running through the Old Testament (and still common in many minds today) is that God gives people what they deserve, especially when they sin. The woman spoke as if Elijah's presence had drawn God's attention to her shortcomings, causing God to kill her son as punishment for her failures.

Notice how Elijah responded: instead of defending himself, he took the boy from her and carried him upstairs, an action some commentators think may symbolize movement toward a higher sphere, where the prophet could commune more directly with God (v. 19).^U

Once there, Elijah laid the boy on a bed and cried out to God in strong language, using words very similar to those of the woman: "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" (v. 20).

With this action we see the dual roles of the prophet: he speaks God's word to the people, but he also speaks the people's words to God. Like the widow, Elijah believed God was

responsible for the boy's death, and he didn't understand why God would respond to the poor woman's hospitality so cruelly (v. 20).

Elijah's action of prostrating himself upon the boy appears to be a symbolic effort to transfer some of his own living vitality to the lifeless body of the widow's son, like a modern medic administering CPR to someone in cardiac arrest. Again he prayed, but more respectfully and indirectly: "Yahweh, my God, please let the life of this boy return within him" (a literal translation of v. 21).

God's response is reported in indirect fashion. The text doesn't say something like "So God brought the child back to life," but "The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived" (v. 22).

As Elijah carried the child back downstairs to his mother, we're reminded that the boy had returned to the land of the living, to ordinary life, much to the delight of his mother (v. 23).

If we expect the mother to be overflowing with gratitude, however, we will be disappointed. The narrator has a different focus in mind, so he fashions her words to affirm that "now I know you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth" (v. 24).^U

This story holds a challenge for us. Though we may occasionally have the opportunity and ability to save someone's life, it is rarely through a miracle. That doesn't mean we should not aspire to be more like Elijah, however.

Do our words and actions lead others to think of us as a man or woman of God, as one through whom God may speak, as one who can be trusted to speak truth? Who are the poor widows to whom God has called us to minister, and what do they have to say about us? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 18, 2018

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Singing Joy

Have you ever been moved to write poetry? Some experiences are so powerful, emotional, or memorable that they cry out for something more than prose. We may feel moved to write poetry when crushed by grief, when flushed with love, or when awestruck by the grandeur of nature.

This is no new phenomenon, for the ancients also marked meaningful moments with poetry, including the Hebrews. The Bible is loaded with poetry, from the joyous praise and mournful laments of the psalms, to the pathos of Job's soliloquies, the pithiness of the Proverbs, the bitter groans of Lamentations, and the hearth-throbbing rush of young love in the Song of Songs.

Hebrew prophets preached in poetic oracles, and narrative storytellers often had their characters break forth in song. Such is the case with Hannah in our text for today, and if anyone ever had reason for lyrical exultation, it was Hannah.

When joy erupts (vv. 1-3)

Hannah's story begins with hardship and sorrow (1 Samuel 1). The story is set sometime in the 11th century,

"There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God." (1 Sam. 2:2)

BCE, as the Israelites were still getting settled in the land.

Hannah was first in order of marriage and first in her husband Elkanah's affections – but sadly unable to bear children in a culture that valued women largely by their fecundity. Despite his love for Hannah, Elkanah took a second wife in hopes of fathering children.

Peninnah soon bore several children to Elkanah, though it was clear that Hannah remained his favorite. Stung by jealousy, Peninnah flaunted her children and taunted Hannah with cruel barbs.

Hannah's misery reached a breaking point during a worship festival at Shiloh. Refusing to eat or be consoled, she went to the temple and fell prostrate, sobbing heavily as she swore a solemn vow that if Yahweh would grant her a son, she would devote the boy to God's service for life. ⚓

God answered the prayer and Hannah soon conceived, giving birth to a son she named "Samuel," meaning "heard of God." Hannah had prayed, and God heard.

After Samuel had been weaned, probably near his third birthday, Hannah and Elkanah returned to Shiloh, where they offered a valuable three-year-old bull to be sacrificed – and presented young Samuel to remain and serve with Eli in the temple. ⚓

One would think that leaving her long-sought son behind would present an occasion for sadness and mourn-

ing for Hannah, and any of us would imagine that she left Shiloh in a somber mood – but for the narrator it was a moment of victory and fulfillment.

To emphasize the triumphant theme, the narrator inserted an ebullient psalm of praise that he attributed to Hannah. In truth, the psalm probably originated much later, likely in royal circles, but the narrator thought it a fitting way to commemorate Hannah's triumph over childlessness while also foreshadowing future developments in Israel's life (see "The Hardest Question" online for more).

While Hannah may never have sung this song, we will approach the text with an appreciation for the role it plays as presented to us. As we have it, Hannah not only sings, but sings both powerfully and prophetically. ⚓

The narrator knew that Hannah's child one day would become prophet and priest to Israel, a king-maker and a king-breaker. As such, he has her sing of enemies, victories, and the ascendancy of God's anointed king. She sings of Yahweh as one who reverses fortunes, not just for individuals, but for nations. Yahweh guides Israel and gives the people victory, so long as they remain faithful. That message would become a common theme of Samuel's preaching.

Like other songs in the Hebrew Bible, the "Song of Hannah" is a prayer (v. 1) composed as poetry. ⚓ In form, it is similar to psalms characterized as "Hymns of Praise." ⚓

The song begins in first person: Hannah "exults in the LORD" and derides her enemies because God has granted her victory (v 1). Read as Hannah's song, "my enemies" would

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be a reference to her rival Peninnah, who had sneered at Hannah's childlessness. In the larger context, it could refer to any of Israel's enemies.

The song then declares Yahweh's uniqueness in three ways: "There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God" (v. 2). The reference to God as a rock is reminiscent of a psalm attributed to David in 2 Samuel 22, also found as Psalm 18.

In v. 3, the singer then instructs all who speak arrogantly to cease their proud talk before Yahweh, who knows and weighs all actions. Before bragging about the things we've done or the plans we've made, it's important to remember that God has the last word.

When fortunes are reversed (vv. 4-8)

The next section highlights a "reversal of fortune" theme. The singer declares that the weapons of the mighty will be broken while the feeble grow strong; that those who were full will go begging for bread while the hungry grow fat with plunder; and that a once-barren woman would bear seven children, while the mother of many would be bereaved.

Only the last of these seems to match Hannah's situation: though previously childless, she bore three sons and two daughters in addition to Samuel (1 Sam. 2:21). "Seven" was often used to indicate completeness, so it should not trouble the reader that Hannah had only six children; the point is that she was blessed with children by virtue of divine assistance.

We should not assume that Hannah was vindictive and wanted Peninnah to suffer the loss of her children, and there is no indication elsewhere that her rival was bereaved, but we recall that the song is really about far more than Hannah: it is a hymn about God's

power and potential blessings to Israel.

The "reversal of fortune" theme continues in vv. 6-8, but with the reversals specifically credited to Yahweh. Yahweh has the power to kill and make alive, to send someone to Sheol or bring them back. ♣ God can make people rich or poor, ignored or exalted, lifting even the poorest from the ashes to sit among royalty – a possible foreshadowing of David's rise from shepherding to kingship.

God is able to do this, the song says, because "the pillars of the earth are Yahweh's, and on them he has set the world" (v. 8b). Though the translation of "pillars" is uncertain, the claim is clear: God created the world and has full power over it. ♣

When salvation comes (vv. 9-10)

The closing section reflects a primary theme of the Deuteronomistic History, to which the books of Samuel belong: God protects and blesses the faithful, but punishes the wicked. The song declares that God prevails in the end, not human might.

The final verse contains the most obvious anachronism of the poem: it speaks of how God "will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed" (v. 10). Hannah's son would grow up to anoint the first two kings of Israel, but when Hannah brought the boy to Shiloh, there was no king in Israel. ♣

Within its context, Hannah's song reminds all readers that God is great and powerful enough to create the world and rule over it in every way – and yet also compassionate enough to care about barren women, uncertain soldiers, and the poorest of the land.

While those who are oppressed may sometimes feel their situation is hopeless, Hannah's song is a reminder that God can reverse the fortunes of

the downtrodden, raising the righteous to replace the wicked in places of wealth and power.

The song is a hymn of hope to those who are abused and mistreated in every generation, a reminder that God has a special concern for the poor, the homeless, and the hungry. A cursory reading of the New Testament shows that Jesus demonstrated these concerns in his own life and ministry.

The Gospel of Luke, for example, emphasizes Jesus' special care for women (5:38-39; 8:2-3, 43-48), the poor (6:20-21), and the oppressed (5:12-14, 17-26; 8:26-39). Matthew preserves a tradition that Jesus taught his disciples to extend appropriate compassion to the hungry, the sick, and the imprisoned (ch. 25).

A movement known as "Liberation Theology" has its roots precisely here: a belief that God is on the side of the world's poor and oppressed, has not forgotten their plight, and will ultimately lift them up.

The stories we find in the books of Samuel show how God's concern for the downtrodden could take the direct form of blessing a barren woman, or the more indirect avenue of calling out leaders and empowering them to defeat those who oppressed the Israelites.

In the same manner, Jesus often touched people directly, but also commissioned his followers to become channels of divine compassion. We are called to share the love of Jesus with people on every part of the social and economic spectrum, but give special attention to seeking justice for those who cannot compete within a system that is rigged in favor of the rich and powerful.

Concern for the poor might make us unpopular in some political circles, but we can take comfort in knowing that Jesus himself would fare no better. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 25, 2018

Daniel 7:1-28

Dreaming Hope

The Bible contains a number of stories that may strike modern readers as just plain weird, and today's text is one of them. Why would the committee behind the Revised Common Lectionary choose Daniel's beastly vision of successively sorry kings for the final Sunday in the church year?

Perhaps it can serve as a fitting reminder that human governments are always susceptible to hijacking by kings, presidents, or prime ministers whose power is matched only by their corruption and megalomania. The failure of human leaders – especially the arrogant “horn” described by Daniel – is an appropriate lead-in to the new church year and the season of Advent, which celebrates the coming of Jesus as the kind of king humankind truly needs.

As strange as this text may seem, it is a helpful reminder that political powers come and go, but the world is ultimately in the hands of God. 📖

One book, two parts

The book of Daniel appears among the prophets in Protestant Bibles, and its presumptive setting is in Babylon during and after the period of the exile in the sixth century BCE. It is most

“To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.” (Dan. 7:14)

likely, however, that the book was one of the last of the Old Testament books to be composed. 📖 📖

The first six chapters of Daniel are narrative stories about how Daniel and his friends heroically remained true to God despite both temptation and danger. In chapters 7-12, Daniel's friends no longer appear, and earthly kings are no longer portrayed as ignorant people who repent and praise God once they see the error of their ways, but as evil monsters.

These chapters belong to a particular form of writing that we know as “apocalyptic,” which arose in times of severe persecution when the present situation seemed beyond repair and the only hope lay in a new age to come. 📖

Four beasts, one terror (vv. 1-8, 15-28)

Chapter 7 begins with a third-person report that Daniel “had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed,” and wrote them down. From here on, the text is presented as Daniel's first-person speech.

The visions overlap with the earlier stories. The first reportedly takes place during the reign of Belshazzar, the protagonist of chapter 5, where he appears as a wicked and wasteful king who finally “sees the handwriting on

the wall” and is found lacking. 📖

Daniel's night vision began with an image of “the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea” (v. 2), a traditional symbol of chaos, untamed and opposed to God's divine order. Out of the sea came “four great beasts,” each different from the other (v. 3). It soon becomes obvious that the four beasts, like the four parts of Nebuchadnezzar's visionary image in chapter 2, represent four successive kingdoms.

The first beast had the appearance of a lion that appeared with eagle's wings. It soon lost its wings, however, stood upright, and was given the mind of a human (v. 4). The lion was regarded as “the king of beasts” and the eagle as lord of the air, so this appears to symbolize the Babylonian empire as the greatest, like the “head of gold” in Nebuchadnezzar's vision (2:37-38). 📖

The second beast had the appearance of a bear raised up as if to attack, and it was instructed to “Arise, devour many bodies!” (v. 5). The NRSV says the bear had “three tusks” among its teeth, but a more likely translation is “three ribs,” as if the bear had been feasting already before being instructed to devour more.

This beast represents the Medes, who the author(s) of Daniel incorrectly thought preceded the Persians in conquering Babylon. The Median empire conquered several other kingdoms, including Assyria, just north of Babylon. The Medes, however, were conquered by the Persians before Cyrus led his army to defeat Nabonidus' forces at Opis and Sippar, then marched into Babylon unhindered.

The third beast was like a leopard,

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with “four wings of a bird on its back and four heads, and dominion was given to it” (v. 6).

Here we have the Persian empire. Some think the four heads represent the four Persian kings remembered by the Hebrews, while others propose we are to think of the four points of the compass, since “dominion was given to it,” and the Persian empire covered most of the known world.

The fourth beast, unlike the first three, did not resemble any known animal. It was “terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong,” with “great iron teeth” that enabled it to devour enemies, break them into pieces, and trample them. Moreover, the beast was adorned with 10 horns (v. 7).

In the ancient Near East, horns were symbols of power. As Daniel considered the meaning of the horns, he saw three of them “plucked up by the roots” and replaced by a smaller horn – but one that had both eyes and a mouth that spoke with great arrogance (v. 8).

The 10 horns represent an assortment of Greek rulers, though their specific identity is not entirely clear. The Greeks came to power under Alexander the Great, who won his pivotal battle at Ipsus in 333 BCE, and conquered Palestine the following year.

Alexander died soon after, and control over Greek territories in the Middle East was divided between four generals, who fought each other until two gained priority: Ptolemy controlled Egypt and Palestine, while Seleucus controlled Mesopotamia. By the early second century BCE, the Seleucids under Antiochus III (the Great) had taken control of Palestine.

The most notorious Seleucid ruler, the little horn with the arrogant mouth (v. 8), was Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a ruthless king who gained control in 175 and tried to solidify his rule by imposing the worship of Zeus on all

his subjects, including the Hebrews. In 167, he famously profaned the Jerusalem temple by reportedly sacrificing a pig to Zeus and forcing Jewish leaders to eat it or face mutilation and death. 🇺🇸

The horn’s arrogant speech represents his decrees that Judaism be outlawed. Though reportedly prophesied hundreds of years previously, these chapters reflect the brutal and horrific reign of Antiochus IV as a means of encouraging suffering Hebrews to remain faithful.

We note that all of the world-controlling beasts, and especially the last one, are portrayed as evil, arising from chaos, and opposed to God’s order. Thus, this chapter’s original readers were encouraged to see themselves as participants in a great cosmic struggle as old as creation itself. This reframing of their situation might give comfort or encouragement to people who could take some pride in believing that their struggles and suffering were part of a much larger picture.

Judgment and dominion (vv. 9-14)

Having set the stage with a vision of evil progressively taking over the world, the author shifts in vv. 9-10 to a heavenly throne room where “one like an ancient of days” sits on a fiery-wheeled chariot not unlike what Ezekiel saw (Ezekiel 1, 10). The imagery portrays God as pure and holy (white hair and clothing) and powerful (surrounded by fire and served by thousands upon thousands).

God is also seen as judge: books are opened and the beasts are hauled into court. The first three beasts lose their power, but the fourth, more evil than the others, is destroyed by fire (vv. 11-12). 🇺🇸

Daniel then sees another figure, “one like a son of man,” who comes on the clouds and is given eternal domin-

ion over the earth (vv. 13-14). Christian believers, familiar with Jesus’ references to himself in Daniel’s “son of man” language, assume that the reference was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.

In its original context, the figure “coming on the clouds” might have brought to mind the archangel Michael, thought to be the patron angel of Israel: in chapter 12, Daniel is told “At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise” (12:1).

Those who participate in this new dominion are called “holy ones of the most High” (vv. 18, 22, 27). This title generally refers to angels, but in apocalyptic thought, earthly actors play out the struggles of their cosmic counterparts. Thus, while the Jews suffered under the beastly rule of Antiochus, they could imagine a future kingdom in which they would rule with the angels.

Weird, huh? Why might this text have any significance for modern folk who are neither Hebrews nor living under serious persecution?

The text is a reminder that history is not all about progress. The story of humanity is rife with heartless leaders, large and small, who mislead many and establish systems in which justice gives way to greed and kindness to corruption. A similar setting gave rise to the similarly apocalyptic Revelation of John.

There may be times in our own lives when it appears that evil will prevail, that the darkness has won. Stories such as the visions of Daniel – or of John – are symbolic ways of claiming the powerful hope that no matter how bad things appear, God is ultimately in control.

Those who follow Jesus believe that he has been given ultimate dominion, and that while we may suffer on this earth, God has a good future in store. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. CarHedge*

New password for online teaching resources is: grateful.

Dec. 2, 2018

Luke 21:25-36

Coming to Reign

It's finally here: the year is winding down, holidays are coming, children are excited, parents are harried, Christmas decorations mark the chill in the air – and the church celebrates Advent.

After a lengthy period of blandly-named “Ordinary Time,” the church calendar turns to the four-week anticipation of Christ’s coming (or “advent”).

The Christmas season is also a traditional time for many churches to emphasize giving to the cause of missions. The cause of global missions is a call to proclaim through work and word Christ’s advent to all the world, so that all may celebrate Christ’s *second* advent. Our text for today considers one of those unsettling passages about the time when Christ returns to the earth, not as a babe in a manger, but as the magnificent king of the universe.

The “Little Apocalypse”

Faithful Hebrews, from at least the eighth century BCE onward, looked for the coming of a messiah to vindicate the just. Several of Isaiah’s prophecies gave voice to the hope that a descendant of David would come and set things right on earth. When a child named Jesus was born to Mary, many came

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly ...” (Luke 21:34)

to believe that he was the Messiah sent from God. 🇺

Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but he was not the kind of messiah first-century Jews expected. The Gospels tell how Jesus lived a remarkable life, died a redemptive death, and was resurrected in glory, but the world was still a sinful place where injustice and violence flourished.

Before his crucifixion, Jesus made it clear that his work was not done. After his ascension, Christ would continue to be present in the lives of his own through the power of the Spirit, but there was also more to come. Jesus proclaimed his intention to return in power, bringing an eternal rule of justice and peace. In the meantime, Jesus’ followers were to carry on his work.

The promise of Christ’s return is good news for those who love God and yearn for closer fellowship. But, the Gospels insist that those who reject God’s way will have no cause for joy at what New Testament writers called the *Parousia*, the “Appearing” of Christ. The first advent is a memory that we celebrate today. The second is yet to come. Our commemoration of the first advent challenges us to prepare our hearts for the second.

The early church remembered Jesus’ talk of a second coming and preserved it in the *apocalyptic* style of writing that grew out of Israel’s greatest times of stress and persecution. As

found in the latter chapters of Daniel and in the prophecies of Ezekiel, apocalyptic writing makes much use of metaphor as a kind of code, offering hope to insiders that present oppressors will be brought down by the mighty power of God. The enemy’s defeat was often described in terms of cataclysmic changes in the cosmos.

This is precisely the kind of language we find in the Book of Revelation, as well as in what is often called the “Little Apocalypse,” found in all three synoptic gospels (Mark 13, Matthew 24, Luke 21). Today’s text derives from Luke’s version of the apocalyptic warning. 🇺

Be watchful (vv. 25-28)

To a degree, Luke reinterprets Mark’s earlier account of the Little Apocalypse, which Matthew followed more faithfully. As in the other synoptics, the section we study today comes immediately after Jesus’ description of a time of great troubles prior to his second advent. The account has Jesus predicting a future in which wars, famines, plagues, and cosmic portents would be followed by an attack on Jerusalem.

Luke, however, removes the fall of Jerusalem (which had already occurred, in 70 CE, when Luke wrote) from the events of the eschaton, substituting a period of undetermined length: “until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (v. 22). Some writers think of this as “the age of the church,” which must be fulfilled before Christ’s second advent.

There is no clear timetable for this event. Many people have sought to predict the time of Christ’s return

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from supposed clues in the Bible, and all have been wrong. The enterprise is a waste of time, for the most certain thing Jesus said about his return is that everyone would be surprised (Matt. 24:36, Mark 13:32). That is why it is so important to be ready *at all times*.

Luke's version speaks of "signs in the sun and the moon and the stars," far less dramatic than Mark's insistence that the sun and moon would be darkened and the stars would fall from the sky. 📌 Luke is unique in adding that there would be "distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves" (v. 25b; compare Ps. 65:8-9 and Rev. 6:12-17), with people worldwide fainting "from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world" (v. 26a) as the powers of the heavens were shaken.

While some popular writers interpret these things literally, they should probably be taken as general metaphors of foreboding, confusion, and panic.

Afterward, the apocalypse declares that Christ (described as the "Son of Man") would descend to the earth in power and great glory. Matthew and Mark insist that Jesus will be accompanied by the angels from heaven and the gathered "elect" (those who have chosen to follow him) from both heaven and earth (Matt. 24:31, Mark 13:27). Luke, however, keeps the spotlight on Christ alone (v. 27).

Only Luke adds this warning: "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (v. 28). This is the only time the word "redemption" occurs in Luke or Acts; it is more common in the writings of Paul.

The use of the term is a reminder that the Bible speaks of our redemption as both a present reality and something that remains to be fulfilled.

See the signs (vv. 29-33)

All three synoptics compare the predictions to a sprouting fig tree that heralds the arrival of summer (Matt. 24:32-33, Mark 13:28-29, Luke 21:29-31). Matthew and Mark speak of it as a "lesson" proclaiming that "he is near." Luke calls the story of the fig tree a "parable," and adds other subtle changes.

For example, Luke adds "and all the trees" to the fig tree, possibly a reference to the Gentiles' inclusion in the kingdom: some consider the fig tree as symbolic of Israel. In Israel's traditions, fruiting fig trees were considered a sign of God's blessing (Deut. 8:7-8, Hos. 9:10, Mic. 4:4). 📌

Luke also replaces "he is near" with "*the kingdom of God is near*." This may be nothing more than a circumlocution, but it may also suggest a shift in emphasis. By juxtaposing the return of Christ and the fulfillment of the kingdom, Luke defused the expectations of false prophets that the kingdom was imminent (19:11, 21:9). There is a sense in which the kingdom became present with Christ, but its ultimate fulfillment is connected with Christ's return.

All synoptic writers agree, however, on Jesus' prediction that "this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place" (v. 32). This led many early believers, including Paul, to expect Christ's return during their lifetimes.

With Luke's reinterpretation, however, readers may understand "generation" as the "generation of the church," or even "the generation of the eschaton" that was introduced with Christ's incarnation, to be fulfilled in a second advent.

Expecting hearers or readers to question the radical claims of the text, all three synoptics include the claim

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (compare Isa. 40:8, Ps. 119:89).

Be ready (vv. 34-36)

Luke alone adds the warning found in vv. 34-36, one modern believers would do well to heed. It is a caution against letting selfish pleasures and the concerns of this life distract us from being prepared for Christ's return.

"Be on guard!" is a forceful command to avoid being weighed down by earthly pleasures and concerns. The only other time "weighed down" is used in Luke is at 9:32, where the disciples were overcome with sleep and in danger of failing to see Christ's transfiguration. 📌

Both the worries and amusements of life are immediate, and thus more likely to garner our attention. Jesus speaks of them as a trap that can ensnare the believer, so that he or she will be captive to the world when the day of Christ's return comes (v. 35).

Jesus called believers to see past the cares and pleasures of this world and to be alert, praying daily for the strength to escape temptation and be able to take one's stand without fear when Christ returns (v. 36).

How do we respond to a text like this? Some give it too much attention, anticipating a literal fulfillment of every warning metaphor. Others give it too little heed, seeing the apocalyptic nature of the text as too bizarre for serious consideration by moderns.

Perhaps we could best choose a middle road, not expecting the heavens to collapse upon us, but still holding to a belief that Christ will one day bring earthly history to a conclusion. If that is the case, we need to be ready, keeping our heads up (v. 28) and remaining alert (v. 36), prepared to stand before Christ without shame. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 9, 2018

Malachi 5:19, 3:1-5

Coming to Judge

There's a picture in my mind of an old tin tub, filled with water, warming in the sun. It sat inside the L-shaped corner of the back porch of my great-grandmother's house, where my parents and I lived the first three years of my life. I don't remember much about the frequency of those baths – just that mental image of the tin tub in the sun.

When we moved to a house that had indoor plumbing, my mother saw to it that we used it far more often than Saturday night. She believed that boys should be clean before they went to bed, so taking baths was a nightly ritual.

Maybe that's why I grew up liking the idea of being clean. I'm happy to get dirty when I mow the lawn or power wash the patio or go on an archaeological dig, but once the job is over I'm ready to get clean – and it feels so good to wash away the dirt and the sweat. It's one of life's simple pleasures.

Misguided questions (5:17)

The prophet Malachi was concerned with dirt of the spiritual kind. He knew people might smell like a rose on the outside, but a peek inside would show a shriveled soul covered with grime. We know people like that, too.

“But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” (Mal. 3:2a)

Sometimes we see them in the mirror. ↓

When Malachi was proclaiming God's word to the people of Judah long before the coming of Christ, he insisted that those who wanted to meet and follow the new Messiah must be people who are clean in mind and heart.

Who was Malachi? He lived and worked during the postexilic period. His work appears to follow that of Haggai and Zechariah and the rebuilding of the temple (515 BCE), but long enough afterward for the renewed worship to grow stale and the people to grow impatient that their lives weren't any better.

“Malachi” means “my messenger,” which might be an unlikely name for a child, so it's often thought that the prophet adopted the name for the purposes of his prophecy.

The book of Malachi consists of six “disputations” in which Malachi states a principle or asks a rhetorical question, quotes a typical response from the people, and then restates the principle, adding words of judgment. The people were facing hard times and apparently trusting in a belief that God would come to earth at the “Day of the LORD” and set all things right. ↓

Our text is the fourth of the six disputations: Malachi wanted the people to know that God's coming would not necessarily be good news: he saw them as corrupt and in need of cleansing discipline before any blessings would come their way.

Today's text begins with a claim

that “You have wearied the LORD with your words” (5:27a). Malachi had heard too much complaining that God was not acting, but saw too little repentance that might spark a divine response.

But the people were blind to the inconsistency: “Yet you say, ‘How have we wearied him?’”

Malachi's response was bruising: “By saying, ‘All who do evil are good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.’ Or by asking, ‘Where is the God of justice?’” (5:27b).

The people had lost the ability to discern good from evil, Malachi declared. They had become so spiritually blind that they blamed the hard times they were facing on God's failure to “do justice” by them.

A coming messenger (3:1)

In response to the people's misguided expectations, Malachi launched into a prediction that would bring little comfort. Popular prophets and possibly priests had nurtured a persistent belief in a coming “day of the LORD” when God would defeat all enemies and shower blessings upon Israel, delivering the people from their oppression. ↓

Malachi had a different vision of what they should expect. Speaking for God, he said “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts” (3:1).

The word translated as “my messenger” (*mal'aki*) is identical to

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the name adopted by the prophet, but does not refer to him. Exactly who is intended is unclear. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more). Looking back through a New Testament lens, readers most commonly assume that John the Baptizer fulfilled the role of the messenger who prepares the way, with Jesus being the Lord to come. Jesus’ initial coming, however, does not fit Malachi’s prediction that the Lord would “suddenly come into his temple” – especially in the way described in the following verses.

Later, Malachi gives the impression that he has Elijah in mind: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes” (4:5). A New Testament tradition has Jesus identify John as “Elijah who is to come,” apparently referencing Mal. 3:1 and 4:5. This does not mean Jesus believed in reincarnation, but that John filled the role of the predicted messenger. 🇺🇸

While New Testament readers may see Jesus as the coming “Lord,” there’s little doubt that Malachi thought of the Lord who would “come into his temple” as being Yahweh, and that coming would result in judgment. This does not fit with the coming of Jesus, unless we are to think of the crucifixion as being a general judgment on sin: Malachi had something more specific in mind.

A cleansing visit (3:2-5)

The people had asked “Where is the God of justice?” (2:17), as if they had begun to wonder where God was, or even if God still existed. Malachi was not so sure they really wanted God to show up: “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” (v. 2a), he asked.

“For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a

refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years” (vv. 2b-3).

Here Malachi used the metaphors of a fire that burns away the dross from precious metals and strong lye that makes garments clean to describe a judgment that does not destroy outright, but cleanses.

Since Malachi believed the priests had become corrupt and had led people astray, he saw them as the first target of the Lord’s cleansing actions. Only when the religious leaders had been purified could the offerings in the temple be pleasing to God (3:4).

The God of justice people had longed for would come, Malachi insisted, but they might not like God’s justice. The same word (*mishpat*) translated as “justice” in 2:17 is rendered as “judgment” in 3:5 – “Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.”

Priests were not the only ones facing judgment, for Malachi lists sample sins that were apparently prevalent, but which violated the covenant. The term “sorcerers” could be used for anyone who claimed clairvoyance or magic powers, taking money from the gullible in return for their false services.

Equally guilty were those who destroyed marriages through adultery, oblivious to the pain their self-gratification brought. Likewise, Malachi

condemned those who swore falsely rather than speaking truth, people who could lie with a straight face and somehow think that blatant deception is acceptable behavior.

Note the emphasis Malachi puts on social injustice, condemning wealthy employers who refused to pay workers appropriate wages, those who oppressed widows and orphans, and those who “thrust aside” immigrants and refugees rather than helping them.

Could there be a stronger indictment of our own society, one in which adultery is rampant, lies are pervasive, millions of workers aren’t paid a living wage, and desperate immigrants are turned away?

Note the last thing on the list: “those who do not fear me.” Those who put selfish interests first and dare claim God’s blessing on their actions have lost all real interest in obeying or pleasing the true God; only the selfish or nationalistic god of their own making.

Malachi’s word is clear: The Lord is coming, both to cleanse those who repent, and to expose those who don’t. Those who are wise will open their hearts and lives to God’s cleansing power, rather than waiting to take their chances on the day of judgment.

That last day of judgment has not yet come for those who live. Yet, each of us faces our own day of reckoning when we die, and none of us know when that day will come. When we hold out in our sin, assuming that we can always repent just before we die, we must realize that we are gambling with grace.

The Advent season reminds us to prepare our hearts for the Lord’s appearing. If we would get out the spiritual soap and scrub brushes of repentance and renewal, our hearts and lives could be as bright and shining as the lights of Christmas. And oh, how good that would feel! **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 16, 2018


Isaiah 12:1-6

Coming to Save

If you have a choice between celebration and sorrow, which would you choose? Surely most of us would opt for the happier of the two. The season of Advent began as a period of fasting and penitence leading up to Christmas, but it is much more than a season of sackcloth and ashes.

As early as the fifth century, Advent was observed for 40 days, beginning the day after a feast honoring St. Martin on November 11. By the ninth century, however, the observance had been reduced to four weeks, and they were not all relegated to remorse for sin.


The third Sunday of Advent came to be celebrated as a day of particular joy, often symbolized today by the lighting of a pink or rose-colored candle that stands out from the more somber violet of the other three surrounding the white Christ candle. While the darker candles are associated with penitence in preparation for the coming of the Lord, the happier rose color symbolizes a shift to joy in anticipation Christ's arrival as the bringer of salvation.

Texts chosen for the day typically emphasize joyful praise, and Isaiah 12:1-6 is no exception. 


"Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation." (Isa. 12:2)

Anger and comfort (v. 1)

The book of Isaiah was fashioned as it is for a purpose, with the first 12 chapters forming a unit that focuses on the failure of God's covenant people to worship God faithfully and practice justice with each other. A period of relative peace and prosperity in the first half of the eighth century BCE had allowed the wealthy to focus on increasing their holdings, often at the expense of fellow Israelites who lacked either the resources or the cunning to ward off their greedy neighbors.

Whether or not it was his initial call, Isaiah was given a vision of God's majesty – and a commission to preach, even if on deaf ears – “in the year that King Uzziah died,” which would have been around 740 BCE (Isaiah 6).  According to the book's superscription, Isaiah remained active through the reigns of Jotham (c. 750–732), Ahaz (c. 735–715), and Hezekiah (715–687 – note that some served for a time as co-regent with their father).

During this period, the long peace gave way to conflict as a resurgent Assyria rose to power. This resulted in political turmoil, strife with former allies, economic hardship, and the loss of property to the invading Assyrians. The northern kingdom of Israel was conquered in 722 BCE and its capital city of Samaria destroyed.

Many Israelite refugees fled south into Judah, while others were forcibly rounded up and scattered among other conquered nations. 

The Assyrian king Sennacherib swept through the coastal plain of Judah in 701 BCE, destroying many towns and cities, including Lachish, second only to Jerusalem in size and power. Sennacherib threatened and besieged Jerusalem, but withdrew without taking the city. The narrator of 2 Kings attributed the city's deliverance to a plague God sent to emaciate the Assyrian armies after King Hezekiah prayed for the city to be saved, and Isaiah predicted the enemy would be turned back (2 Kings 19).

Isaiah saw the ongoing troubles as divine judgment for the people's failure to live faithfully, and made his beliefs clearly known in prophetic sermons such as the “Song of the Vineyard” (5:1-7). There he condemned those who enlarged their estates at the expense of poor neighbors, and who fed their appetites with hedonistic pleasure (5:8, 11). Isaiah predicted a coming exile (5:13) in which God would “whistle for a people at the ends of the earth” to overrun the land like an army of roaring lions (5:26-30).

The prophet was not without hope, however. Isaiah saw past the hard times of discipline to a day when God's grace would flood the land and a “shoot from the stem of Jesse” would usher in a new age of peace (ch. 11).

Chapter 12 concludes the first section of the book with an appropriate response to the promise of renewed peace and prosperity: it is a hymn, a call for the people to praise God in the light of God's promise to deliver.

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The first verse uses singular verbs, indicating the corporate nature of the people, who should hear Isaiah's challenge and respond as one. "You will say in that day: 'I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me'" (v. 1).

The image of God's judgment being replaced by comfort calls to mind a similar passage in Isaiah 40, where a later prophet writing in Isaiah's name foresaw an end to Judah's exile and heard God's call to comfort the people, for their penalty had been paid (Isa. 40:1).

God's judgment may seem great, but God's grace is greater yet.

Salvation and joy (vv. 2-3)

Verse 2 sounds like Isaiah's own testimony, a testimony he would like the people to share: "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation." 🇺🇸

Isaiah's joy does not derive from his own abilities, but from putting his trust in Yahweh. Deliverance does not come through human efforts, but through God's salvific work. 🇺🇸

Isaiah's own name, spelled *yesh'ayāhū* in Hebrew, means "Yahweh is salvation." Surprisingly, Isaiah rarely uses other forms of the word for salvation, perhaps to avoid drawing attention to himself. Here, however, he uses it three times in the course of two verses. In v. 2 he declares that "God is my salvation" (*yishū'ati*), and "he has become for me salvation" (*līshū'āh*).

In v. 3, he proclaims "With joy you (now plural) will draw water from the wells of salvation" (*hayeshū'āh*).

Earlier in this section, Isaiah used the names of his own children, as well as the child Immanuel (ch. 7-8), as

"signs and portents of the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mt. Zion" (8:18). Whether he intended it or not, Isaiah's own name has here also become a sign and portent of its own – a pointer toward God's promised deliverance.

But the deliverance remained a promise, and singing a song of salvation that one has yet to see requires trust. Thus, Isaiah could say "I will trust, and will not be afraid." He believed that putting faith in God as "my strength and my might" would lead to "my salvation."

In v. 3, Isaiah encourages others to follow his example. Drawing water requires intentional effort. God may offer forgiveness and salvation, but only those who reach for it in trust will receive it.

Water is a common biblical metaphor for life. Many parts of Israel receive little rain, and even the wetter northern and central areas endure a long dry season from May to October, when rain is rare and seasonal streams go dry. In those days, for people not living near the Sea of Galilee or the Jordan River, survival depended on strong and dependable springs such as the Gihon Spring in Jerusalem and the 'Ein-es Sultan (also known as "Elisha's") Spring in Jericho.

The unfortunate translation "wells" in the NRSV obscures the intended image, for the underlying word means "springs." While wells may indeed provide water, they are the result of human labor. The picture here is of life-giving water that bursts from an underground source as the gift of God, waiting only for grateful people to receive it.

Proclamation and praise (vv. 4-6)

Verse 4, like verse 1, begins with "And you will say in that day ...," except now the verb behind "you shall say" is

a plural form. The shift indicates that all are responsible, in various ways, to not only "Give thanks to the LORD" and "call on his name," but to "make known his deeds among the nations" in order to "proclaim that his name is exalted."

Those who receive God's salvation, in other words, are not just to enjoy it and rejoice, but to testify. They are not to hoard God's blessing for themselves, as the wealthy had sought to accumulate land, but to share the good news of deliverance with others.

The challenge to testify is expanded in v. 5, as God's delivered people are to "Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth."

God's care and deliverance were not for Israel's benefit only. Isaiah's vision was as broad as the known world, and his hope was that all peoples could live together in peace and mutual worship of God (see Isa. 2:1-4).

Isaiah's audience might still think of "royal Zion" as the heart of Israel and as the most focused dwelling place of "the Holy One of Israel" (v. 6), but God's power – and the mission of God's people – stretched far beyond the walls of Jerusalem.

It is easy for modern believers to look askance at the ancient Israelites, thinking of them as provincial and misguided, concerned only with themselves, constantly in need of prophetic challenges to keep them on track.

Think, however, of ways in which contemporary Christians likewise put self before God and selfishness before others. Think of ways in which we compartmentalize worship within the confines of the church building and fail to take the good news of Jesus with us wherever we go.

Who's keeping us on track? Isaiah might have a word for us, too. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 23, 2018

Hebrews 10:1-10

Coming to Sanctify

Christmas is coming, and its images float in our heads like sugar plums: a stable, a donkey, a tired woman and a stoic husband; shepherds and angels and, in the midst of it all, a tiny newborn baby. We sometimes think about prophetic promises frequently applied to the coming of Christ: a shoot from the stump of Jesse, a young woman conceiving, a coming servant who would suffer for the sake of others.

The Gospel of John declares that Christ was present before the creation of the world, indeed, from the very beginning: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:1-3). In John’s gospel, there is no question that “the Word” is Christ.

If Christ was consciously pre-existent prior to his earthly incarnation, then it follows that he made a purposeful decision to give up the accoutrements of deity and be born into this physical world that humans inhabit. Paul spoke of Christ, who “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but

“And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Heb. 10:10)

emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (2:5-8).

Today’s text is another writer’s attempt to visualize the life-changing decisions that went on in heavenly places and resulted in the birth of a baby in a manger. The text declares that Christ came because it was absolutely necessary for our redemption. The writer is amazed at the willingness of Christ to take on flesh and to take up the dread task leading to our salvation. The experience of Christmas will be much richer if we remember that Christ did not come into the world to be coddled and cute. Christ came to save us from our sins, even at the cost of his life. 📖

The bodies of bulls (vv. 1-4)

The book of Hebrews was written anonymously. Though an old church tradition attributed it to Paul, it is quite different from Paul’s other writings, especially in its elevated style and its focus on Christ as a high priest. Fortunately, we don’t have to know the author in order to appreciate his or her message. 📖

The writer of Hebrews consistently views Christ as the ultimate high priest, presenting careful and detailed arguments designed to show that the

Old Testament system of sacrifice was an inadequate means of atoning for human sin. Only Christ, he says, is able to provide the perfect sacrifice needed for our redemption.

The writer argues cogently that the Law and its attendant sacrifices could never be a sufficient and lasting remedy for human sin because they had to be offered continually, year after year. If they were at all effective, why should they have to be repeated so often (vv. 1-2)?

He concludes that such yearly sacrifices serve only as a continual *reminder* of our human proclivity to sin (v. 3). This encourages repentance, but does nothing about the sin itself, “for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (v. 4). The shedding of sacrificial blood may well symbolize human need for repentance, but it cannot cleanse us from the stain of wrongdoing.

This was not a new idea, but one already expressed in the Old Testament – in narratives, psalms, and the prophets. 📖 It is likely that many faithful Jews of the first century no longer put much trust in animal sacrifices. Though the entrenched priestly system continued to offer sacrifices while the temple endured, when it was destroyed in 70 BCE the rabbis quickly adapted. Synagogue worship soon took the place of the old temple services.

The body of Jesus (vv. 5-9)

The Gospels tell us that Jesus also saw the emptiness of animal sacrifices, since Matthew’s gospel twice portrays him as quoting Hosea 6:6:

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“I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (Matt. 9:13, 12:7). According to the writer of Hebrews, this same view was held by the pre-incarnate Christ.

Using his inspired imagination, the author boldly ascribes to Christ the words of Ps. 40:6-8. He insists, “Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said . . .” He then quotes from the psalm – originally the words of a worshiper speaking to God in prayer – as if God the Son was speaking to God the Father as he prepared to come into the world.

And what did he say? “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’ (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)” (vv. 5-7).

If we compare this with the actual text from Psalms, we will notice that the author, like most New Testament writers, quoted from a Greek translation of the Old Testament (known as the “Septuagint” or “LXX”) rather than the Hebrew text, which has “you have given me an open ear” (literally, “an ear you have dug for me”) instead of “a body you have prepared for me.” The Hebrew version implies a readiness to hear and obey. 🇺🇸

The author could have made his point with either version, for he emphasizes the importance of Christ hearing and obeying the will of God. However, the image of Christ’s body is especially vivid, given the context of his remarks about Judaism’s sacrificial system. The writer suggests that the bodies of bulls and goats were not sufficient for removing sin, but that God has given to Christ a body, also destined for sacrifice, that *was* sufficient.

The efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice is not based on some mystical differ-

ence between his human body and the bodies of animal sacrifices – perhaps the difference is that Christ, in a fully human existence, *voluntarily* surrendered his life.

Animals brought to the sacrificial slaughter had no knowledge of what was happening and no choice in the matter, but Christ willingly went to his death as a sacrifice for our sins: “See, God, I have come to do your will.” The value of sacrifices is that they were given as tangible expressions of the believer’s devotion and obedience. Only in Christ could the obedient giver and the gift be one and the same.

Does this idea help us to appreciate the sacrifice Christ made for us, or to have any deeper insight as to its purpose? What kind of response does it call for?

For the writer of Hebrews, Jesus’ human life (and death) of obedience began with the incarnation (“you have given me a body”) and was a fulfillment of God’s eternal plan (“in the scroll of the book it is written of me”). The practical effect was that God had abolished the old order of animal sacrifice, since the effective work of Christ had superseded it (vv. 8-9).

The body of believers (v. 10)

Those who follow Jesus are thus brought into a right relationship with God through their faith in the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice, the author says: “And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (v. 10).

Note the writer’s emphasis on this being a “once for all” event. Old Testament sacrifices were offered continually while the temple stood, and the author saw this as evidence of their inadequacy (vv. 2-4). In contrast, Christ’s voluntary gift of himself

needs not be repeated: it is effective for all persons, and for all time.

This does not mean that the word “sacrifice” is now *passé* – Christ’s redeeming sacrifice for sin is all-sufficient for our salvation, but Christian believers are also called to lives of personal sacrifice for the sake of others. Paul expresses this beautifully in Romans: “I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (12:1).

There is no more sacrifice for *sin*, but there is a sacrifice of service to God, and this is demonstrated best through actively loving others. Such service may involve the sacrifice of time, of material goods, or even of one’s physical being.

Any worship or service that we offer to God can be thought of as sacrifice. Even the writer of Hebrews, echoing language often found in the psalms (40:6, 50:12-15, 51:15-17, 69:30-31), spoke of how believers may offer a sacrifice of praise to God through words of testimony (Heb. 13:15). Of course, he knew that there are times when it will cost believers to be faithful in giving and living out their testimony. 🇺🇸

What are some of the different ways we can sacrifice ourselves in service to others, for the sake of Christ?

In this Christmas season let us not fail to look with joy upon the cuddly baby in the hay, but let us not forget that the same baby so lovingly wrapped in swaddling would one day be stretched out naked on a cross – willingly. This was not because Jesus was a masochist, but because he was (and is) a *Savior*: “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” **NEJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 30, 2018

Colossians 3:1-17

All in the Name of Jesus

Imagine that you are a pastor, a Sunday School teacher, or any person who has a coterie of friends – and you have an opportunity to speak or write a letter to some acquaintances who have fallen prey to misguided teachings that have them going off the rails in their understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

What words of encouragement would you offer? What topics would be of first importance?

Today's text contains words of advice from Paul to the believers in Colossae. 📖 Paul had probably never been to Colossae, a small city in western Asia Minor (now Turkey). His letter suggests that the church there – along with those at Hierapolis and Laodicea – had been started by his colleague Epaphras (Col. 1:7-8, 4:12-13), who may have been a native of Colossae as well.

Paul spoke of himself as a prisoner when he wrote the letter, likely in Rome. He wrote to the Colossians in response to a visit from Epaphras, who reported that the church was threatened by false teachings. While particular heretical teachings are not spelled out in the letter, the advice Paul gives suggests the church had come under

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Col. 3:17)

the influence of a mystical brand of Judaism that wanted to add legalistic requirements to the gospel of faith.

No doubt, Paul would have liked to visit, but the best thing he could do was to write them a letter. In doing so, he dealt with the problem teachings and added further advice. His missive reads as a guide to Christian faithfulness in a faithless world. 📖

Our text comes just before Paul gets into offering advice for families: the most important wisdom he could pass on had to do with the believers' relationship with Christ, and to this we now turn. 📖

Out with the old (vv. 1-11)

Our text begins at v. 12, but it is helpful to recall what has come before. In 3:1-4, Paul went straight to the heart of it: those who have died to the old life and have been “raised with Christ” ought to live like Christ, seeking “the things that are above, where Christ is . . .,” setting their minds on Jesus' way rather than the world's way and basing their behavior as well as their hopes on Christ (vv. 1-4).

Sadly, too many people who claim the name of Christ show little concern with following the teachings and modeled behavior of Jesus. Many prominent religious leaders who harp on preaching a “biblical worldview” rarely mention Jesus, focusing more on strict moral codes (sometimes with

little biblical basis) than on living like Jesus, and giving more attention to threats of divine vengeance than to the love Jesus showed.

How we act, how we feel, how we respond to others, depends in large measure on how we think, and Paul wanted us to think like followers of Jesus. As people who have “died” with Christ, he said, we should also “put to death” negative elements of our former nature. Immoral behavior, unbridled lust, wrongful desires and greed are all aspects of idolatry, Paul said. Why? Not just because they are harmful, but because they claim power over us, claiming a higher place in our hearts than Jesus, and leading us in the wrong direction (vv. 5-6).

Likewise, negative behaviors such as unchecked anger and rage, malice toward others, and hurtful language belong to the old life, not the new (vv. 7-8). Paul makes a special note that we should tell the truth and not lie to others (vv. 9).

This is a badly needed word in a day when truthfulness is lambasted as “fake news,” and powerful people – some claiming to be Christian – spin transparent lies with no apparent concern for accuracy. Whatever our political leanings, Christian people are called to honor the truth.

If we are to grow in Christ, we must put false living behind us and “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (v. 10).

Only then can we overcome the ingrained prejudice and exploitive injustice of this world to experience a new life in which “there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and

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uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all” (v. 11).

In with the new (vv. 12-15)

Our new life as believers does not derive from putting away negative behaviors alone: Paul goes on to describe positive attributes we should put on in their place. To make his instruction more memorable, he reminds readers of their special relationship with God and uses the metaphor of getting dressed for the day:

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (v. 12). Can you think of any more needed behaviors in this me-first world of road rage, put-downs, and grudge-bearing?

Do others perceive you as compassionate and kind? In what specific ways have you demonstrated those qualities this past week? To whom have you shown kindness, and how?

Are you known for having a humble and gentle spirit, or as aloof and self-centered? Can you name any recent instances in which you showed patience even when the check-out line was long, or forbearance toward someone whose service fell short of expectations?

“Bear with one another,” Paul said, and “forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (v. 13). Harboring ill feelings toward others is not only hurtful to them, it’s harmful to our own health and well-being. Learning to forgive and let things go is not just a Christian ideal, but crucial for our own emotional health.

As he does in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul sums up his position with a command to “clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together

in perfect harmony” (v. 14). Compassion, kindness, patience, forgiveness – all of these splendid traits grow from love: love that is not dependent on feelings alone, but which grows from a conscious choice to treat other people as Jesus would.

Living in this way enables us to experience the deep peace of Christ, aware that we are all parts of one body of believers, called to live with love toward others and with gratitude to God (v. 15).

When you think of your life, what thoughts come first to mind? Some might think first of how busy and overwhelmed and aggravated with others they feel, while others might consider their lives to be empty and lonesome. Paul believed that putting our first thoughts on Christ would lead us to know peace and joy no matter what our circumstances.

On with the show (vv. 16-17)

How does one find the daily motivation and encouragement to live in such a way? “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,” Paul said (v. 16a). Paul does not have in mind Christ as the incarnate Word, as the author of the Fourth Gospel would put it years later. Rather, Paul probably has in mind both the words of Jesus and words about Jesus: in other words, the gospel message about Jesus. What did Jesus teach? How did Jesus live? Remembering these things provides the guidance we need for daily life.

We do not live and believe alone, but in community. Paul understood this, so he indicated two ways in which letting the word of Christ dwell in us is manifested – and both of these take place in community. We are to “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom,” and to gratefully “sing psalms hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (v. 16b).

Both of these take place in the context of worship, as well as through Bible study, prayer groups, accountability partnerships, community service, and many other aspects of church life. Following Jesus is not easy, for we are constantly swimming against the current of outward culture and inner cravings.

To daily “focus our minds on Christ,” we need the encouragement of others. We need the formality of worship. We need music both old and new that honors God. We need to gather with others and stand together and sing together and pray together and give together. A solitary stalk of corn may wither in the sun, but clustered with others, supporting and shading each other, it can grow tall and strong.

And where does this all lead? Paul sums up this section by returning to the theme of putting Jesus first: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (v. 17).

In this passage, then, Paul calls us to abandon negative behaviors that destroy relationships and alienate people, and to adopt the kind of practices and attitudes that build community. To any rational person, that advice seems ideal, but it’s hard to think clearly in the midst of a wrong-headed world. 🇺

Every Christian faces the task of finding his or her place as a believer. We are tempted to think of baptism as an end rather than a beginning, assuming we are now “safe” because we’re “saved,” then lapse back into familiar but negative ways of living.

To prosper in our faith, we need help, and today’s text reminds us that we are not alone on our journey. We grow stronger faith within the community of faith, and find it’s easier to keep our minds on Christ among others who are likewise minded.

Worship, anyone? **NFJ**

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What does DNA say?

Ancient bones and modern science combine to tell surprising stories

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

Two recent stories highlight the growing role of DNA analysis in archaeology. One of them offers a reminder that Israel — a land bridge between Africa, Asia and Europe — has always been a land of migrants.

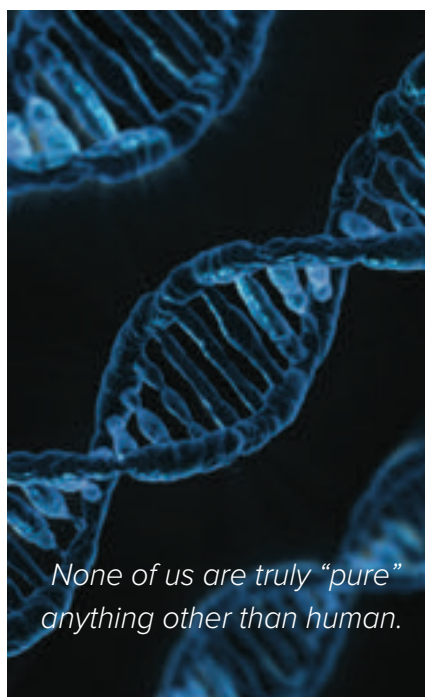
In 1995, a large karstic cave (one formed by eroding of limestone) was discovered in the Upper Galilee of northern Israel. *Rediscovered* is a more appropriate term: the site, which came to be known as the Peqi'in Cave, was used as a seasonal dwelling place in the early Chalcolithic Period, about 7,000 years ago.

Later, between 3500–4500 BCE, it was converted into a mass burial site in which the dead were left until their flesh decomposed, then the bones were transferred into ceramic ossuaries that were shaped and decorated in ways peculiar to that area.

Some time later, the site was robbed and vandalized, with the bone boxes broken and scattered around. Untouched for thousands of years, some of the ossuaries were covered by limestone dissolved in water dripping onto them.

The shape and decorations of the ossuaries created quite a stir, as many of them included human faces or even molded human features, and scholars wondered what brought about such a cultural change from other burials in the Levant.

It turns out to be due to migration. Researchers recently extracted bone powder from the skeletal remains of 48 samples, and



None of us are truly "pure" anything other than human.

successfully used DNA to reconstruct the genomes of 22 individuals.

What they found was that the genes indicated a population with fair skin and a fairly high incidence of blue eyes — characteristics not found in population groups further south. This indicates a wave of migration from the north during that period, one of many similar population shifts during Israel's long history, and another reminder that the land has always had a diverse population.

The second story goes back even further, to a cave in the Altai Mountains of Siberia, known as the Denisova Cave (named for an 18th century Russian hermit who lived there, named Denis). Human bone fragments found there date back more than 100,000 years — a thought that might be frightening to the 38 percent of

Americans who still believe the earth was created Genesis-style less than 10,000 years ago.

As the earliest humans spread from Africa and into Asia, according to paleontologists, they split into several groups, including Homo Erectus, Neanderthals, and Denisovans — named for the cave in which the only specimens of that group have been found.

All three groups are genetically different enough to be distinguished, but also apparently capable of interbreeding. A recent study showed that DNA extracted from a bone belonging to a woman indicated that she was a first-generation hybrid, with a Denisovan father and a Neanderthal mother.

While it's overblown to refer to the finding as "Evolution's Holy Grail," as Israel's *Ha'aretz* newspaper recently did, it's still a finding of some significance.

It has been known for some time that many modern humans retain a small amount of Neanderthal DNA — my own "23andme" report says I have 277 Neanderthal variants, more than 52 percent of other people in their database, but still less than four percent of my total DNA.

In a day when many people continue to think of themselves as superior to other groups because they belong to a certain race, it's helpful to remember that none of us are truly "pure" anything other than human. We're the end product of all our ancestors going back hundreds of thousands of years, as well as the culture in which we've lived for the past few years of our lifetimes.

We each can be grateful for who we are without singing, "My genes are better than your genes." **NFJ**

Six Gifts

Quaker writer Parker Palmer
offers insights into aging

BY JANA RIESS
Religion News Service

There's no shortage of advice these days about aging, but in our culture, most of that advice seems to be about how to deny that it's happening. Dye your hair, bleach your teeth, learn about Snapchat and eat more antioxidants.

Parker Palmer's new book, *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity and Getting Old*, isn't like that. The Quaker writer and activist best known for his teachings on vocation in the book *Let Your Life Speak* focuses on the spiritual gifts of aging that our youth-obsessed culture has largely ignored.

Here are six of those gifts out of a wide-ranging phone conversation after which Parker's wise words were arranged around these themes.

1. Recognizing you are "on the brink"

As I approach age 80, I'm "on the brink" of everything. From this vantage point of age and metaphorically being in a high place, on the brink, I can look back, I can look around and I can look ahead and connect the dots in a way that allows me to discover something about my own life.

I've led a very zig-zagged life when it comes to work, and had many kinds of jobs for which I wasn't particularly prepared,



because at the time they seemed right.

The best example is that I got a Ph.D. from Berkeley in the late 1960s and got job offers to become a professor. But by 1969, the cities were burning, Vietnam was raging and my heroes had been assassinated. So it seemed to me that my calling was to become a community organizer, working on issues of racial equity and justice.

So there's an example of one zig or zag among many. There was a period of time — a couple of decades, in my 30s and 40s — when I kept making those zigs or zags. People would ask me why, and the best I could tell them was, "This is something I can't *not* do." I wasn't a trust-fund baby, and I had a family.

I was facing all the real-world circumstances and had three kids. But I couldn't not become a community organizer at a time when there seemed to be a compelling need that I felt called to meet.

2. Looking back and finding the patterns

The discovery piece of aging is being able to look back and say, "Ah, *that* is how it all connects." If I can use the metaphor of a tapestry that you have been and are still weaving, I can also say that there are ugly threads of failure or misunderstanding.

But looking back, you can see how those (threads) become an integral part of the weave, not only adding beauty but also contrast, and they strengthen the resilience of the fabric. These are things that I couldn't see in my 30s or even into my 60s.

When you discover these patterns in your life, then you can look around you with new eyes and look ahead with more perceptiveness, with your feet on the ground, and not be carried away by fear. I can't imagine a sadder way to die than realizing I never showed up in this world as myself.

That would be a particular kind of psychological pain that I would find almost unbearable. If you can say you showed up, more often than not, with your heart in your hand, you can die with a certain sense of satisfaction. You have become what you were meant to be.

3. Reframing your purpose

There's a whole existential crisis that many people feel when they come to the end of the road of whatever has brought them meaning and purpose. For some, that's because they've been compelled to retire from work.

Or perhaps a person who has been devoted to raising children, which is one of the most important jobs in the world, finds

that his or her children have left home, and they are left with questions of meaning and purpose that they don't know how to answer. I think we give people very little help in distinguishing the job they do and the vocation they have.

It's partly that our educational system trains people for the workforce, but very rarely do we start preparing people for a meaningful life after the job goes away. The job I'm doing every day for money is not necessarily my vocation — my calling, the reason I was put here on earth.

Maybe their job is not simply child-rearing but caring for the growth and development of other human beings. If you put it that way, there's no need to ever leave your post unless you want to, because people who need that kind of support are legion.

4. Listening to and learning from young people

I have a whole section in the book on the importance of intergenerational relationships. When older people ... reach out to a younger person, our tendency is to say, "Sit down, young man or lady! I'm going to give you the recipe for success."

But when you get to that age, you have a very mixed record of failure and success. This thing of always giving advice is deadly because it kills off any chance of relationship. The thing to do is listen, to hear them into speech.

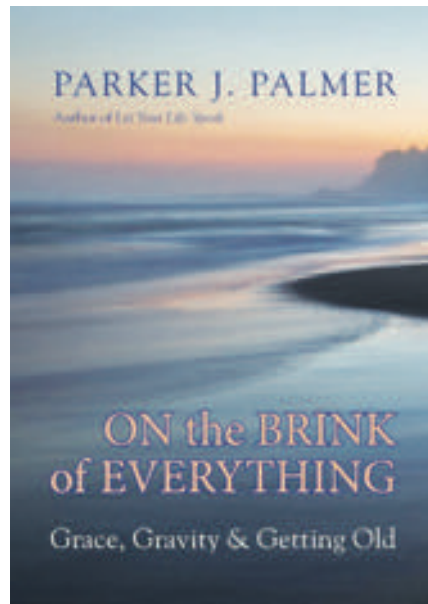
Young people suffer deeply from feeling they're not listened to; they're not seen as who they are. When an elder expresses generous interest and doesn't immediately fall into advice mode, that builds relationship.

Step two is dealing with failure and telling them not to be afraid of it. Factoring failure into your story is not only honest but also reassuring to young people. I have learned so much more from failure than I have from my successes.

For my successes, I pat myself on the back. But when I fail, that's when I stay up late at night chewing on things. That's when deep learning happens. Failure is a big teacher and also a big thing to model with younger folk.

5. Facing up to mortality

The older I've gotten, the harder it becomes *not* to think about my mortality. When you're in your 20s and 30s and 40s, it's a lot easier to pretend that you're going to be the exception, that you're not going to die.



Teenagers think they are bulletproof. But we carry that habit for quite a long time.

As a writer I used to spend 15 hours a day at the keyboard when I had something hot going. These days, I don't do that. I'll instinctively get up from my chair, get outside and take a little walk. Or if it's winter, I'll sit in an armchair and look outside at the weather in Madison, Wis., for a while before I return to my work.

St. Benedict said to "Daily keep your death before your eyes." No matter how rich or important or famous you are, there is death coming. Two things happen when

we meditate in a healthy way that our lives are finite.

One, we become more appreciative of life and its gifts. Two, we can prepare ourselves for the Big Death by embracing all the little deaths that come our way: the death of a dream, of a relationship.

Instead of trying to avoid thinking about those things, it's important to embrace the motto, "If you can't get out of it, get into it." There's no way out except in and through.

As you do that, as you embrace the little deaths, your heart becomes less brittle, more supple. These deaths are more likely to break your heart open than to break it apart. These little deaths allow us to exercise our hearts in the same way a runner exercises a muscle so that it won't snap while running.

6. Speaking out with wisdom ("You're not dead yet!")

In the section on "Keep Reaching Out," there is a fair amount of politics. In the context of what is happening right now, it's not only a disgusting spectacle but it's fundamentally damaging to our democracy.

The only answer is to reclaim the concept of "we the people." We are falling prey, big time, to the old divide-and-conquer strategy, which is aimed squarely at "we the people" so that we will become so fragmented that we cannot stand united.

This is not a problem of any one party or administration, though it's going on today more than ever in my experience. But that's not the real issue. The real issue is: Are we going to put up with it and succumb to these tactics? Are we going to allow "we the people" to be taken apart and left in fragments and shards?

That's the real political message I want to advance: Do not give up your citizenship. Elders get the message that they are over the hill and out of the game. But they still have a voice and gifts to give. **NFJ**

"I can't imagine a sadder way to die than realizing I never showed up in this world as myself."

"Factoring failure into your story is not only honest but also reassuring to young people."

Matthew & Migration

Reading the birth story of Jesus in new light

BY PETER C. PHAN

The power of the gospel narratives concerning Jesus' birth may easily escape us when we read them while enjoying Christmas cheer amid jingling bells and twinkling lights.

We cherish them as favorite stories while giving them little serious thought. Yet, meditating on these texts, especially in light of current events, reveals layers of meaning we would do well to heed.

The last 50 years, given the enormous number of people on the move, have been dubbed the "Age of Migration." On June 19 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) released an annual *Global Trends* report showing that the

number of refugees worldwide as a result of war, violent conflict, persecution and human rights violations reached 68.5 million in 2017, a new high for the fifth year in a row.

Recent events of babies and children taken from their asylum-seeking parents by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers at the Mexico-U.S. borders arouse the Christian conscience from its slumber of indifference in a time when the grossest immorality and injustice have become the new normal.

It is time to go back to one of the Christmas texts that has been largely ignored because it does not tell of singing angels and wakeful shepherds with their flocks.

STORIES

The Infancy Narrative of Matt. 2:1-23 narrates four stories, namely, the Magi's travel first to Jerusalem to inquire with officials, including King Herod, concerning where

the "king of the Jews" had been born, and then to Bethlehem to pay homage to Jesus (vv. 1-12); the Holy Family's flight into Egypt (vv. 13-15); King Herod's massacre of all the boys two years old and under in Bethlehem and its vicinity (vv. 16-18); and the return of the Holy Family to Nazareth (vv. 19-23).

For many historians, the fact that these stories are reported only by Matthew and are not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament casts doubt on their historicity. The stories are laden with miraculous elements such as a rising star that revealed to the Magi the birth of the "king of the Jews" and showed them the house where Jesus was, dreams as a means of divine communication, and angelic appearances to convey a secret divine message.

Some consider these elements to be the stuff of legend and not historiographical data. Moreover, that an act of such extreme cruelty as the massacre of all children age two and under in Bethlehem and its environs was not corroborated by secular sources renders its historicity suspect.

Even the Magi, well-attested historical figures in Persia, Babylon and Arabia ("from the East") and variously described as magicians, astrologers and Zoroastrian priests consulted by kings for their esoteric wisdom, are said to function here more as religious symbols than as flesh-and-blood persons.

On the other hand, some biblical scholars do not see that the arguments alluded to above necessarily militate against their historicity, or at least probability. The narrative references well-known historical persons such as Herod, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and Archelaus, as well as known geographical areas such as Judea (Judah), Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Egypt, Ramah and Nazareth.

Given its *mélange* of materials, Matt. 2:1-23 is generally regarded in historical-critical exegesis as something like rabbinic



Theologian Peter Phan of Georgetown University, speaking at a symposium on "Jesus in a Pluralistic Age" at Campbell University Divinity School, sponsored by the George W. and Joan O. Braswell World Religions and Global Cultures Center. Photo by Andy Wakefield.

midrash, a literature that attempts to interpret biblical texts by means of other texts or by telling stories that may or may not be true to reveal its deeper meanings.

In this case, Matt. 2:1-23 seeks to illuminate the significance of Jesus as the Son of David and the Son of God by connecting, albeit without exact parallels, some events in the birth and infancy of Jesus with those in the life of Moses, a migrant par excellence.

While the historical-critical method is indispensable for sorting out facts from myth in the biblical text — though still without certainty — it is by no means the only hermeneutical tool nor the most helpful way for contemporary readers to discern the biblical message for their lives.

The Bible is like a window: with the historical-critical method we can look behind it to try and discover what really happened, the “world *behind* the text.” But the Bible also conveys God’s message for our salvation. It is a mirror as it were; we can look into it and see ourselves enacted in the biblical story and addressed by God’s word, the “world *in / of* the text.”

Lastly, the biblical text, like God’s beckoning voice, opens up a new way of being in the world that God’s grace and power enable us to undertake, the “world *in front of* the text.”

When read in the second and third ways, the four stories narrated in Matt. 2:1-23 are no longer dismissed as “fake news” and “alternative facts,” as they would be in our contemporary socio-political culture. On the contrary, they present several figures that would assume a huge significance in the context of migration, such as the Magi, Herod, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and Archelaus.

MIGRATION

The Magi, whether they were astrologers, magicians, wise men, Zoroastrian priests or court counselors, were non-Jews, *goyim*, “pagans” or “heathens” whom ancient Jews tended to look upon as idolaters and whom some Christians might condemn to hell.

But here they are, not unlike modern transnational migrants, willing to undertake a long and arduous journey across

*“The Bible is like a **window**: with the historical-critical method we can look behind it to try and discover what really happened...*

*But the Bible also conveys God’s message for our salvation. It is a **mirror** as it were.”*

national borders — in their case to find the King of the Jews. Having found him, they prostrated themselves and worshiped him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Like the Magi, many contemporary refugees undertake perilous journeys at the risk of life and limbs to escape religious persecution in order to have the freedom to practice their faith.

Herod was a superstitious, wily and cruel despot; a vicious and paranoid ruler who did not hesitate to kill his enemies, including three of his sons, his wife Mariamne, her mother, and uncounted babies in order to safeguard his rule.

Would it not be possible to see in him political leaders of countries big and small of our day who cause mass forced migrations, or refuse entry of refugees into their countries for political careers and personal interests, and under the banner of national security?

As for the chief priests and the teachers of the law who collaborated with Herod by giving him counsel and information on the infant Jesus, are they not the fore-runners of some of the religious leaders of Christian churches who are willing to sell their birthright of Christian faith, integrity and morality for a mess of the pottage of political influence, perhaps hoping to see a possible reversal of abortion and gay marriage laws by the Supreme Court?

The central figures in Matthew’s narrative, however, are Joseph and Mary. By the Roman emperor’s order that all people of his empire must register in their ancestral towns, Joseph and Mary had to travel from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem, a city south of Jerusalem. The journey would have been about 80 miles, mostly uphill, with the shortest way going through Samaria, where

Jews would meet with hostility, then on through the rugged Judean hills.

The journey was physically taxing, especially as Mary was in advanced pregnancy. Most likely they had to go on foot, and it would have taken a near-term pregnant woman more than a week.

In Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to her son Jesus in a manger because “there was no place for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7), a situation now experienced by undocumented refugee mothers who cannot afford to deliver their babies in a regular hospital for fear of being arrested.

Luke tells us that eight days after Jesus’ birth, he was taken to Jerusalem, some six miles away, to be circumcised, and that 40 days after delivery Mary returned to Jerusalem to perform purification rites according to the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 12). These inconvenient trips — again by foot — call to mind the plight of asylum-seekers required by law to shuttle from government office to government office to apply for residency without the assurance of obtaining it.

REFUGEES

In Matthew’s account we are told that the Magi, who had been warned by an angel in a dream not to return to Herod, went home by another route. Shortly afterwards, Joseph was told by an angel in a dream to take Mary and Jesus and escape to Egypt because Herod was planning to kill the child.

Indeed, infuriated by the Magi’s trickery, Herod ordered the massacre of all children two years old and under in and around Bethlehem. Herod’s violent persecution made Jesus and his parents into refugees in the modern sense of the term, the very first in the New Testament.

The distance from Bethlehem to the Egyptian border is about 40 miles, which would make the trip more arduous than the earlier one from Nazareth to Bethlehem, since this time the trip started “by night” (Matt. 2:14), and there was a baby to take care of and protect. Again, we are reminded of refugee parents who escape with their children and have to provide for all their needs with whatever they can get.

Indeed, had Joseph and Mary crossed the Mexican border into the U.S. in recent

days, Immigration and Customs Enforcement would have taken the infant Jesus from his parents, and they would not have known his whereabouts and might never have been reunited with him again.

Matthew does not say where precisely in Egypt the Holy Family went and settled. However, wherever they went, like most refugee families today, Joseph, Mary and Jesus had to survive among strangers whose language and customs they did not know, in unfamiliar surroundings, depending on their neighbors' hospitality and generosity.

Of course, there were large Jewish colonies in Egypt at the time, but most were located in faraway places such as Alexandria, Elephantine and Oxyrynchus. Like many migrants, the Holy Family must have wanted to live among their fellow countrymen but surely could not afford to, given their meager financial resources.

Mathew tells us that at Herod's death (between March 29 and April 4, 4 BCE), Joseph was told by an angel in a dream to bring his family back to his native land. Jesus, who had been born sometime in late 5 or early 4 BCE, must have been several months old by then.

Joseph had intended to return to Bethlehem, but upon discovering that its ruler was Herod the Great's cruel son Herod Archelaus, he was afraid to settle his family there. His fear was confirmed when he was told in a dream to go further north back to Nazareth.

The distance from the Egyptian border all the way to Nazareth is at least 106 miles, and the Holy Family's trip, again mostly on foot and with an infant, would have been enormously burdensome, comparable to that of refugees who have to cross Mexico to reach the U.S. border.

In returning to Israel, Jesus and his parents became part of what is referred to today as refugee return movement. Despite current attention to flows of asylum-seekers and refugees, a surprisingly large number of refugees, perhaps tens of millions, have returned since the mid-1990s to their countries of origin, notably Angola, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Jesus and his parents were thus twice-refugees.

Furthermore, for political reasons, they could not return to Bethlehem, not unlike refugees who are forced to migrate due to climate change and who have no home to

return to. During Hurricane Katrina, about 1.3 million people left New Orleans and many could not return because their homes had been totally destroyed.

Similarly, thousands of Puerto Ricans still cannot return to their homes after Hurricane Maria. Millions of people in Bangladesh are left homeless each year due to flooding, and many small islands in the Pacific have been submerged in water and have become uninhabitable.

When an American leader raises the specter of the U.S. as being "infested" by migrants, try to imagine the paradigmatic migrant Jesus and his refugee parents needing to be exterminated. Then remember the 68.5 million refugees and reflect on Jesus' saying:

"I was a stranger and you did not welcome me.... Truly, I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Matt. 25:43; 45). **NFJ**

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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.

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Calling the church to battle opioid addiction

By David Julen

Evil comes in two forms according to theologian Fisher Humphreys. First, there are actions we take that are knowingly wrong — that we are free to not take, but do anyway.

These are actions sins. For these actions, the church proclaims we are to preach repentance and forgiveness. As followers of Jesus, we are to repent of our sins and seek forgiveness.

Second, evil reveals itself through powers that oppress us. These evil powers can be hostile governments, sickness and suffering, crime and violence, sexual and verbal abuse, domestic violence and many other results of a fallen world.

In these areas the church proclaims itself to be an agent of deliverance. The biblical word “redemption” comes to mind, which means to be liberated or set free from hostile forces or powers. The greatest redemption of the Old Testament was God’s liberation of God’s people from Egypt.

Addiction, though in some cases resulting from willing beginnings, soon takes the

second form of evil. The church is called to preach repentance and forgiveness, but also to be an agent of liberation and redemption in the world.

Jesus spoke of giving his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), and Paul referred to Christians as having been “bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:20). So the question arises: To what are we redeemed?

The answer is the redeemed life, or as Paul writes, “walking in the newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). However, the suffering of addiction takes away from the life that God desires for all of us.

But for the grace of God, many of us may be ensnared by the grip of addiction. We recognize that the sins of rage, anger, greed, lust, gossip, slander and others are as destructive and as difficult to overcome as addiction. We all struggle daily to overcome something.

As people of faith, we are called to mobilize our forces to be agents of God’s redemption and deliverance in our communities. While recognizing the destructiveness of all addiction, it is important to note the specific pain that comes from opioid addiction that is so rampant now.

This addiction is often hidden because it can begin as a means for healing and help, to lessen pain, but can become demonic and destructive in its ability to demean and even destroy life.

Jesus commissions the church to be on a mission of redemption and deliverance, and promises his disciples that the gates of hell cannot stand against it (Matt. 16:18). This is a picture of the church on the offensive (Matt. 11:12) against the powers of darkness and addiction, not one waiting behind a closed door for someone in need to find their way in.

Community is a vital component in the mission to battle and escape addiction. At its best the church offers a type of community that accepts fellow sinners, courageously speaks the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), and walks humbly with those suffering under the powers of oppression.

Jesus commissions the church to be on a mission of deliverance and redemption. **NFJ**

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Calvin Coolidge (1923–1929)

By Bruce Gourley

From lofty perches in urban towers East and Midwest, American capitalists in the summer of 1923 cast their collective gaze upon a new promised land of financial profits.

Even the unexpected death of Republican President Warren G. Harding, a pro-business chief of state who had cut tax rates for wealthy individuals, failed to cast a pall upon visions of dollar signs dancing in their heads.

The sky was the limit. In Detroit, the world's third largest corporation, General Motors, opened the planet's second largest building to house its new world headquarters.

Financed by hundreds of thousands of middle-class Americans purchasing cars on "installment plans," the massive structure, symbolically and literally towering far above America's poor and middle classes, represented the beginning of a years-long, record-setting climb of national wealth inequality.

Then a seemingly strange thing happened. From its lofty perch General Motors began an extraordinary campaign to recast itself as humble, ordinary, down-to-earth.

Turning to the man often credited with naming the corporation, General Motors "re-imaged itself through," according to one historian, "so unbecoming a set of metaphors as those of family, community, neighborhood and ministry."

Who was this man tapped to transform one of the largest and most profitable



capitalistic enterprises in the world into the hometown embodiment of family, friends and faith? Bruce Barton was his name, and Christian capitalism was his game.

Against the backdrop of Christian-blessed, capitalistic-driven wealth inequalities and the death of Harding, pro-business conservative Calvin Coolidge suddenly transitioned from the vice-presidency to the White House.

Little known for most of his life, Coolidge was born in Vermont in 1872. The son of a farmer, storekeeper and politician, a young Coolidge exhibited ambition of his own. Moving to Massachusetts, he graduated from Amherst College and became a lawyer. Thereafter he became involved in state Republican politics and ingratiated himself to the insider establishment.

Widely viewed as cold and uninspiring, Coolidge nonetheless used his connections to become Massachusetts governor in 1919. The same year, a strike by Boston police changed the trajectory of Coolidge's career.

Commonplace in the post-World War I era during a time of strong labor unions, strikes served as a means of seeking better pay and working conditions in the face of runaway inflation and wealth inequality. Corporations and many Americans, however, viewed troublesome unions as communist-inspired.

Boston policemen, vastly underpaid, demanded higher wages. Unfortunately, a local criminal element took the opportunity to loot and destroy property, shifting public sentiment against policemen.

Governor Coolidge, sensing an opening to promote himself, assumed command of the National Guard from Boston's Democrat mayor and demanded law and order. The police union backed down, and Coolidge issued a press release that was read in newspapers throughout America: "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time."

Suddenly a national face of law and order, Coolidge's political ambitions grew. Political allies urged him to seize the moment and recast his uninspiring personal persona "in a more human light" in order to run for president of the United States the following year.

Taking the advice to heart, Coolidge reached out to a fellow Amherst graduate — the Christian businessman Barton.

Born in Illinois as the son of a prominent Congregational minister, Barton by 1919 had made a name for himself in some

This is the 30th article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, online editor and contributing writer for Nurturing Faith Journal, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.

Christian circles as a biblical commentator and inspirational writer. More recently was his successful and acclaimed work on the federal government's pro-war propaganda-driven Committee on Public Information.

Barton, within months of having established his own advertising agency, found in Coolidge a politically-prominent, corporatist ally who represented an opportunity for the aspiring publicist to further advance his own success.

Guided by Barton's deft publicity skills, Coolidge's political stock grew. Barton authored the first national magazine feature story on Coolidge in *Collier's*. Therein he portrayed the Massachusetts governor as having arisen from humble rural, Yankee beginnings to become a modern executive who "seems cut from granite: one could almost strike sparks with such a name, like a flint."

Coolidge, in Barton's makeover, stood tall as a steely opponent of radical workers' unions and represented the pinnacle of white Protestant culture. A man of candor and honesty, Coolidge had "the disconcerting habit of telling the truth" about the American ethos of white supremacy. In other publicity materials Barton subsequently presented the presidential candidate as moral, "a spiritual leader," a traditionalist "in these ultra-modern times," "a kind of contemporary forefather," and a businessman opposed to government extravagance.

On the printed pages of Barton's compositions, Coolidge was a political giant. In person, his reticent persona remained.

Although Barton could not overcome the long odds the yet-uninspiring Coolidge faced in securing the 1920 presidential nomination, the publicity campaign succeeded in elevating Coolidge's image among many Republican insiders, who overwhelmingly chose him as their party's 1920 vice-presidential candidate.

Thereupon the Harding-Coolidge ticket defeated their Democratic opponents in the November elections. Yet, true to form, once in office he remained personally uninspiring.

Unremarkable and quiet, Coolidge was a man of so few words that he became

known as "Silent Cal." Of Coolidge's cold and aloof demeanor, writer and political socialite Alice Roosevelt Longworth said, "When he wished he were elsewhere, he pursed his lips, folded his arms, and said nothing. He looked then precisely as though he had been weaned on a pickle."

As vice president, Coolidge wisely retained Barton's services. The publicist again set about re-imagining his client.

An artist of good copy, Barton's writing talents lurked behind a masterful 1922 Coolidge-bylined publicity article promoting Christian capitalism and published in a woman's magazine, *The Delineator*, a publication to which publicist Barton had ties.

"Religion — Our Nation's Strength" deftly blended faith, capitalism and nation in a more religiously sophisticated manner than Coolidge's writings otherwise evidence. On the precipice of excessive wealth inequality during the decade, the article spoke favorably of the spiritual foundation of the hard-working, theocratic Puritans of early colonial America.

"They laid a [spiritual] foundation in America which has never been shaken." All of the "great movements of mankind," the missive declared, "began with great religious revivals."

"Materialist thought," however, usurped America's "religious beliefs and ideals" by creating doubt as to the Bible's "inspiration." With a sleight of pen, materialism — usually thought of in terms of wealth — became something altogether different: scientific, intellectual opposition to religion.

Despite intellectual challenges to faith, in time "there came a firmer conviction, a more abiding faith, which remains unshaken." Eventually, "industry" arose and added to the peon of achievements of mankind that, although remarkable, were secondary. Science, education and industry all served "to better the world. But these are all weak compared with the strength of the religion of our fathers."

Hereupon the Bartonish essay smoothly transitioned into the marketing man's anti-union, corporatist worldview buttressed by religion:

"It is in the strength of religious

convictions alone that we may hope for any permanent solution of the differences between employer and employed, for a permanent social relationship which can be embodied in the law of the land ... A religious motive alone can inspire the nation to bear its public and private burdens. All other plans are makeshift, they pass away, while those built upon spiritual thought are permanent."

Labor questions and wealth inequality were spiritual issues, not the concern of government. America's societal troubles, always fed by economic undercurrents, should be resolved by religion. Permanent resolutions of America's problems must be subject to religious faith, incorporated into law as needed.

And then, the closing line of the Coolidge-bylined article: "The strength of the nation is the piety of the nation."

With those final words, the shortcomings of corporatism vanished into nothing. Religion remained all that truly mattered. Distant, aloof, vice president "Silent Cal," never one to voice personal religious feelings, stood as a champion of the union of capitalism and Christianity in the service of nation.

Even so, almost a century later, Christian ideological descendants of Bruce Barton's Calvin Coolidge determined to abolish any remaining distance between evangelicals and capitalism by adding a few additional sentences to Coolidge's — or Barton's — closing line in *The Delineator* article:

"The foundations of our society and our government rest so much on the teachings of the Bible that it would be difficult to support them if faith in these teachings would cease to be practically universal in our country."

This fabricated, extended quote appears in some modern evangelical books, articles and online quotes. Neither Barton nor Coolidge actually penned those words, although the early marketing genius might well have approved.

Months following *The Delineator* masterstroke, in a Christmas address broadcast over radio, Vice President Coolidge expressed, in Bartonish wording, displeasure with working class discontent and

enthusiasm for the virtues of capitalism.

“Obedience to authority has been sanctified” by God, Coolidge declared to millions of listeners, planting the capitalist-driven social order firmly within the realm of religion. Christian-infused principles are “the way to good citizenship, to progress and to economic success,” Coolidge declared. “There is no other way. The full significance of Christmas is lost unless, as a part of its observance, the American people think of these things.”

The vice president continued: “These are the reasons why our country has no need of revolution. What it needs is perfection. The world waits on the extension of these principles into the practical affairs of people. Their application will be found not in some complicated legislative enactment, not in some abstruse theory, but in the simple and homely experience of everyday life. If more freedom is desired, it can be had by more obedience. If there is need of more brotherhood, it will be found in more service. If success be sought, the way lies open through thrift and industry. If character is wanted, it can be created by hard work and kind deeds. This is the substance of which America has been built.”

Capitalism served the interests of humanity. Riches were the righteous dues of successful corporations, businessmen and investors. Labor unions were unnecessary and should be replaced with harmless service organizations. For the aspiring, riches could be achieved through thrift and industry.

Less than a year following Coolidge’s capitalistic and co-opted Christmas message, national tragedy struck America in the sudden death of Harding in August 1923. Jolted out of his personal shell by the stroke of history, a reclusive Coolidge yet again turned to Barton for help.

The publicist assured Americans they could trust Coolidge, comparing the new president to the late Theodore Roosevelt. It was a stretch, but the publicist was good at his craft.

In the remaining months prior to the 1924 election season and having been provided religious cover, President Coolidge

supported the anti-immigration and pro-business policies of his late predecessor.

Signaling a new era in presidential politics, Barton convinced Coolidge to use radio during the campaign season. In kitchens and living rooms throughout the nation, white middle-class Americans listened as President (and candidate) Coolidge, in neighborly fashion, calmly assured them of economic prosperity and racial superiority if they retained him in the White House.

Coolidge’s low-key but steady approach led to an easy victory, and his low-key but steady presidential tenure mirrored the playbook of his predecessor: tax cuts for the wealthy, reduced federal spending, minimal corporate regulation, a business-first agenda, the placement of business leaders into top government positions, and anti-union policies.

Collectively, Coolidge’s economic playbook overwhelmingly benefited the wealthy. The resulting “Roaring 20s” were characterized by extravagance and hedonism among the rich, modest gains among the middle class allowing the purchase of automobiles and household appliances, and poverty for the majority of Americans.

Barton remained a friend, publicist and adviser to the president, as well as a lobbyist. His career soared as he benefited from his connections with Coolidge and the corporatist reign over America. His smooth words transformed the wealthy behemoth General Motors into a neighborhood friend, and the first-century Middle Eastern Jesus into a white, wealthy 20th-century businessman. Neither Coolidge nor Barton expressed concerns about soaring wealth inequality.

Little if any space separated the unfettered capitalist ideology of the Christian businessman and the U.S. president.

The “chief business of the American people is business,” Coolidge enthused in 1925. Americans “are profoundly concerned with producing, buying, selling, investing and prospering in the world. I am strongly of the opinion that the great majority of people will always find these the moving impulses of our life.”

Even his obligatory words of caution about excess rang hollow.

“Of course, the accumulation of wealth cannot be justified as the chief end of existence. But we are compelled to recognize it as a means to well-nigh every desirable achievement. So long as wealth is made the means and not the end, we need not greatly fear it,” the president proclaimed. Only a few would succumb to “the evil of selfishness” and “feel that their own temporary interest may be furthered by betraying the interest of others.”

Barton felt the same way. As Coolidge glorified wealth, Barton published a book sanctifying riches. The volume quickly became a runaway success.

The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus cast aside the biblical account of Jesus as champion of the poor and oppressed and critic of wealth. In Barton’s account Jesus became the “Founder of Modern Business” and “the world’s greatest business executive.”

“The Gospel According to Bruce Barton met a popular demand,” wrote historian Frederick Lewis Allen in 1931. “Under the beneficent influence of Coolidge Prosperity, business had become almost the national religion of America. Millions of people wanted to be reassured that this religion was altogether right and proper, and that in the rules for making big money lay all the law and prophets.”

America’s new “national religion,” however, generated soaring wealth inequality and hurtled the nation toward inevitable financial collapse.

Ever eager to help corporations enrich themselves, President Coolidge coldly refused to provide federal assistance to an economically-devastated farming industry. “Farmers never have made much money,” said the son of a farmer. “I do not believe we can do much about it.”

In the wake of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, the worst natural disaster on the Gulf Coast until the 21st century, Coolidge only reluctantly signed a congressional federal aid bill.

On racial issues, President Coolidge evidenced a more nuanced approach. Although he signed anti-immigration legislation, he nonetheless eschewed appearances

of personal racism. Through a hallmark piece of legislation, he granted automatic American citizenship to Native Americans in the Indian Citizen Act, a law designed to balance the final assimilation of native peoples into white culture alongside the retention of tribal traditions.

Following his predecessor, Coolidge strove, unsuccessfully, for laws against lynching, while advocating for more civil rights for African Americans. Indirectly, he opposed the Ku Klux Klan, which declined under his presidency.

As president, Coolidge delivered a commencement address at racially integrated Howard College and commended African Americans for their growing educational attainments and contributions in American life and society.

Racial issues and religion intersected in Coolidge's advocacy for and appreciation of Howard College, a school co-founded by Washington's First Congregational Church, a congregation often attended by Coolidge and his wife, Grace, while the couple lived in D.C.

In his autobiography, Coolidge, having been raised in an unchurched family due to the lack of any "organized church society near my boyhood home," spoke of his own appreciation for the spiritual dimension of his collegiate education. Amherst imbued in the young future president an appreciation for the place of religion, and belief in God, in human society.

The president's attendance at Washington's First Congregational Church may have been partly the result of the pastor, Jason Noble Pierce, who was also an Amherst alumnus.

Coolidge, however, never joined a church. Late in life he wrote of his fondness for D.C.'s Congregational church:

"Although I had been rather constant in my attendance, I had never joined the church Among other things, I had some fear as to my ability to set that example which I always felt ought to denote the life of a church member. I am inclined to think now that this was the counsel of darkness."

In his speeches, autobiography and other writings Coolidge failed to speak of

Jesus, nor did he give voice to personal faith. Instead, for Coolidge, financial prosperity itself served as the pinnacle of religion.

Having decided not to run for a second full presidential term, on December 4, 1928 president Coolidge closed his last State of the Union Address with these words:

"The end of government is to keep open the opportunity for a more abundant life. Peace and prosperity are not finalities; they are only methods. It is too easy under their influence for a nation to become selfish and degenerate. This test has come to the United States. Our country has been provided with the resources with which it can enlarge its intellectual, moral, and spiritual life. The issue is in the hands of the people. Our faith in man and God is the justification for the belief in our continuing success."

Coolidge departed from office seemingly blind to the twin evils of unfettered capitalism and wealth inequality. Nine months later the "selfish and degenerate" fruits of Coolidge's economic policies decimated the nation and plunged America into an unprecedented Great Depression.

Returning to Massachusetts, Coolidge lived a mostly quiet, albeit business-focused

retirement as the nation crumbled around him. He died in 1933, his Gospel of Wealth but a bitter memory in the minds of tens of millions of desperate, impoverished, hungry and homeless Americans due to the excesses of unfettered, Christian-anointed capitalism.

Historians largely remember Coolidge's presidency as uninspiring and aloof, a time in which he sat by passively as corporations freely served their own interests in a period of excessive wealth inequality that led to the Great Depression.

Less remembered is that Coolidge's presidency was in significant part the product of Bruce Barton. Together, Coolidge and Barton glorified unfettered capitalism as patriotic and the will of God, and labor unions as evil at worst, and unnecessary at best.

Despite the stock market crash of 1929, the subsequent Great Depression, and cyclical economic crises since, the ideology of Coolidge and Barton is undiminished.

Today's popular "Prosperity Gospel" and "Prosperity Theology," in tandem with national wealth inequality and the weak state of labor unions, can be traced to the Christian-blessed excesses of capitalism birthed by the Coolidge-Barton alliance. **NFJ**

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'Are you saved?'

What the Bible does and doesn't say about salvation

BY E.B. SELF

There are people who want salvation but sometimes wonder if they are truly saved. They may review their conversion experience to be sure it was genuine. They may be baptized more than once. They may worry about whether they have properly followed the "plan of salvation."

Contrary to what we sometimes hear, there is no mention in the Bible of a plan of salvation. The biblical writers do refer to salvation and related matters but never outline any plan. We should think about what and how much the biblical writers do say.

SALVATION PROMISED

If we go back to the Old Testament, one of the most memorable statements about God's standards is found in the writing of a prophet. According to Micah 6:8, "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Nothing is specifically said here about salvation, but you would think that anyone who meets the Lord's requirements would be acceptable to God.

There is another place in the Old Testament that does speak clearly of being saved. We find in Joel 2:32, "Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."

Who will do the saving? There are several indications in Joel 2 that the LORD, the one who will save, is the God of Israel. For example, verse 27 tells us, "You shall

know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other."

Salvation is promised to all who call on the name of the LORD, who is identified as the God of Israel.

ETERNAL LIFE

When we come to the New Testament, we find the claim of Jesus in John 3:16 that those who believe in God's only Son will have eternal life.

There is no direct mention of salvation, but eternal life is a part of salvation. Jesus did have more to say.

It is Jesus himself who causes us to think carefully about calling on the name of the Lord to be saved. According to Matt. 7:21, Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

If we think of entering the kingdom of heaven as being saved, then more is required than simply saying something. Doing the will of the Father is what Jesus required.

Jesus also said in Matt. 24:11-12, "And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved." Relying on an initial profession without continuing commitment appears to be insufficient.

Jesus said even more about salvation. According to his words in Mark 16:16, "The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned."

Lack of belief leads to condemnation, but salvation comes to the one who believes

and is baptized. What if someone believes but is not baptized? Nothing is said directly about salvation in that situation.

There is a further complication for Mark 16:16. According to the third edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, this verse is not in all ancient manuscripts. It is a part of the last verses of Mark 16 that are marked as doubtful in some manuscripts where they do appear. Thus there is some concern about the complete authenticity of Mark 16:16.

FAITH & FREEDOM

There is apparently no question about what Peter said of baptism on a special day of Pentecost. People asked Peter and the other apostles what they should do.

According to Acts 2:38, Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Having sins forgiven is a vital part of salvation. Peter emphasized both repentance and baptism for that experience.

Paul added some steps for salvation, saying in Rom. 10:9, "because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Paul goes beyond silent affirmation to confessing Jesus as Lord with the lips. He also specifies believing in the resurrection of Jesus.

Paul also had this famous but not entirely clear statement about salvation in Eph. 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

Christians agree widely that Paul includes both grace and faith in salvation,



but what is the origin of faith? Many believe that God has given the gift of freedom to have faith or not have faith. The thought is that people may decide for themselves whether or not to respond with faith to God's gracious offer of salvation.

Some think Paul meant that God gives (or withholds) faith itself. The second interpretation is that God chooses who will and who will not have faith and be saved. Christians continue to disagree over the proper view.

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

It may sound strange at first, but we can disregard one requirement for salvation that is mentioned in the Bible. According to Acts 15:1, "Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the

custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" We find later in Acts 15 that a conference in Jerusalem rejected this claim about salvation.

As to beliefs about salvation outside of the Bible, we have to be very careful. One man wrote that, when he was young, he felt sorry for the Methodists. He had been taught that only Baptists would be saved and go to heaven. He was probably surprised when he found out later that there is no such teaching in the Bible.

Also, there are no instructions in the Bible about "every head bowed" and "every eye closed." There is nothing in the Bible about "walking the aisle" or "going forward." There is not necessarily anything wrong with these expressions, unless they distract from or replace biblical statements about salvation.

If you wish to be saved and look to the Bible for help, think carefully about how

much is in the Bible and also what is not in the Bible.

You may consider doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God, calling on the name of the Lord (the God Israel according to Joel, but Jesus according to Paul), believing in God's only Son, believing that God raised Jesus from the dead, repenting, confessing with the lips, being baptized, doing the will of the Father, and enduring to the end.

Be ready to reject false claims. Salvation, specifically a "plan of salvation," is not as simple as it sometimes seems. **NFJ**

—E.B. (Ben) Self of Hopkinsville, Ky., is a retired professor and pastor with degrees from Baylor, Yale and Vanderbilt universities.

[Scripture quotations taken from the NRSV]

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Why do ‘nones’ avoid religious identification?

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

One of the most talked-about trends in American religion today is the growing number of persons who say they are religiously unaffiliated. But, why do they claim no religious identity?

Pew Research Center took that question to more than 1,300 so-called “nones” to better understand the reasons behind their lack of identification with any particular religious expression. The most common reason given was that they question much of the religious teachings they have heard.

For churches or other religious organizations seeking to reach the unreached, this reason could well raise questions about what is being taught (or perceived to be taught) and about what kind of environment is being created for questions, doubts and even challenges.

Pew found that six-in-10 religiously unaffiliated American adults — who

describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” — say the questioning of religious teachings is a very important reason for their lack of affiliation.

Not surprising to many observers, the second most common reason given was their opposition to the positions taken by churches on social and political issues. This was affirmed by nearly half (49 percent) of those surveyed.

Other reasons included a dislike of religious organizations (41 percent), a lack of belief in God (37 percent), a sense that religion is irrelevant to them (36 percent) and a dislike of religious leaders (34 percent).

The varied reasons for being religiously unaffiliated reveal that “nones” are not a monolithic group. This becomes most obvious when looking at the sub-categories.

For example, 89 percent of self-identified atheists say their lack of belief in God is a very important reason for their religious non-affiliation. Perhaps more surprising is that 11 percent of atheists did not give that

as a primary reason.

Yet only 37 percent of agnostics and 21 percent of those in the “nothing in particular” category deemed a lack of belief in God as being very important to their religious identification.

Atheists also were more likely (at 63 percent) to say religion is “irrelevant” to them — echoed by 40 percent of agnostics and 26 percent of adults with no particular religious identification.

Exploring the varied reasons a growing number of American adults now are religiously unaffiliated is helpful, even if challenging, to church leaders seeking to engage these persons in congregational life and faith.

The reasons behind self-identification as religiously unaffiliated vary. But one clear aspect of the growth of so-called nones is, well, the growth of so-called nones; that is, it is more socially acceptable now to affirm that one does not identify with any particular religious faith group. **NFJ**

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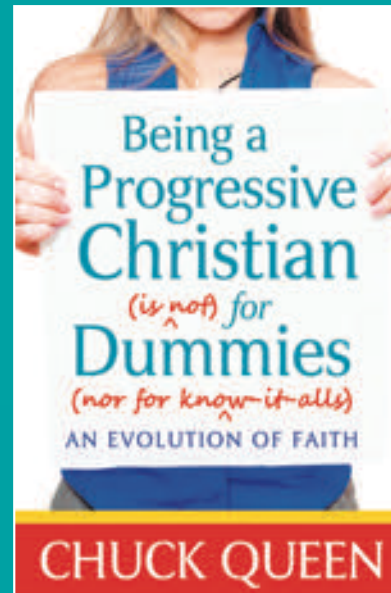
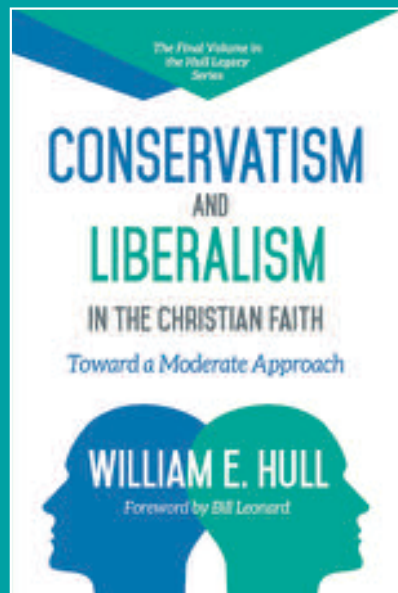
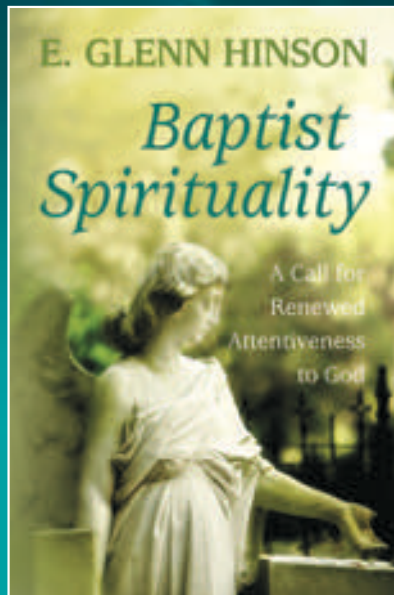


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Speaking God

A conversation with Jonathan Merritt
about spiritual conversations

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

With his new book, *Learning to Speak God from Scratch: Why Sacred Words are Vanishing — and How We Can Revive Them* (Crown Publishing Group), Jonathan Merritt is advancing a conversation about spiritual conversations. So, this timely conversation is adapted from an interview with Merritt, a popular faith and culture writer who lives in Brooklyn, N.Y.

NFJ: Sometimes I avoid religious conversations such as when my seatmate on an airplane asks what I do for a living. I'm tempted to say I sell Volvos or something. Why do many of us avoid those kinds of conversations?

JM: First of all, you are not alone even as a Christian. Only seven percent of Americans say they feel comfortable having spiritual or religious conversations on a regular basis. That's also true of 13 percent of practicing Christians.

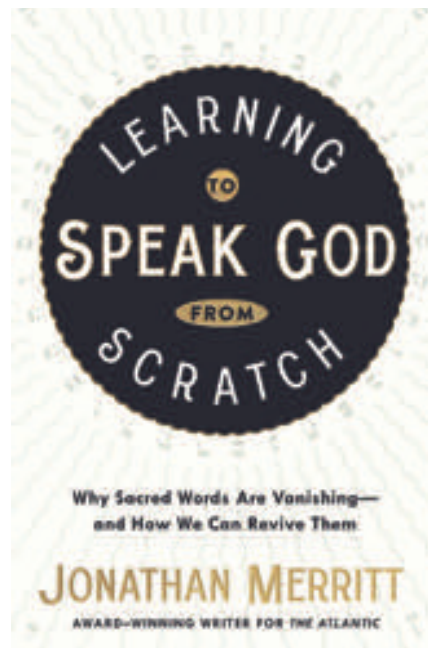
In other words, if you went to your church and only the most faithful showed up this Sunday, only one in eight of the people on your row would have a spiritual conversation or a religious conversation with regularity.

The second thing is there is a range of reasons why someone might not feel comfortable. With this book we conducted a big national survey. We took all the people who said, "No, I don't speak religious" or "I don't have religious or spiritual conversations regularly," and asked them: "Well, why not?"

The number-one answer was religious conversations tend to create tension or arguments. If you've ever been at a Thanks-

giving dinner and had Uncle Philip shaking a drumstick at you, telling you what the Bible really teaches, you'll know what that's like.

Other people say, "I'm afraid this will make me seem like a fanatic or an extremist." That's a particularly popular excuse among millennials, who are very sensitive to being seen as kind of on the fringe or outside the norm.



Some people — about 17 percent — said religious language has become too politicized and, as a result, it feels less sacred than it once felt. So they avoid it. Also, some people have used these words so often they don't know what they mean anymore.

There's a famous saying about familiarity breeding contempt, but I like how Dallas Willard reframed it. He said familiarity breeds unfamiliarity, and unfamiliarity breeds contempt. Sometimes we use these words so often but don't stop to ask: "What

am I saying when I'm saying what I'm saying?"

So that is the kind of mosaic picture of why people aren't speaking God these days.

NFJ: You note that even the word "God" needs attention. When we say God, what are people hearing or sensing overall, and do we who mean God revealed in Christ still need modifiers?

JM: I think a better approach might be that the whole framework by which we engage the conversation has to shift. In other words, if you just create "evangelical Jesus," then somebody out there on Twitter who uses #evangelicaljesus will end up finding it and you'll have the same problem.

What if we were to engage in our local communities in active conversation about these words, what the problems are with these words and what we think these words mean or should mean for us in our day? Most people are not willing to do that hard work.

Let's say a pastor says the word sin is really off-putting to people. But his answer is not to intentionally lead the congregation to reimagine sin or to re-engage the word sin, but merely stop using the word. He may start substituting it with a word like brokenness — never having dealt with the problem at the root.

So rather than just adding modifiers, I'm suggesting a process of resuscitation — actually bringing that word back to life.

NFJ: Why is it important that we engage in this way?

JM: This book took me four and a half years to write, and a year of that was devoted to just studying linguistics. What I found is that languages die every year. Right now,

the language of the Christian faith is dying in America. If current trends persist, it will be nearly extinct by the end of my lifetime.

So what I wanted to know was: If a living language can die, can a dying language be revived? And I found there are a number of examples that this is true. Hebrew is a great example.

My neighborhood in Brooklyn is a Hassidic Jewish community. You will hear Yiddish there, which linguists call a comeback language. There are lots of examples of comeback languages that have gone to the brink and have come back.

The way they came back was that you had a renewed commitment among the leaders — which would be pastors, magazine editors, bloggers, podcasters, writers, speaker, influencers — and a renewed commitment among folks around their kitchen tables and their coffee tables, coworkers at the water cooler or in the lunch group would begin to revive that language.

They would begin to use those words again. None of those languages came back with a whole, brand-new vocabulary. They always change. Syntax shifts, the meaning of certain words will often morph a little bit. So that's really what I want to happen with the language of faith — that it would become a comeback language.

C.S. Lewis talks about this in a book called *Studies in Words*. He talks about how languages can continue to exist and to survive because every language will either change or die. He talks about a word being like a tree with the trunk as the central concept. But over time new branches sprout.

It's not an effective means of bringing back a language to just cut down all the trees and plant new trees. You haven't dealt with the real problem, which is its concept that bothered you. The problem, for one thing, wasn't the combination of letters; it was actually the concept. So we have to deal with the concept that the word points to or else we end up solving a problem that doesn't exist and ignoring a problem that does.

The other thing is that Christians, in addition to Muslims and Jews, call ourselves "people of the Book" which points to the

fact that we are a people who have a central, sacred text. So when you just stop using a word like God or sin, once you return to the text you realize really quickly that that word didn't go away; you just stopped using it. And you end up bumping into it again and again.

So the only way to deal with language revival in the Christian tradition is to become once again what Walter Brueggemann called a "community of utterance," and to speak God with each other so that we breathe new life into these words, that they become life-giving and no longer soul-sucking. That is ultimately how you revive a dying language.

NFJ: Sociologists refer to speech communities, of which churches certainly are, as having familiar language that's not widely known. Sometimes you'll hear ministers speak to a city council or civic club as if they're the same audience as their congregations. As part of what we have to do in conveying a Christian language, shouldn't we have an awareness of our audience?

JM: Yes, I think we do have to have an awareness of our audience. We also have to have the commitment to understand our audience on an ongoing basis. What often happens is that believers engage in apologetics, and there really is no curiosity.

The goal is merely to argue with the other person, assuming that you've already figured it out and that you will, hopefully, convince them you're right and they're wrong, and they will now agree with you. That tends to be an approach that discourages nonbelievers from wanting to engage.

A better approach is to have a softer touch, I think. To discuss a concept with a friend or a neighbor or a coworker or a child of yours and to say, "What do you think this means? Why do you like or dislike what this word means? Let me explain to you what I think this word means."

Engage in community with other people seeking to understand before seeking to be understood, listening at least as much as talking. Most people don't have these types of conversations, and I think that oftentimes the system is perfectly designed to get the results it's getting.

We have these kinds of conversations in ways that — if living in a Muslim-dominated or Hindu-dominated culture — we would resist with people of the dominant faith. We sort of fail the golden rule by merely trying to coerce people without listening to them.

I think many people in the United States do have a spiritual curiosity. And if we are willing to have conversations with them at eye level rather than from on high, I think we'll find that many people are more amenable to speaking God than we might assume.



"If you ever want to know why something is going on, just ask what was going on before what is now going on was going on."

NFJ: So, in other words, don't be arrogant.

JM: There you go.

NFJ: You did some research with Barna, and I want to talk about that. I have issues with Barna in that they define "practicing Christian" apart from following Jesus, and their six criteria for embracing a biblical worldview only acknowledges that Jesus was sinless; that's it. However, I assume that you found the research on your particular topic to be helpful. Is that correct?

JM: Well, I would say that I have some of the same critiques. The way that they define evangelical, the criteria for me is just not workable.

NFJ: But what did you find in your research?

JM: I found that, despite widespread religiosity — you know, 70.8 percent of Americans at least claim to be Christian — only seven percent say they have a spiritual or religious conversation regularly, which is about once a week. That number, to me, was staggering.

Then I went on to ask why they didn't, and those answers were also staggering. We've talked a little bit about that: being criticized, causing arguments, ignorance about what the word means. That, to me, is also fascinating.

The other piece of data (not from Barna) I thought was fascinating is the Google Ngram data. Google has basically compiled all the books, all the magazines, all the journal articles, all the transcripts, all the speeches, everything going back hundreds of years and made it searchable. So you can search the frequency of word use over time.

What's been interesting to see is a massive decline — what we would call a demoralization of language — in the English-speaking world by up to 50 percent or more of words like grace, mercy, love, sin, evil, patience.

Courage words are in decline. Kindness words are in decline. Compassion words are in decline. Economic languages are on the rise. Individualistic terms are on the rise, but communal language is on decline; ethical language is in decline.

There are these massive trends shifting in our language, and most people have no idea that in the English language most spiritual and religious words in America are now endangered species.

NFJ: Some words gain pejorative meanings over time, and others are intentionally redefined for political purposes. It's funny

how compassion is considered a weakness now among some people. And there are particular terms such as family values and religious liberty that are being redefined for political purposes. Does that impact our spiritual conversations?

JM: Yes, I think so. Words always gain meaning from the communities in which they're used. So, if those types of words and phrases have been co-opted and redefined, the question is: Are the masses comfortable with that — or do we want to work together to reclaim those terms? I think most of us, with many of those terms, would like the opportunity to do that, but we just don't know how.

I hope my book will be something of a manual for how people can begin reclaiming words they feel have been hijacked or co-opted by other people in the culture.

NFJ: You've given a lot of attention to developments in the Southern Baptist Convention recently, especially surrounding Paige Patterson's removal as seminary president. Is it a personal interest or just professional analysis of religious culture or both?

JM: I think it's only personal in the sense that I have such a rich Southern Baptist heritage, and I don't dislike that heritage. I have a great relationship with my dad [former SBC President James Merritt] and I was texting with some denominational leaders today, who I disagree with on a lot of issues but have great respect for. That tradition taught me to love God and love the Bible. That tradition gave me a lot of good gifts.

Because I have such a rich Southern Baptist heritage, a lot of people said: "Hey, we don't know anyone who can kind of translate what's going on here. Can you help us do that?"

As an opinion columnist, you can't write about everything. So you look for areas

where you have expertise and interest. I'm obviously very interested in this community that raised me, and I have deep expertise. So it was an easy fit for me to write about the whole Paige Patterson thing.

Obviously, the news was driven by someone else; I was just doing analysis pieces. It was largely *The Washington Post* doing a lot of the reporting. But then, once you have the reporting out there, the question is about the implications. So what does this mean?

That's where I was able to come in as a commentator and help people understand from an analysis standpoint. So I guess it was personal in a sense that I have deep roots, and it was professional in the sense that it just made sense for me as a columnist.

NFJ: You give attention in your book to "heresy hunting" whereby Christians place correctness over compassion in a lot of cases. How have you faced and dealt with these heresy hunters?

JM: I find that increasingly I don't. I'm in a place in my career where I can become a heresy-hunter hunter. And a lot of people — and I've been guilty of this — end up doing to others what they don't like about others. They become that which they dislike.

What I'm trying to do increasingly is not go out and offend people who offend me, attack people who attack me. I think that the marketplace of ideas is important. It's helpful for us to have important conversations about a range of religious and political issues. But I try not to work out personal vendettas in public.

I do that by having a really complex accountability system, so I have people in my life. My dad is one of them. Before I publish a piece, oftentimes I'll send it to my dad. He may say, "Hey, I don't think you've been charitable here, or I don't think this is true, or I think you need to reword this, or I think if you took the edge off here people would actually hear what you're trying to say."

It's been helpful for me to have a group of what I would call wise counselors in my life, or iron sharpeners, who can help me do that. When I was younger I was kind of the rogue, free-wheeling opinion columnist,

*"Compassion words are in decline.
Economic languages are on the rise."*

and probably wrote some things in that day that I wish I hadn't written.

NFJ: You write of the importance of mystery in the life of faith, and that's a word too often equated with doubt — as if that's a bad word — or with a lack of firm faith. When did you discover mystery as a part of your faith, and how have you recovered that word for good?

JM: I was a teaching pastor at my dad's church outside Atlanta for a number of years, and then I became a full-time writer, and shortly after that I moved to New York. In the process I began discovering more contemplative practices and more contemplative and mystical writers throughout Christian history that I wasn't even aware of — people like Henri Nouwen. I didn't grow up reading Henri Nouwen, and when I discovered him it was like this dry well had been refilled and there was a whole world there.

These folks were using this word "mystery," which had not found a prominent place in the spiritual vocabulary I was given. But then I'm reading the Scriptures and finding that word pops up again and again. In fact, Christians are described in the New Testament as stewards of the mystery of God — not stewards of the certainty of God, but of the mystery of God.

I thought, "How am I stewarding mystery in my life?" And I realized I wasn't stewarding it; I was ignoring it. I didn't even have a place for it.

It was a multiyear period where I began to encounter mystery. That really meant learning to speak some holy words, the words "I don't know." I think I have often engaged in the idolatry of answers, and actually questions can be holy, and God can actually show up in the liminal "I don't know" space between the question and the answer.

But I only looked for God in the answer. And it's been a process of beginning to see God in the question and in the wrestling and in the answers when they provide themselves. So that has been a big journey for me.

If you look at this book, the first chapter opens up with, "A life coach once told me..." and the last chapter opens up with, "A friend of mine who is a mystic once

told me..." It's a subtle signaling that in this four-and-a-half-year period that I wrote the book I was moving from this kind of didactic, 1990s, post-enlightened Christianity that's obsessed with certainty to a more mystic experiential phase that is still very much Christian but has a prominent place and space for mystery.

NFJ: If mystery is such an important part of your spiritual life, and it's so clearly biblical, there had to have been an intentional effort somewhere in our Southern Baptist upbringing to downplay that. Do you think there was a fear of mystery? Why was that not part of our vocabulary and experience?

JM: What I've learned as a student of religion in American culture is that if you ever want to know why something is going on, just ask what was going on before what is now going on was going on.

American culture and Christianity in America tend to be highly reactionary. When you look at the early 20th century and the rise of Darwinism, the rise of biblical criticism, you go into the Cultural Revolution with all the kind of assaults, or perceived assaults, on the Christian faith.

Then there was an effort by some Christians, and it was intensified with the work of Mark Noll who wrote a book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, that people in certain faith communities were awakened to the lack of intellectual rigor.

I think there was overcompensation for that when I was growing up. If you went to EE [Evangelism Explosion] training or read [Josh McDowell's] *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, or [Lee Strobel's] *A Case for Christ*, it was all about figuring out the answer.

It wasn't about sitting with the mystery. And there was a need — or at least a perceived need — among Christians to start providing some cogent, reasonable answers to the biggest questions of faith. And I think what we're seeing now is another reaction to the reaction.

You're seeing among millennials in particular that there's a value for doubting, a value for question-asking. They're returning to liturgy, for example, and the Eucharistic services. This is, again, another reaction to

the reaction to the reaction.

So I think that what you saw in late-20th century Christianity, mystery was overlooked in an effort to solve the problem of a lack of intellectual rigor.

NFJ: In writing this book, where did you come out in a different place from where you went in?

JM: Lots and lots. People who have seen my faith journey have often asked whether I've become more liberal or more progressive. And the answer is no, actually. Depending on how you define those words, maybe I fit those categories.

But the real trajectory of my faith, particularly in this period, has not traveled across the conservative-liberal axis. I've moved from a closed-handed faith to an open one. I'm more open to possibilities; I'm more open to changing my mind; I'm more open to listening to people with whom I disagree. I find that I just have a far more open-handed faith.

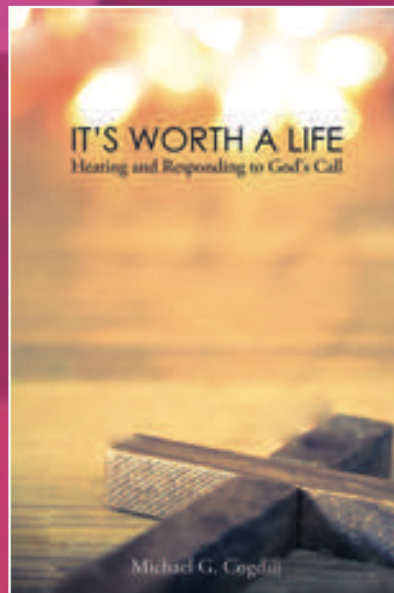
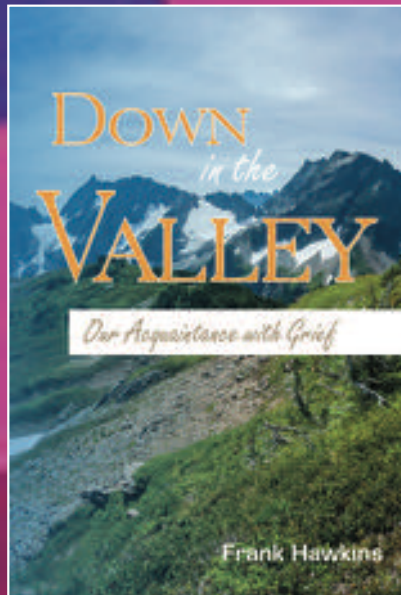
For a lot of people that feels uncertain or unsure. But I will tell you, I'm more in love with Jesus today than I was five years ago, and I'm more committed to living out the Christian faith than I was five years ago.

The other day I was at a party here in Brooklyn and someone asked, "Have you ever thought about quitting God?" I said that I don't even know how at this point. I'm so bought in; I'm so committed. But what that commitment looks like now is much different than what it looked like when I was a child or even an adolescent. I think I'm just more open.

Karen Armstrong, a religion writer, talks about how our conceptions of God arise about the same time as our conceptions of Santa Claus. When we grow up we give up the Santa Claus myth and accept our nuanced views of Christmas.

The difference is we often carry our childhood notions of God into adulthood without ever questioning them. I think I'm in a place now where I realize, to use the language of the Bible, "when I was a child I thought like a child." Now I'm a grownup, and I'm allowing these words and these concepts to mature as I have. **NFJ**

Hopeful



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Lament and Light

Losing patience with the slow train of justice, but not hope

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The first time a Kate Campbell CD landed in my inbox, in 2001, it stayed there until a convincing publicist called weeks later to follow up. Leaving the office I grabbed the hymns-plus-original-songs CD, *Wandering Strange*, and played it in my car.

The moving lyrics and Kate's mellow honest voice had me driving in circles on the way home to hear more.

Shortly thereafter I met Kate on the steps of Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church, where a 1963 bombing by white supremacist terrorists killed four precious black girls and inspired one of the songs on that earlier album. After we visited the Civil Rights Institute across the street I interviewed Kate for a feature story.

Since then I have enjoyed Kate's music through recordings and in concerts, including her singing at the 35th anniversary celebration of this publication. Now when a new CD of hers arrives it quickly makes its way into my ears and heart.

Damn Sure Blue (available at katecampbell.com) is Kate's thoughtful musical response to the sad reality of resurfacing and politically emboldened white



nationalism that has many of us wondering what has happened to the dream of living in racial harmony and equality.

Most troubling, for many of us, is how fear still causes otherwise goodhearted people — many who have professed Jesus as Lord — to demonize groups of people and act so unloving toward them. As Kate puts it in the title song, "... I can't see why good people do such hateful things, but they damn sure do."

Expressing disappointment that the dream echoed by Martin Luther King Jr. decades ago — based on the example and teachings of Jesus two millennia ago — has experienced a setback, Kate in the CD's second song, "Change Should've Come By Now," laments: "I never thought I'd have to write another freedom song; I never ever thought that it was gonna take so long."

This CD contains five of Kate's original songs and a couple where she turns to Johnny Cash for inspiration — including his justice ballad about Native American/military hero Ira Hayes. Also, with the help of some great musicians, Kate blasts out the old Louvin Brothers song of eternal expectations, "The Great Atomic Power."

The overall project, however, is rooted in Kate's melodious righteous anger over remaining if not resurgent injustice and inequality. Yet her music expresses a loss of patience, but not hope.

"I'm not bitter, I'm just mad," she sings as the opening line of the title song. "I'm not broken; but you know I'm sad."

Yet she turns to self-examination in asking: "So what about me? I love to talk, but do I dare walk the walk; and look myself in the eye; or turn away and pass on by?"

Much of the fear-driven racial insensitivity and ethnic-based hostility in America



today is advanced within and by an evangelical church culture — something this singing/songwriting preacher's kid surely knows. Hence the disappointment and sadness many of us share.

"Where's the light to guide us through? Well it's not there, and I'm damn sure blue."

In "Long Slow Train," she confesses: "Jesus said, ye are the light; I just pray that he was right."

Kate doesn't leave her listeners in the dark.

In "This and My Heart Beside," she prayerfully asks, "Rock of Ages, help me please, shine a little light."

Order is important. Kate's begins the CD with the honest confession of being "damn sure blue" about the social climate in America today. Yet she ends with a blessing of hope.

"Peace, perfect peace," is a moving benediction mined from an old album by banjo-playing Grand Ole Opry star David "Stringbean" Akeman who was tragically murdered along with his wife in 1973.

Damn Sure Blue allows for expressing our frustrations and disappointments that come from social and spiritual failures — but reminds us to not give up hope or abdicate our rightful places in the journey.

"It's a long slow train we're on; made of blood and bone. Sometimes it feels like we'll never make it home; but we're still moving on."

Yes, it is, Kate. And, yes, we are. **NFJ**

Questions Christians ask scientists

Why do some people think the earth is flat?

“The world, I believe, is honestly flat.”

Thus did “Mad” Mike Hughes, a California limousine driver, explain why he launched himself 1,875 feet above the Mojave Desert in his homemade steam-powered rocket. The feat, performed on March 24 of this year, took him another step toward his ultimate goal of rising so high that he sees — or doesn’t see — the curvature of the earth with his own eyes.

Unfortunately for Hughes, commercial aircrafts, flying at more than 20 times his maximum altitude, do not rise high enough for passengers to detect the earth’s curve with their unaided vision. Only military pilots and astronauts reach the required altitudes of 50,000-plus feet.

Hughes is not alone in his suspicion of “ballers,” as round-earth advocates are sometimes called. The number of flat-earthers has ticked upward over the last few years.

Certain celebrities (for example, rapper B.o.B) are certified. Others (for instance, basketball star Kyrie Irving) have come out as “flat-curious,” and, according to *The Denver Post*, flat-earth groups have begun meeting in coffee bars and private homes in Denver, Boston, New York, Houston, Philadelphia, Phoenix and Chicago.

The First Annual Flat Earth International Conference was held last year in Cary, N.C., and the second one will take place this fall in Denver.

I find it difficult to adequately express my dismay at this trend. Unlike many ideas in science, proving the planet is spherical is not difficult. You don’t need to launch yourself into space to do it.

Just take a pair of binoculars to any large body of water and watch a ship sail away from shore. Through the binoculars you will see the ship disappear hull-first.

The highest part of the ship will be the last part seen. And this will happen no



BY PAUL WALLACE

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matter which direction the ship sails. In no case will the boat simply get smaller and smaller and disappear into a point, as it would on a flat ocean.

This has been known for thousands of years. Aristotle, in the fourth century BC, provided the first formal scientific argument in favor of a spherical earth, based on three independent observations: one from the sailing ship and two from astronomy.

He noted that every time the earth’s shadow falls on the moon during a solar eclipse, it appears as a circle. Moreover, this was true no matter where the moon appeared in the sky. Since a sphere is the only shape that always casts a circular shadow, Aristotle had another piece of evidence in favor of a round earth.

The philosopher also knew that as he ventured south, southern stars rose while northern stars sunk lower. On northward

journeys the stars in the north rose and those in the south set. These facts remained no matter his longitude.

This third line of evidence sealed the question for Aristotle: the earth is a ball. This was, as I have said, well more than two thousand years ago.

But today, in the most scientifically and technologically advanced nation on the planet, only 66 percent of adults aged 18-24 firmly believe the earth is round. Between the ages of 25 and 34 the percentage rises to a still-shocking 76 percent, and it increases steadily with age; fully 94 percent of the 55-plus cohort has never seriously questioned Aristotle’s conclusion.

That the youngest generation would doubt such a fundamental and thoroughly-verified piece of knowledge is strange, especially when that same demographic is more likely than others to accept less obvious theories such as the Big Bang, evolution and global warming.

The notion that the planet is as flat as a table is surely the most glaring example of antiscientific beliefs, but others circulate as well. Young-Earth Creationism, the belief that the universe and everything in it was created in six 24-hour periods about 6,000 years ago, dismisses an enormous amount of science.

Those who refuse to vaccinate their children also reject science, albeit a far smaller amount of it. The probability that human-produced greenhouse gases have driven global warming is better than 95 percent, but many do not take this conclusion, or the science behind it, seriously.

As a scientist I am frustrated by these anti-science movements, but in each of these three cases I can imagine why their advocates might believe as they do. Their possible motivations do not elude me.

The claims of creationists may serve to protect their idea of God; many in the anti-vaccination movement believe vaccines cause autism and are seeking explanations and

restitution for children's health problems; climate deniers often have economic interests at stake. All of these folks have very human and easy-to-understand motivations for their rejection of science.

But what could motivate anyone to deny the shape of the planet?

Let's look first at those aged 18-24. As a college professor I know two things about this group: (1) thanks to social media they have constant exposure to celebrities' opinions, and (2) they live and breathe irony (as do many celebrities). So perhaps the recent uptick in famous flat-earthers and the pleasures of satire have drawn the younger crowd. Maybe they do not really mean it.

As for flat-earthers as a whole, another rather predictable factor comes into play. The survey cited above reveals that "most flat-earthers (52 percent) consider themselves very religious, compared to just 20 percent of the general population."

Perhaps the general suspicion toward science found in many traditional religious

groups, the same skepticism that drives creationism, drives flat-earthism as well. That seems likely.

Also, Genesis 1 helps. The first chapter of the Bible describes the creation of a flat earth and suggests the structure of the biblical cosmos.

After the breath of God and light show up, verses 6-8 mention a dome, or firmament, that separates the "waters from the waters." God called this dome "sky."

Next, flat dry land emerges from the waters below the dome. Then plants, animals, and people are added to the earth. The ancient Israelites simply described it the way they and their readers saw it. They were not trying to do science in the modern sense, but this fact seems to have passed by some flat-earthers.

"Why do you believe what you believe?" asks Rob Skiba, a well-known flat advocate. "There's no way you can get a spinning heliocentric globe out of anything in the Bible."

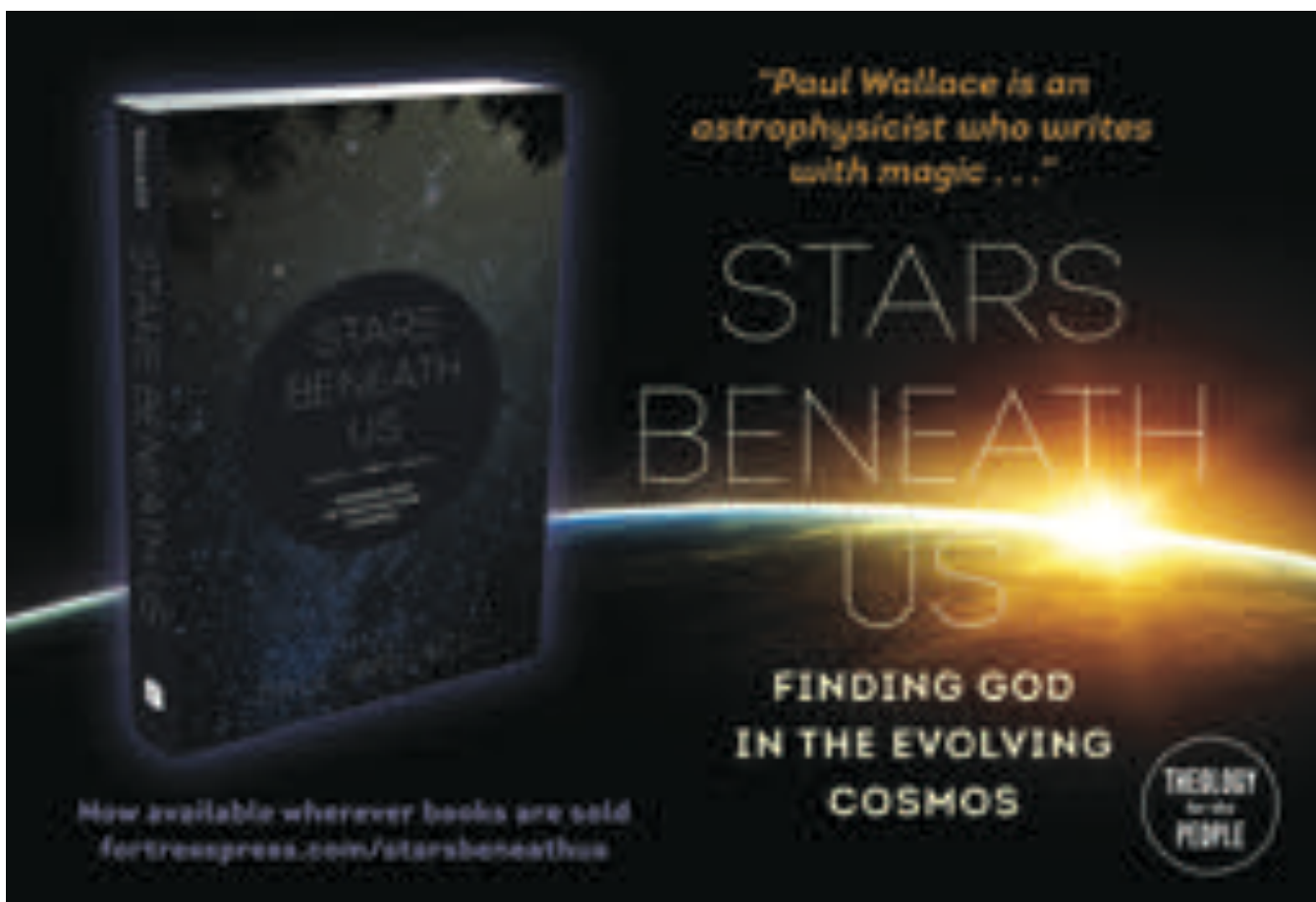
He's right, but he is mistaken to look to the Bible for answers he can literally discern with his own eyes.

The large number of 18-24-year-old flat-earthers cannot be explained by religious devotion, however, for this is the least religious group studied in the YouGov survey.

I suppose we should simply chalk up the rise of this weird conspiracy theory — for that is precisely what we have here — to America's overall drift away from traditional authorities, institutions and sources of knowledge. People seem to be grasping for whatever works at the moment, and if they can get an online following and a conference out of it, all the better.

Meanwhile, I urge you to remember these words, written by Galileo, who, 400 years ago, knew very well the earth was round and why he believed it:

"I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason and intellect has intended us to forgo their use." **NFJ**





Through the year, at the **end of the year**

BY JOHN D. PIERCE
Executive Editor

The poet Maya Angelou said,
“I have found that among its
other benefits, giving liberates
the soul of the giver.”

To early Christians, Paul quoted the words of Jesus: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

Most of us know those truths. We have spent our lifetimes embracing the important role of stewardship of our time and monetary resources.

Our challenge, most often, is having more worthy causes than we have goods to give. So we rightly prioritize our giving to support those causes we deem most worthy and most impactful.

I want to assure you that the ministry of Nurturing Faith is worthy of your giving

and that your support makes a significant impact. Simply put, we need generous, individual support in order to keep doing what we are doing.

THROUGHTOUT THE YEAR, our small but gifted team works hard to produce quality resources for thoughtful Christians who desire to grow and serve. We address the challenges facing congregational life today in honest and hopeful ways.

While others avoid relevant issues that actually impact Christian ministry today, we engage those issues in constructive ways that open dialogue and lead to progress. We plan and guide events that foster understanding and lead to new opportunities for additional resources for Christian growth.

It never stops; there is always one more deadline, one more good idea, one more opportunity to engage with others in ways that keep us moving in hopeful directions during fast-changing times.

THE END OF YEAR is an important time for securing the financial support that allows us to finish well and have a healthy start to the new year. I assure you that your gift to Nurturing Faith will make a significant impact. It is not icing on the cake; it is the cake.

So I encourage you to be generous in your support so that we can keep doing what we’re doing. Through the years so many have been faithful — for which I’m deeply grateful.

Please be faithful and generous as this year comes to an end. We have much yet to do. Your support is both greatly needed and deeply appreciated!

HOW TO GIVE

Charitable gifts may be made to Baptists Today, Inc. (Nurturing Faith) at P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318, or online at nurturingfaith.net/give-now, or by calling (478) 301-5655. **NFJ**



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