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Sitting around
the table, able to
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be praegustum terrenum partibus
for me, at least- of sacrament.
Dare we come together, then,
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around your table we know
the Holy Spirit, come to bless
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-Madeline L. Eagle

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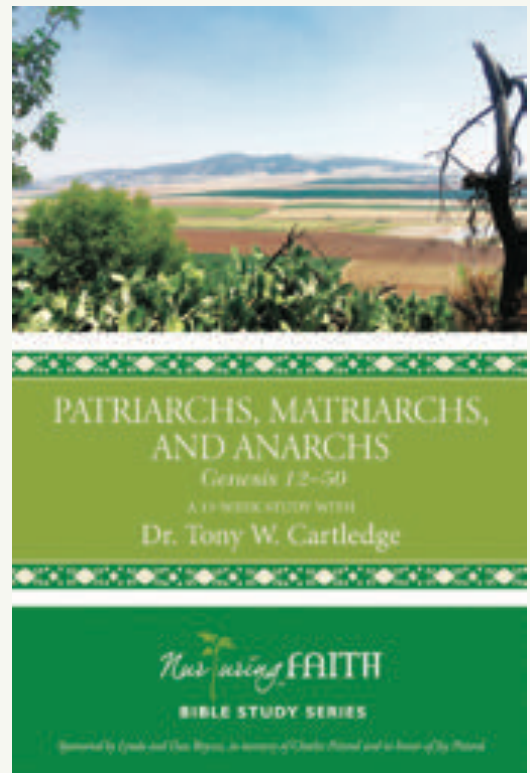
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Cover photo by John D. Pierce. Ministers Ann Zárate and Griff Martin of First Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, consider the arts — including the church-based theater company — effective means for bringing people and causes together.

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TRINITY STREET PLAYERS — The diverse cast of *Side Show*, by Bill Russell and Henry Krieger, brings to the stage a story based on the lives of conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton. Photo by Rod Machen.

ON STAGE

Austin's Trinity Street Players bring people, purposes together

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

AUSTIN, Texas — A decade ago Ann Pittman Zárate saw something otherwise unseen on the rarely visited fourth floor of the First Baptist Church here in the Lone Star State's capital city. It wasn't a ghost.

Rather the nondescript storage space, she thought, would make a perfect black box theater.

As a new seminary graduate serving a two-year pastoral residency at the time, Ann shared her vision with church leaders. Not only did she find encouragement but an initial investment of \$60,000 and eager volunteers to bring the dream of a church-based theater into reality.

CREATIVITY

"I'm a creative person, so I like to think out of the box," said Ann, who returned to the church in 2014 after being away for four years, and now serves as artistic director of theater ministry.

The Missouri native — who rotated through various pastoral roles with an emphasis on college and young adults as part of the earlier Cooperative Baptist Fellowship residency program — soon discovered ways her love of theatrical arts and congregational ministry could connect.

"The church had a history of doing some theater," said Ann, whose first involvement came with the production of the musical *Joseph and the Amazing*

Technicolor Dreamcoat. "But this was the first time the church had seen me facilitating a theater."

She suggested casting age-appropriate actors, including young adults with whom she worked. "*Joseph* went very well!"

After the two-year residency the church created a position for Ann on the ministerial team.

THEATER

The former storage room was transformed into a theater and the Trinity Street Players formed. Adjacent rooms were gradually annexed for storing costumes and props, and more recently the creation of rehearsal space.

While rooted in the church, Ann's goal

for the theater — like much of what is done by First Austin — was for it to become a community affair.

“Austin has about 130 theater companies with just five venues,” said Ann.

So when the Trinity Street Players aren’t occupying the black box theater, the space is rented to other companies bringing in revenue to support the ministry.

The fourth-floor theater also brings people from throughout the community into the church building. Directions for the downtown performances come with this good-humored guidance:

“So you wanna know where to go to see a show? Yep, you’re gonna have to walk into that Baptist church. Don’t be scared; just pretend you’re in Europe.”

First Austin carries out its artistic ministry in wide community collaboration. In 2014 the Trinity Street Players joined with the Austin Jewish Repertory Theater to produce the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*.

RELEVANCE

The congregation’s encompassing commitment to social justice is apparent in its theater participation and performances.

“Most of the shows have a theological message to them,” said pastor Griff Martin, noting that Ann is one of the church’s best preachers as well.

Ann, who along with her husband Manuel also runs the annual National Winter Playwrights Retreat in Colorado, said she intentionally chooses scripts and casts to convey important, relevant messages.

The most recent Trinity Street Players production, *The Tiny Banger* by Alice Stanley, performed last December, sought to encourage activism to change public perceptions of homelessness that result in unjust criminalization.

The playbill included contact information on local and state officials, along with neighborhood resources to serve both housed and homeless persons with needs.

First Austin’s worship and educational facilities are located in a part of the city occupied by many homeless persons. Using an approach called “devised theater,” Ann has gathered homeless neighbors weekly to write a script they also performed.

MINISTRY

The theater ministry — while community focused — ties well into congregational life. Dramatic arts are incorporated into worship — as are some performers who otherwise would never be a part of a church experience.

Ann said a two-fold approach is taken to tie the theater to Sunday worship: First, ensure actors they are welcome and safe. And, second, bring the gifts of talented people — through singing a selection from a musical, for example — to enhance worship.

Building trust between the church and theater persons who might be suspicious of or even hostile toward organized Christianity takes time but often pays off, said Ann.

Before one performance as part of Sunday worship, Ann noticed that one of the actors was very anxious. He recalled the condemnation he experienced as a gay person growing up in a Lutheran congregation.

“I hate church,” he confessed honestly. Ann assured him: “I promise you’re safe here.”

After four years or so of volunteer service through First Austin, this once fearful actor told Griff that he loves the church.

THE ARTS

“Art has the ability to speak to us in different ways,” said Ann, acknowledging that the art of storytelling is how the gospel gets advanced.

The story is enhanced and broadened by the inclusion of those who otherwise might not have a voice, she said. So Ann intentionally includes diverse persons from within the community in the performances.

“Over the past few years we’ve attempted to implement several ideals as we’ve created seasons and hired actors/

designers,” Ann said when marking the 10th anniversary of TSP.

“We’ve been intentional about diversity of casting. We’ve increased stipends for actors, offering competitive non-equity contracts. We’ve prioritized exposing Austin to new works in addition to the classics. And we’ve pushed for partnerships where possible to promote a spirit of collaboration, not competition.”

Open castings encourage diverse participation, said Ann. And to ensure the audience is diverse as well, “all Trinity Street Players shows are free,” Griff added.

“I believe everyone should have access to the arts,” said Ann. “You could be sitting next to a homeless person, a theater critic or a Baptist preacher.”

COMING SOON

“This church has always loved the arts,” said Ann. “They have a long legacy of beautiful music and now professional theater.”

The musical *Godspell* will be performed this year in the church’s sanctuary. Trinity Street Players alumni will be paired with choir members. For some roles, Ann said, she is auditioning people of color only since the choir is predominately white.

Ann said she doesn’t have to look far for exceptional talent. Several professional actors are part of the First Austin congregation.

“We’re fortunate to have a lot of good people who’ve been a part of this since the beginning,” she said.

However, the theater reaches far beyond, as well as deeply within, this broad-minded, open-hearted Baptist congregation.

“Ann doesn’t ask persons to fit into our mold,” said Griff, “but to bring their gifts and we’ll find a way to fit them in with ours.” **NFJ**

“I believe everyone should have access to the arts. You could be sitting next to a homeless person, a theater critic or a Baptist preacher.”
—Ann Zárate



Worth Repeating

“I can’t say they’re all Baptists, but we’re working on them.”

President Jimmy Carter when his family of 45 attended historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta on the last Sunday of 2018 (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*)

“Admitting any error does not fall easily from the lips of religious folk — ironically, the very people who want others to confess their sins and turn from their wicked ways.”

Mark Wingfield, associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas (*Baptist News Global*)

“While racism is certainly seen in hateful actions and words, it is also seen in our inaction and silence regarding the larger social problems that stem from our racist history and continue because of our indifference.”

Carolyn B. Helsel, who teaches preaching at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Texas (*Christian Century*)

“While the number of self-identified Christians in Congress has ticked down, Christians as a whole — and especially Protestants and Catholics — are still overrepresented in proportion to their share in the general public.”

Pew Research, reporting on the more religiously and ethnically diverse 116th Congress (*RNS*)

“The Johnson Amendment works great, protecting us from our worst instincts in religion and politics, and saving us from ourselves. Well, most of us.”

Commentator Jacob Lupfer for Religion News Service

“When cultural conservatives disengage from organized religion, they tend to redraw the boundaries of identity, de-emphasizing morality and religion and emphasizing race and nation.”

Peter Beinart, reporting for *The Atlantic* on research results by PRRI

“When the average American hears the word ‘justice,’ I think very often — unless they’ve been taught otherwise — the first idea they have is punishment, and that’s unfortunate. Biblical justice is always restorative. The point is never simply punitive; the point is to set the world right.”

Pastor and author Brian Zahnd (*Relevant Magazine*)

“A poor person never gave anybody charity, not of any real volume. It’s just common sense to me.”

Liberty University President Jerry Falwell Jr. (*Washington Post*)

“Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all; ... out of her poverty put in all the livelihood that she had.”

Jesus Christ (The Gospel of Luke 21:3-4 NKJV)

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Conviction and compassion: a balancing act

By John D. Pierce

It has been rightly said that silence is golden, but it can also be yellow. There are appropriate times to keep quiet and appropriate times to make a little noise.

It can be tricky to find the right balance when seeking harmony while not ignoring injustice.

However, life is a balancing act. Setting up camp on any extreme is rarely the best option.

Surely that is true when it comes to balancing kindness and restraint with a much-needed intolerance of untruth and injustice. There is an important difference between being civil — which is essential — and so-called harmony that merely covers up unacknowledged and unaddressed injustice.

“Keeping the peace” is never an adequate excuse for ignoring abuse of the innocent. Sadly, the church has often taken that approach.

On a personal, daily level, how do we balance a desire for avoiding conflict and preserving institutional peace with not remaining silent in the face of rampant misrepresentations and widespread discrimination?

Too often demeaned and oppressed people have heard, “We don’t want to cause trouble...” or “It’s not the right time...” from the very persons with the voices, influence and resources to make a difference by advocating and acting on their behalf.

Peacemaking is not to be confused with abdicating our responsibilities for speaking up and standing up to injustice and abuse. In fact, it is quite the opposite.

The beloved founding editor of this publication, Walker Knight, long ago coined the charge: “Peace, like war, is waged.”

Peacemaking and justice-seeking require active participation rather than ignoring lies, abuses and injustices. Silence is yellow when we simply ignore or dismiss wrongs that need to be righted so as to avoid conflict and keep the funds flowing or other acts of self-interest.

Admittedly, finding the right balance is not easy. We must choose our battles of justice carefully, while not constantly sitting on the sidelines in the false name of peace.

It is worth constantly evaluating the effectiveness of appropriately placed outrage. A barrage of tweets or constant argumentation with those whose minds are well sealed is probably less than productive.

And there is a noted difference in appropriate boldness and unproductive belligerence. Yet ignoring abuse and injustice cannot be chalked up to simply good manners.

Too often the silence we choose is chickening out when we need to crow.

“Don’t rock the boat” shouldn’t have been applied to slave ships. And we still have vessels of injustice that deserve more than our silence.

Love is sometimes expressed in ways that aren’t warm and fuzzy. I am grateful for those from Hebrew prophets to American abolitionists who didn’t consider it too risky or disruptive to speak truth to power.



Recently I was chided (kindly and understandably) by a friend who believes it is inappropriate for one Christian (namely, me) to publicly criticize any other person of faith. In doing so, he believes the Body of Christ and the Christian witness are harmed.

My conclusion, however, is quite the opposite: I believe the Christian witness is harmed when Jesus is misrepresented by a self-serving political ideology in contrast to how God is revealed in Christ.

Publicly challenging such a false notion, I think, can help those outside the fold to see that not all who profess to follow Jesus fall for such nonsense.

Beyond the public image of the Christian Church today are those whom Christ loves but who are mistreated in our culture. Speaking up and standing up for them *is* a verbal and visible Christian witness.

I appreciate well-meaning friends who call us to “just be nice” all the time. In a divisive culture, we need that constant reminder to relate to one another respectfully.

However, one can be both nice *and* extend grace and justice to those who suffer — and challenge the ways we claim Jesus but then act in contrast to his life and teachings.

The image some convey of a soft-spoken, robed teacher wandering the countryside telling warm, inoffensive stories and hugging lambs and little children might be off a bit. That kind of person doesn’t end up on a cross.

If Jesus is indeed our model for faithful living, then it is worth considering both his compassion and conviction. **NFJ**

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Remembering Jimmy Allen

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Jimmy R. Allen, a Texan who landed well in Georgia, died on Jan. 8 at his home on St. Simons Island at age 91. Earlier he was the influential minister at the interdenominational chapel in the mountain village of Big Canoe, Ga.

While intentionally ecumenical, by every definition he was a Baptist statesman. While serving as pastor of First Baptist Church of San Antonio, he was elected as the last president of the Southern Baptist Convention (serving 1978–1979) before the strategic fundamentalist takeover, and then was a key founder of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

A visionary leader, his handprints can be found on all kinds of ministry initiatives including this one (Nurturing Faith). Jimmy had a special love for media, having served as president of the SBC Radio and Television Commission and as founder of the ACTS television network.

In 1988 he received an EMMY award for producing the special, *China: Walls and Bridges*, for ABC-TV.

Jimmy served on the board of directors of Baptists Today, Inc., that hired me as executive editor in 2000. He later served consecutive terms as the board chair and was a trusted source of guidance and support for many years.

Jimmy helped me in creating the Judson-Rice Award to be presented annually by Baptists Today (now branded as Nurturing Faith). The person we had in mind for the first award presentation was unavailable due to declining health.

By my conspiring with other directors — and without Jimmy's knowledge — the inaugural Judson-Rice Award for leadership with integrity was rightly presented



A visionary leader, his handprints can be found on all kinds of ministry initiatives including this one (Nurturing Faith). Jimmy had a special love for media, having served as president of the SBC Radio and Television Commission and as founder of the ACTS television network.

to Jimmy R. Allen on Sept. 17, 2001, at the Atlanta home of then board chair Jim McAfee and his wife, Carolyn. At the time, I said that Jimmy Allen “understands church life better than most, and his wise counsel is among the first I seek.”

The following year, at a well-attended banquet in downtown Atlanta, the second annual Judson-Rice Award was presented to Tony Campolo — with subsequent award dinners held each year since.

Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler, retired executive director of Woman's Missionary Union, who also served on the Baptists Today board at the time, presented that first award to her longtime friend Jimmy in the McAfees' home.

Like the historic Baptists for whom the award is named (Adoniram Judson, Ann Hasseltine Judson and Luther Rice), she said, “Jimmy Allen has remained sturdy and true through difficulties ... and thereby encourages others facing similar tragedies.”

The tragedies of which she spoke are personally and honestly traced in Jimmy's 1995 book, *Burden of a Secret: A Story of Truth and Mercy in the Face of AIDS*.

When many church leaders were either ignoring the disease or shaming those suffering from it, Jimmy called the church to repentance and greater compassion.

In the book Jimmy unfolded the painful story of HIV/AIDS devastating his own family — and the ways churches responded with fear and exclusion at their times of greatest need. He not only stood up for his own family but also others who suffered.

Having studied under the legendary Christian ethicist T.B. Maston, Jimmy pushed Baptists — through leadership of the Christian Life Commission in Texas and in other venues — to face up to their racist history and build relationships of forgiveness, cooperation and hope.

He guided the formation of the interracial gathering and continuing collaboration known as the New Baptist Covenant — formed at the urging and active participation of his longtime friend, President Jimmy Carter. Tens of thousands of Baptists across racial and convention lines gathered in Atlanta in January 2008 for the first “Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant.”

This year, and in good timing, the Board of Directors of Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith will present its 19th annual Judson-Rice Award for leadership with integrity on April 25 in Knoxville, Tenn., to Wayne Smith — founder and director of Samaritan Ministry that ministers to persons suffering from HIV/AIDS and provides resources to churches and others.

It will be an appropriate time also to remember the impactful and graceful life of Jimmy R. Allen. [NFJ](#)

On and On

Pat Terry's new CD offers upbeat reflections on life's challenges and joys

A REVIEW BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Singer/songwriter Pat Terry likes life — here and now. He doesn't get lost in the escapism some attribute to a firm faith. And he's not afraid to say so.

“I don't want to die; I want to go on; Like the river's song; Like the blue up in the sky...” he sings in “On And On And On,” one of nine original songs on his newly released CD *How Hard It Is To Fly*.

Those of us who share that perspective will appreciate lyrics such as, “I don't care how long I live; Or how much time goes by; Or how sure I am that God forgives; I don't want to die.”

Yes, this is the same guy who four-plus decades ago helped birth Contemporary Christian Music with songs like “I Can't Wait To See Jesus.”

HEAVEN/EARTH

However, in even his biggest hit, the heaven-themed “Home Where I Belong,” recorded by B.J. Thomas in 1976 and by dozens of others including Roy Rogers, Pat penned an opening line to convey the goodness of earthly living.

One online critic (a Calvinist, I'm guessing) slammed the still-popular Christian song for not adequately wallowing in

the fallen state of humanity — as if one cannot (or should not) find enough joy, meaning and purpose in earthly living to want to hang around a good while.

This new song, “On And On And On,” said Pat in a recent interview with *Nurturing Faith Journal*, was nearly a decade in the making.



“I didn't know exactly what it was supposed to be,” he confessed, “when dealing with not wanting to die.”

To some degree, he acknowledged, it was a matter of being honest about loss and having the freedom to grieve in the midst of faith.

“When my father died in the early '70s,” said Pat, “I was a young Christian and felt a lot of pressure not to express my grief.”

He took that social pressure to mean that “to bear a testimony to life after death” required being “positive” even amid heartbreak. Later he learned that “grief is a part of life and that Jesus grieved.”

So Pat's musical message here is one of affirming life in the present tense as a joyful, divine gift — not simply a painful prelude to eternity.

“I decided I wanted to express how beautiful I find this world to be,” he said. “I wanted to celebrate that what is here now is from God as well.”

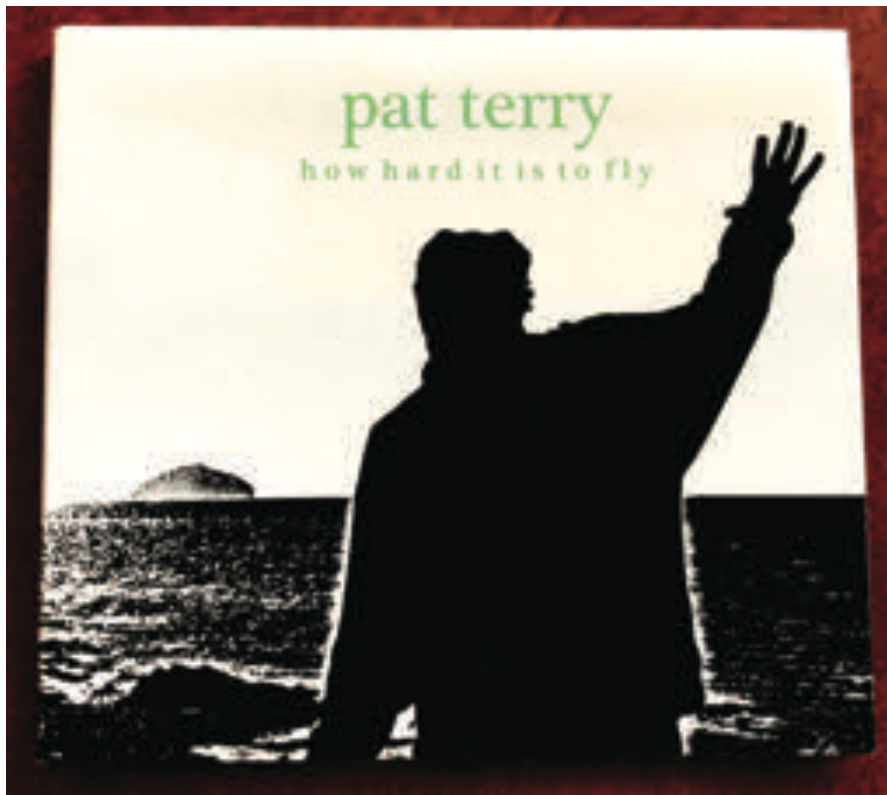
EMPATHY

Don't expect a Pollyanna overdose from this album, however. In fact, what drove Pat's new collection of songs was his growing concern about “the church's willingness to go down a road that seemed more about political patterns than following Jesus.”

Pat tackles empathetic themes regarding homelessness in “Clean Starched Sheets” and racism in “Whose Good Ol' Days.” An overarching theme, he said, is one of being true to your professed values.

“I've thought a lot over the last few years about empathy,” he said. “If you can put yourself in someone else's shoes, it is easier to be compassionate and show Christ-like love.”

Pat is upfront about his disappointment with those who so publicly claim the Christian mantle but are often unloving toward the most vulnerable people.



In “Her Guardian Angel,” he sings: “The faithful she put her faith in have just broken her heart in two.”

The overall context out of which this album emerged is expressed well in the song, “Noise,” which Pat said was written early on in this project.

“I was having a hard time grasping what I wanted to say,” he said. “I was just overwhelmed; ...bombarded by all the negativity out there.”

The song seeks refuge from the loud and constant commotion stirred by politicians, prognosticators, preachers, “dyslexic stars and twerking singers, and those with itchy trigger fingers.” And there is “a tip of the hat” to Pat’s beloved Beatles’ song, “A Day in the Life.”

STARRY NIGHT

Pat does explore the afterlife, however, in his song, “The Heaven That You Know.” He asks of those already there: “Have you had your talk with Jesus? Did he answer all your questions? Did he take you where the wounded hearts are healed?”

In my favorite song on the CD, “Sky Full Of Stars,” Pat speaks of the grandeur and mystery that contribute to the divine

gift of earthly living. It is rooted in a childhood experience, around age 9, at a Royal Ambassadors church camp.

Hence the lyrics: “I was a Baptist kid, so me and all my Baptist friends; We walked down to the water; Went under and came up again.”

A young friend, the pastor’s son, Pat recalled, pointed to the majestic star-filled sky one night and asked, “Can you imagine a God so amazing to create that?” Pat said of his friend’s question: “He got me thinking about spiritual things.”

Years of mature reflection unfold in this song with lines such as: “There was so much I was so sure about; Now there’s so much I can’t explain” — and “Praying to God to help us ... Pulling on his sleeve; Asking if there’s something a fool can still believe; He said, ‘Just look up, sonny, at that big ol’ sky full of stars.’”

TIMING

While this album took a while to come to fruition, Pat said it reflects much of his thinking over the past two or three years in particular. Taking his wife Pam’s advice, which is always a wise thing to do, Pat set a firm date to complete the project.

“When I write a song I always demo it,” he said, meaning that he does an initial recording so other artists know how he intended the song to be heard.

Deciding to put these particular songs on his own album, and with the self-imposed deadline, Pat took to the cozy but high-tech studio behind his suburban Atlanta home. He created the desired sound by providing all the lyrics, voices and instrumentals on the CD — with only his dog, Apple, contributing to the project.

For the CD to be available at the premiere concert, Pat said he stayed up 36 hours during one stretch of studio work. Listeners will likely appreciate the effort.

Pat’s music has evolved over the decades, with sensitivity to what is happening in the world and how faith shapes and is shaped by cultural shifts. His perspectives give listeners both phrases and sounds to hang onto for a while.

The up-tempo title track, “How Hard It Is To Fly,” came late in the production process, he said, and has a similar sound to some of Pat’s solo work in the ’80s. The song’s purpose, he said, is to “encourage people to keep going” when things get tough in life.

And his musical approach? “Just plugging in the guitars and playing what I wanted to play.”

HEAR/SEE

While Pat has written songs for many country music artists including Kenny Chesney, John Anderson, Tracy Byrd, Confederate Railroad, The Oak Ridge Boys — and number-one hits for Travis Tritt, Sammy Kershaw and Tanya Tucker — his earliest and strongest musical influence remains the Beatles. This latest CD has more of a rock vibe than a country sound.

How Hard It Is To Fly is available along with some of Pat’s earlier recordings at patterryonline.com.

Also, there is a contact link should you want to reach out to Pat. He is available to sing and share in a variety of settings including churches, coffee houses, musical venues and house concerts. Just let him know of your interest, and he will work on scheduling. [NFJ](#)

#churchtoo

It's time for Christian communities to talk about sexual harassment, abuse

BY PAM DURSO

In 2006 a young black woman named Tarana Burke coined the phrase “Me Too” as a way to help women who had survived sexual violence. Fast-forward 11 years. The phrase is no longer a slogan; it became a movement.

HASHTAG

The last few months of 2017 were filled with explosive revelations and immediate reactions. On Oct. 5, 2017, Harvey Weinstein, the larger-than-life Hollywood executive and Oscar-winner, was forced to take a leave of absence from his own company after a *New York Times* published exposé.

The article revealed that he had for decades been sexually harassing and abusing women, including his own employees and young actresses. One of those actresses, Ashley Judd, was quoted in the *Times* article: “Women have been talking about Harvey amongst ourselves for a long time, and it’s simply beyond time to have the conversation publicly.”

Ten days later actress and activist Alyssa Milano tweeted, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” By the next morning her tweet had received 55,000 replies and the hashtag was trending as number one on Twitter.

The #metoo hashtag gained momentum, sweeping throughout the world to focus attention on the magnitude of the problem.

CHURCH TOO

The next month a new hashtag showed up on Twitter. Emily Joy and Hannah Paasch used #churchtoo and told their stories of being abused by church leaders.

Their hashtag also caught fire, and hundreds of women and men shared their own horror stories about the church on Twitter.

Responses to these hashtags tell us sexual harassment is all too common. It happens in workplaces, schools, state houses, churches, synagogues and homes.

Sexual harassment is any unwelcomed sexual advance, any request for sexual favors, and other inappropriate verbal and physical conduct of a sexual nature, including jokes, vulgar language, demeaning treatment, unwanted physical touches, and assault and rape.

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center reports that one in five women (20 percent) and one in 71 men (1.4 percent) will be raped at some point in their lives. The Center also reports that 91 percent of sexual assault victims are women.

Anecdotal evidence tells us that nearly every woman has experienced sexual harassment at some level. Sexual harassment is pervasive in our culture, and women are the primary victims.

PAINFUL STORIES

As people of faith, what can we learn from these justice movements? What can we learn from victims and survivors?

First, we have to listen. Not long after

#churchtoo gained traction, I sat down and read on Twitter victim story after victim story.

The experience was painful. But here is what I “heard” and learned:

Victims of sexual harassment within the church are most often blamed. They are told their clothes are too suggestive, they are too pretty or too appealing, or they were in the wrong place.

In other words, the victims are told they caused the abuse. They are responsible for what happened. Victim blaming is an all-too-common response.

Many victims are told they weren’t abused. What happened to them is not abuse; it is normal, common practice, and thus the victims should not be so dramatic or emotional. They should not make such a big deal out of the words, touches or assaults.

Victims who reported are not believed. Their stories are dismissed. Their ministers and/or other church leaders refuse to listen to them. Or their stories are completely discounted, and they are accused of lying.

A very high percentage of victims leave the church. Some leave because of the treatment they received from fellow church members when they reported the abuse. Others leave, believing that a God who allows such pain is not trustworthy. Many victims never return to church, and thus, the initial abuse results in a secondary trauma for clergy sexual abuse victims.



NEEDED CHANGE

None of these stories from victims should surprise us. Indeed, their experiences are as old as history itself. Read the book of Genesis.

The stories of women in our sacred text mirror the stories of recent #church-too victims: women in Genesis were often blamed for the abuse they received. They were labeled as troublemakers or liars. Their stories were dismissed, discounted, disbelieved.

The #metoo movement has brought much needed change for victims. American society has responded by applying pressure to many abusers, removing them from places of power and influence.

Churches, however, have been slower to respond, despite the news stories that are posted and published each week about clergy sexual abuse. So, how should we as people of faith respond to #church-too stories? Here are my best suggestions:

Believe the women. When women share stories of victimization by clergy, believe them. Listen to them. There are many reasons why the church should be quick to believe women — theological, psychological and legal reasons.

Women are made in the image of God and deserve to have their voices heard. Dismissing victims' stories causes long-term damage. It denies the value of victims, crushes their confidence in the church and damages their souls. Dismissing women's stories can have legal ramifications for congregations — lawsuits and litigation may very well be a possibility.

For those who say that believing the women gives too much latitude for false reports and unsubstantiated claims, and that it endangers the careers of men, take a look at statistics and do the math.

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center, in its studies of sexual abuse reporting, noted that false reports occur between 2–10 percent of the time. That means that 90–98 percent of the reports made by women are true.

Believe the women because the statistics are overwhelmingly on their side. Women rarely, rarely make false reports.

Victims of sexual abuse have too much to lose, too much trauma to endure, too great a chance of being discounted and blamed to report falsely. This is especially true for the victims of clergy sexual abuse.

To believe the women means that each report should be taken seriously. Each potential victim should be met with compassion, care and grace. To believe the women does not mean that reports are not to be scrutinized. The opposite is true. Each reported incident deserves a full and thoughtful investigation. Due process must be followed every time. To believe the women requires prompt, appropriate and active pursuit of the truth.

Provide safe places for victims to tell their stories. In reading the #church-too stories of women, I discovered that many desperately hoped for a safe space in which to tell their truth. They craved the freedom to speak and be heard.

One woman tweeted, “Story connects us. Story saves us.” Churches can respond to victims' pleas by opening doors, making space for storytelling. In partnership with trained counselors in our congregation or community, we can provide support groups or discussion groups for victims to gather and talk with each other.

Consider inviting those who are ready and are open to sharing to tell their story to small groups or leadership committees. As a ministry to and with victims and survivors, make space in your church for their hard stories.

Educate your congregation. Church leaders, employees and members must be made aware of what constitutes inappropriate behavior, which means that professional training should be provided for all employees and volunteer leaders. Expectations, standards and policies regarding clergy sexual abuse must be clearly communicated on a regular, scheduled basis.

Preach sermons about sexual violence. There are plenty of scriptural texts from which to choose.

Addressing this hard topic from the pulpit will make some in your congregation

uncomfortable. It will make others angry, but it will be life-affirming and validating for many members, some of whom will tell you their stories and some of whom will never mention that they have been violated.

Read Daniel Glaze's post about preaching on #metoo, found on the Baptist Women in Ministry blog (bwim.info/pamsblog/preaching-metoo-by-daniel-glaze/). Glaze is pastor of River Road Church, Baptist in Richmond, Va.

Read Micah Pritchett's sermon, “Destructive Walls and Healthy Boundaries,” also found on BWIM's blog (bwim.info/clergy-sexual-misconduct-task-force/destructive-walls-and-healthy-boundaries-by-micah-pritchett/). Pritchett is pastor of North Broad Baptist Church in Rome, Ga.

Pray for victims. Add victims of sexual violence to your church's prayer list. Mention victims in community prayers. Many churches pray for victims of natural disasters and/or gun violence. We should do the same for victims of sexual assault.

Pray for healing for the victims. Pray for justice. Pray for grace. And, God help us all, pray for the perpetrators.

Make use of available resources. In July 2016, Baptist Women in Ministry (BWIM) and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) partnered to form a Clergy Sexual Misconduct Task Force. The Task Force in 2018 produced an educational video, “Safe Churches and Ministers,” with an accompanying discussion guide and leader's guide.

The Task Force also assembled a collection of guidelines for congregations called “Clergy Sexual Abuse Prevention Recommendations for Churches.” These resources may be found at bwim.info/safechurches.

NOW IS THE TIME for a conversation about the pervasive problem of sexual abuse in our society and in our churches. Now is the time to think together about ways church leaders and congregations can speak truth, offer care to victims and survivors, and lead in the work for change. **NFJ**

—Pam Durso is a church historian, professor and the executive director of Atlanta-based Baptist Women in Ministry.

A year of discoveries

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

Recently *Christianity Today* released a list of “Top Ten” archaeological discoveries in 2018, and several important things were announced during the year, though some of them had been found earlier.

For example, on the first day of 2018 Israeli archaeologists excavating a large house later demolished and covered by an ancient Roman street near the Western Wall and Temple Mount discovered a seal impression dating to the sixth or seventh centuries BCE, when the first temple still stood.

Seal impressions (also called bullae) are fairly common in excavations, consisting of a small lump of clay that was once used to seal an important document, then impressed with an image from a carved seal, perhaps on a ring or a pendant, indicating its owner.

What's unusual about this seal is it depicts two men wearing striped robes facing each other, and the title *sar 'ir*, meaning something like “governor of the city,” a title used twice in the biblical record (2 Kgs. 23:7, 2 Chron. 34:8).

Though similar seals have appeared on the antiquities market, this is the first one to be discovered in a scientific excavation that could establish the provenance and date, confirming the existence of a position described in the Bible. That's an important find.

An excavation at Abel Beth Maacah in the far north of Israel turned up an intriguing head made of faience, a glass-like product. The head dates to the ninth century BCE, when representational art was



Photo by Clara Amit, Israel Antiquities Authority.

extremely rare, and it is similar to the way Egyptian art depicts Semitic people.

Since the image is so finely done and wears what appears to be a crown (or headband?), it is widely thought to depict some elite person, likely a king — but who?

Abel Beth Maacah was located in a contested border area where Israel, Aram (Syria), and Tyre met. If the head indicates a king, would it be Ahab of Israel, Hazael of Aram, Ethbaal of Tyre, or someone else? We can hope further excavations may turn up more clues.

At the top of the *Christianity Today* list is a ring found 50 years ago at the Herodium, a monumental hill and palace built by Herod the Great several miles south of Jerusalem as a retreat from the city and the location of his tomb.

The old find, a thin ring made of copper alloy and quite corroded, was recently cleaned and photographed using modern analytic techniques, enabling researchers to identify its inscription, in Greek letters, as *Pilatō*.

Some Christian news outlets immediately announced that the personal ring of the man who ordered Jesus' death had been found. There may have been a connection

between the ring and Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator who ruled Judea from 26–36 BCE, but it's highly unlikely to have adorned his finger.

Most inscriptions of Roman rulers have their names in the nominative or genitive cases, but “*Pilatō*” appears to indicate the dative case, typically used for indirect objects. In that sense, it could be rendered “to Pilate,” or “for Pilate.”

The ring was cheaply made and shows no great workmanship, depicting only the inscription surrounding a large bowl called a krater, a common image in Judaic art at the time.

Is it likely that the rich ruler of Judea would wear such a cheap ring, rather than something made of silver or gold and precious stone? His personal seal, surely, would have been engraved more carefully and would probably have used the fuller version “Pontius Pilate” and included his title as “Prefect,” as in a stone inscription found at Caesarea.

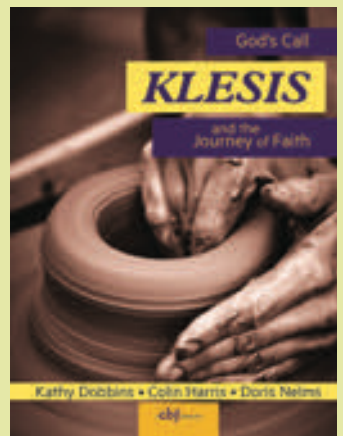
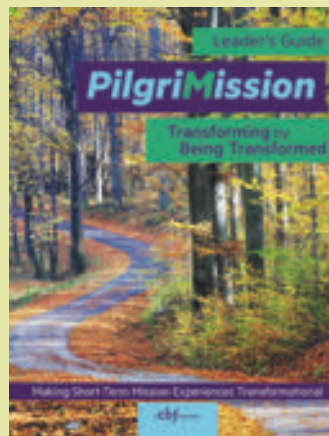
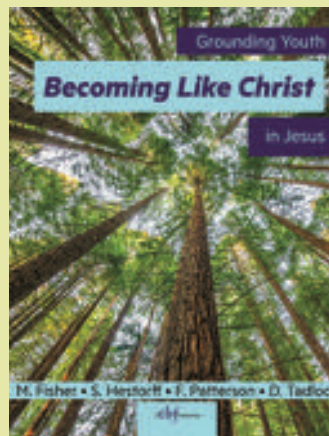
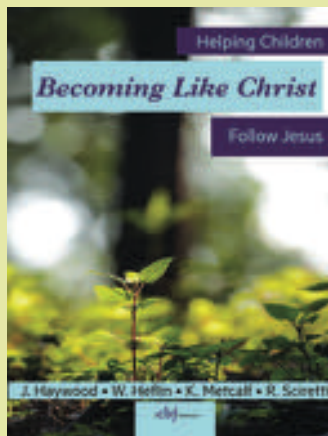
It is the sort of ring worn by soldiers or run-of-the-mill government officials. Although the name “Pilate” was not particularly common, it could have belonged to someone in that category who shared the same name.

More likely, perhaps, the ring could have been used by a government administrator in charge of handling shipments of supplies, packages, or documents to Pilate. There is evidence that Pilate made use of Herod's previous palaces in both Jerusalem and Caesarea, so the Herodium could have served as an administrative center.

Whether the man who ordered Jesus' death ever wore the ring is unlikely, but the appearance of his name is yet another chilling reminder of the real political situation under which Jesus lived — and died — but will never be found in an excavation. **NFJ**



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When a God-sized dream comes true

BY BILL SLATER

Wake Forest Baptist Church celebrated its 175th anniversary in 2013 and was continuing to experience significant growth in membership. Sunday school classes were meeting behind partitions, in glorified closets, in two nearby seminary buildings — anywhere and everywhere possible.

Youth had no space to call their own, having to pack up and take down every Wednesday and Sunday as they met offsite in the seminary chapel basement. Months of endless meetings and going to God in prayer led to no clear resolutions in discerning where and how to do ministry in the limited spaces.

The church was totally landlocked, situated on the campus of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary — a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship church on an island in the sea of a Southern Baptist Convention seminary. Then came a glimmer of hope, and ultimately a dramatic and totally unexpected result.

Beyond all expectations and history, following a 90-minute meeting with SBC-elected seminary trustees from all over the country, and as a result of a long-built relationship between the church's pastor

and the seminary president, came forth an offer from the trustees to sell 1.8 acres of their campus property to the church for the sum of one dollar.

It was a defining moment, a hinge moment on which the future now opened up; an act of God that made front-page headlines of the local paper and that the community and church are still talking about in wonder and awe.

With long-time barriers coming down, the church moved ahead. A capital campaign was named “Beyond the Walls” — which has now become a mission statement reflecting the culture of the church and a constant reminder of the reason the new building stands.

With a plan in place to build a new facility with a fellowship hall, education wing and state-of-the-art youth center, a challenging price tag exceeding \$3 million was embraced and paid off ahead of schedule.

The historic decision of the seminary, the abundant generosity of a church with a passion to live God's dream, the remarkable difference now experienced in the beautiful new facility and youth center: all have exponentially multiplied the ministries of the church in ways never thought possible just a few years ago.

The church now hosts in its new building a Korean congregation, a community youth orchestra, numerous support groups

and ministry partners, and a fellowship hall that has become increasingly a magnet for outside groups to hold meetings and special events.

This experience serves as a reminder of several leadership lessons — including the value of building relationships with outside neighbors, whomever they may be. In the church's case it was Southeastern Seminary, which led to a trust that encouraged them to be partners with the church in allowing greater ministries to take place.

This relationship took place over years of conversations with no goals in mind other than understanding each other and learning to trust each other in a respectful manner. The turn of events created a momentum in the church's life that expanded its members' expectations of what God is able to do.

Church leadership was guided by the conviction that God-sized dreams should be the standard by which every ministry should be considered. “Beyond the Walls” was repeated and reinforced constantly as a compelling witness that what was being built was designed to fulfill a larger purpose in our community.

This emphasis led to a culture change in the church in which an outward focus changed the trajectory of the church. The church has now embraced a visioning process that has led to a fresh sense of God's future story — to continue to live large and dream big. [NFJ](#)

—Bill Slater is pastor of Wake Forest Baptist Church in Wake Forest N.C.





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Jesus the Way

By John R. Franke

In the Gospel of John (14:6), Jesus famously says that he is “the way, and the truth, and the life.” In the history of the Christian tradition this has often been interpreted to mean that those who would be in right relationship with God must believe this about Jesus.

I'd like to suggest that while belief is certainly important, the focus of this assertion ought to be on the lives those who follow Jesus are called to live.

In the next three columns I will explore the meaning of Jesus as “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” in order to sharpen an understanding of the worldview Jesus taught and embodied to his early followers.



In the midst of a world teeming with diversity, what does it mean to say that Jesus is the Way? Simply put, it means we should look to Jesus to discover how God acts in the world.

As the divine incarnation of God's love and mission, Jesus exemplifies the way of God in the world. He is sent not simply to teach us about God but to demonstrate how God wants us to live and to call us to follow his example.

And how does God want us to live? While this is obviously a complex question, the short answer is that God calls us to love.

But what does a life of love look like? This love is not an abstract notion, but is characterized by the *action* of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

As the one sent by the Father, Jesus exemplifies the way of love in his mission to the world. He then sends his disciples to continue this mission (John 20:21). Jesus sends us just as the Father sent him.

Commitment to Jesus as the Way means following him in his mission, and the mission of God, by *doing* what he calls his disciples to do.

Belief is important. If we don't believe Jesus is the Way, we're not likely to do what he says when it becomes costly or is at odds with our own interests. Among many examples that could be cited, let me mention two biblical texts that point to central elements of following the way of Jesus.

The first is found in the opening of Jesus' public ministry. He went to the Nazareth synagogue on the Sabbath and took onto himself the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus calls us to join him in his struggle for the liberation of humans from all the forces of oppression.

A second text stands at the heart of the gospel and shapes our participation in the way of Jesus, “who, being in very nature

God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:6-8).

Faithfulness to Jesus as the Way means emulating his humility by valuing others above ourselves. The affirmation of Jesus as the Way, then, means to acknowledge that it is he who shows us who God is and how God acts in the world and then to follow him in that way of life.

The way of Jesus is not simply about an inwardly focused or otherworldly spirituality so common in our culture — or the social activism often viewed as its alternative. Rather, it is the way of humility and self-denial for the sake of others as a faithful witness to the love of God.

Clearly, commitment to Jesus as the Way is not simply about belief but rather a new way of life lived for the sake of others. This is why in the commissioning of his followers at the end of Matthew he instructs them to make disciples of all the nations by teaching them to *do* all he said.

In this way Jesus calls on his followers not simply to *believe* the gospel but to *be* the gospel. This is the Jesus Worldview. **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.

Clearly, commitment to Jesus as the Way is not simply about belief but rather a new way of life lived for the sake of others.

Keep pressing on

BY GINGER HUGHES

Early in a new year we seek to keep those resolutions we wrote down weeks ago. You know, the ones where we resolved to lose some weight, exercise rigorously and cut out sweets.

Or perhaps we aspire to have a more organized home, cut back on spending or eat more organic foods.

While there's certainly nothing wrong with making resolutions in the hopes of improving our health or well-being, perhaps we should focus throughout the year on some other things as well.

Rather than losing weight, what if we resolve to gain courage?

Rather than walking a mile each day, what if we commit to walk alongside someone who is hurting?

Rather than working out with weights, what if resolve to work out our faith?

Rather than organizing our stuff, what if we commit to giving more of it away?

Rather than focusing on ourselves, what if we focus on others?

Rather than chasing happiness, what if we bring a smile to someone else's face?

Rather than seeking perfection, what if we seek our Perfect Savior?

In Philippians 3, the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Philippi remembering all he has accomplished throughout his life:



“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do:

Forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what is ahead, I *press on* toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

This could be a year of doing things far greater than losing weight or organizing closets. We can share more kindness, extend more grace and show more mercy. We can resolve to offer forgiveness and share generously.

We, like the Apostle Paul, can press on.

... forgetting what lies behind except for that which offers lessons or wisdom.

... embracing our heritage as a beloved son or daughter of Almighty God.

... remembering we are fully known and fully loved.

... surrendering our will and our plans to the one whose will is perfect.

“toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.” *NFJ*

—Ginger Hughes is the wife of a pastor, a mother of two and an accountant. 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.

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5,001 things to do before you die

By Brett Younger

You have not read all of the books you should have read.

James Mustich's *1,000 Books to Read Before You Die* is, ironically, not on the list of 1,000 books to read before you die.

The list, which begins with Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* and ends with Carl Zuckmayer's *A Part of Myself*, is 946 pages long. You have not read nearly enough Sophocles, Honore de Balzac or Vladimir Nabokov. Even if you have read 500 of the books — which you may think you have, but you have not — you are still 500 books short. To catch up in 20 years, you need to read a book every two weeks and ignore the books that are written in the next 20 years. Some of the books — *War and Peace*, *Les Miserables* and *The Bible* — are long, and since you cannot die until you read them, you need to start reading a lot more.

You have not seen all of the movies you should have seen.

Steven Jay Schneider has compiled *1,001 Movies You Must See Before You Die*. The list of movies you have to see before expiring fills 960 pages. "Must" seems strong for a few of these — *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Babe* and *Blade Runner 2049* — but you have no choice. Even if you have seen 500 of them — which you have not — you are 500 short. You need to watch a movie every week for the next 20 years and then start on the new list.

You have not been to all of the places to which you should have been.

Patricia Schultz has catalogued *1,000 Places to See Before You Die*. These 1,200 pages make it clear that you have not seen the world. Have you been to Robert Louis Stevenson's home in Western Samoa? What about Japan's Sapporo Snow Festival, Calcutta's Marble Palace, Turkey's Whirling Dervishes, New Zealand's Tasman Glacier, Cook Islands' Dance Festival, Buenos Aires' Tango Bars, the Penguin Rookeries of Antarctica or the Shark Rodeo at Walker's Cay in the Bahamas? Even if you have been to 500 of these places — you are not even close — you have 500 to

go before you can breathe your last. You need to go on a trip every two weeks until you catch up.

You have not eaten all of the foods you should have eaten.

Mimi Sheraton has, in 1,008 pages, written mouth-watering descriptions of *1,000 Foods to Eat Before You Die*. Before you give up the ghost you have to eat grilled pigeon, bird's nest soup, black truffles, camel hump, ox heart, ostrich meatballs and a frozen Milky Way. Even if you have eaten 500 of these delicacies — which I suspect not even Mimi Sheraton has done — you have 500 new meals ahead of you. Eat something on the list every day and you are eligible to kick the bucket in less than a year and a half.

You have not heard all of the music you should have heard.

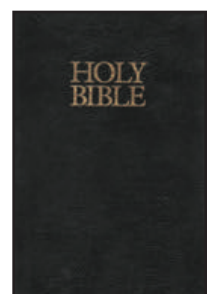
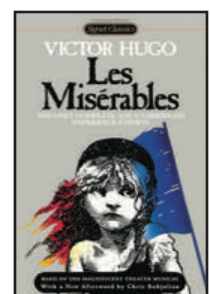
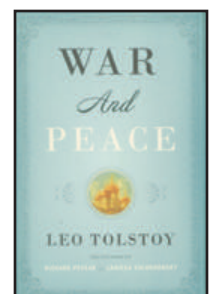
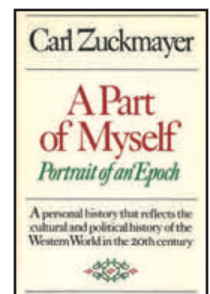
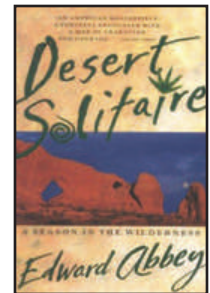
Tom Moon's list of *1,000 Recordings to Hear Before You Die* comes in at 992 pages — from Abba to ZZ Top. Are you caught up on classical, jazz, rock, pop, blues, country, folk, musicals, hip-hop and opera? You may be behind on Bach, Bartok or Beethoven, late to Little Richard, Lyle Lovett or Leadbelly, or overdue on the O'Jays, OutKast or Roy Orbison. I, for one, have not heard the '80s Rastafarian hard-core punk band Bad Brains. Listen to two new pieces of music each day and you are qualified to meet your maker in a little over 16 months.

We need to pick up the pace if we are going to do everything we are supposed to do. We have to read a lot more, watch a lot more, go a lot more, eat a lot more and listen a lot more or we are never going to get it all done.

Or maybe not. If we actually try to do everything people think we should do, we might die sooner.

There is more to be enjoyed than we can ever get around to enjoying. We need to slow down enough to read thoughtfully, watch carefully, explore energetically, eat heartily and listen hopefully. If we live that way, we might find ourselves writing *1,000 Ways to Be Grateful for What We Already Experience*. [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

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

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 3, 2019

Luke 9:28-36

Climbing Higher

Have you ever wished you had the ability to turn into someone completely different, like one of the many “superheroes” featured in the ever-popular comic books and movies?

When I was a boy, there was an old black-and-white “Superman” series on TV. People of a certain age will remember the voice-over introduction: “Faster than a speeding bullet – More powerful than a locomotive – Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound – Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird. It’s a plane. It’s Superman!”

Children have long pretended to be superheroes. Today, it’s more common for youth and adults to imagine transformation through insanely realistic video games that allow the player to become a character within the game. Still, as lifelike as they may be, even with a “virtual reality” mask, the transformation is imaginary.

Once there was a man, however, in another place and time, whose transformation was both real and so amazing that we still remember it today.

Heavy thoughts (v. 28)

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, so it’s not surprising that the text is the familiar

Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” (Luke 9:35)

story of how Jesus led Peter, James, and John up a mountain somewhere in the northern part of Israel. We don’t know which mountain it was, or how high up they went, and it doesn’t matter. 📌 It was a quiet place where they could be alone, where they could concentrate on something very important.

Jesus had just predicted his death (vv. 21-27), so we wonder if his initial intent was to seek a retreat that might strengthen his own resolve for the final leg of his earthly journey. He may also have intended to instruct the disciples further. Though Peter had confessed Jesus as the Messiah, he was much like a young child who can answer questions about salvation but who has no concept what sin and salvation really involve. Peter and his companions still thought in the same way that most Jews of their day thought: they believed the Messiah would return as a great warrior to defeat the Romans.

Jesus used that moment to explain that he had a different agenda: he was not planning to defeat the Romans, but let them put him to death – but only as the prelude to resurrection and a new beginning.

Try to imagine how the disciples struggled to wrap their heads around that notion. Jesus had not come to fight with Rome, but to deal with the spiritual powers of death and evil. Rome was small potatoes compared to that.

Jesus called out Peter, James, and John – the three disciples who were closest to him – and led them up a

mountain to pray (v. 28). The climb must have been long and tiring, for after some time praying, the three disciples grew very drowsy (v. 32). Just as they began to wander on the edge of sleep, between dreaming and wakefulness, something remarkable began to take place. 📌

Shocking changes (vv. 29-33)

As the disciples fought sleep and sought to pray, Jesus underwent an astonishing transformation. Matthew and Mark described the change with the Greek word *metamorphō*, the root of “metamorphosis” (Matt. 17:2, Mark 9:2), usually translated as “transfigured.” Luke wrote that “his face changed” (literally, “the appearance of his face became different,” v. 29). All three agreed that Jesus’ clothes glowed: Matthew added that “his face shone like the sun.”

The implication is that Jesus threw off his appearance as a Galilean peasant for a while, and took on a celestial aura. Perhaps his clothes were so bright because his body was shining through. Since this may have taken place at night (remember that the disciples could hardly keep their eyes open), the effect would have been all the more impressive.

Jesus was transformed. For a few miraculous moments, heaven and earth intersected and the disciples were witness to it – but they were not alone. All three synoptic gospels agree that Moses and Elijah also appeared with Jesus, carrying on a conversation (v. 30).

Luke wrote that the two appeared “in glory,” so perhaps their appearance was also bright and otherworldly

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(v. 31a). And why were they there?

First, the presence of Moses and Elijah served an important symbolic function. A tradition in Judaism held that Moses and Elijah would return to earth before the “Day of the Lord.” Moses represented the Law, and Elijah the Prophets. The implication is that the Law and the Prophets were fulfilled in the person of Christ.

Secondly, Luke said “they were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (v. 31b). This suggests, perhaps, that they were speaking words of encouragement or comfort for the coming days. The Greek word for “departure,” significantly, is *exodus*.

In the exodus of Israel from Egypt, God had worked through Moses to set the people of Israel free from slavery. In Jesus, a new Exodus was about to take place. God would work through the suffering and death of Jesus to set all people free from slavery of another kind.

At some point, as Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah, Peter finally found his tongue. He had no idea what to say, of course, but he had never experienced God like this – had never touched eternity like this before – and he didn’t want it to end. So he spoke up in fumbling, embarrassed words and offered to cut down limbs from the trees and build temporary shelters for Jesus and Moses and Elijah (vv. 32-33).

It seems ludicrous to think that Moses and Elijah, having “beamed down” from the glories of heaven, would have any interest in staying on in a hillside lean-to. Luke was kind enough to add, “he didn’t know what he said.”

Cloudy revelation (vv. 34-36)

Luke records no response to Peter’s request. A cloud descended with

surprising suddenness, he wrote, and the disciples were terrified. Perhaps they were terrified because they recalled how, in the Old Testament, God often appeared in a cloud.

Several ancient traditions spoke of the *Shekinah Yahweh*, the glory of God’s presence, being veiled within a cloud. In a cloud, God led the people of Israel (Exod. 13:21, Num. 14:14, Deut. 1:33). A cloud settled over the tabernacle to indicate God’s presence when it was consecrated (Exod. 40:34-38). The cloud that descended over Jesus and Moses and Elijah – and Peter and James and John – indicated that God was present. They could feel the divine nearness. Can you imagine the goosebumps?

And then, when Peter and James and John thought their senses couldn’t possibly get more overloaded, the voice of God began to speak, and they fell to their faces before him.

“This is my Son,” a voice said ... “my Chosen One. *Listen to him!*”

And then the voice was still, and the cloud departed. When the bedazed and bedazzled disciples peeked out through their fingers, there was Jesus alone, sitting on the grass, waiting for them. “This is my Son – my Chosen One,” God had said. “Listen to him!” Had they been awake, or sleeping? Was it real, or was it a dream? Could they all have had the same dream? They chose to believe it was real – and it was so real that not one of them could say a word.

Just as God’s voice had spoken at Jesus’ baptism, validating his call and his ministry, God had spoken again near the end to assure the disciples that Jesus knew who he was and what he was doing and why they had best give attention to his words. In the aftermath of it all, the three disciples were so overwhelmed that they couldn’t say anything at all – but from that point on

they never failed to listen when Jesus spoke, and they knew that to truly listen is to obey.

Given the power of this story, it’s no wonder that the lectionary celebrates Transfiguration Day every year: Jesus’ transformation carries with it the promise of our own inner and ultimate transformation – if we listen to him.

It may be hard to believe this. We live in a material world with food to cook, houses to maintain, and people to please. The story recounts a fleeting vision through sleepy eyes, a glimpse of heaven, and a call to listen. As in the Old Testament, to truly listen is to obey.

When we listen to Jesus, he calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

When we listen to Jesus, he calls us to be born again, to become a new creation.

When we listen to Jesus, he calls us to go into all the world and make disciples.

When we listen to Jesus, he tells us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and reach out to people who are in prison.

When we listen to Jesus, he calls us to live in him and be transformed.

This does not happen immediately for us, but it does happen. We can experience God’s saving grace in a moment, but our transformation is a life-long process. Listen to the way Paul described it to the Corinthians:

“And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (1 Cor. 3:18).

All of us, as we listen to Jesus, are being transformed into the same image of Christ . . . from one degree of glory to another. We can be *transformed!*

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 10, 2019

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

A Joyous Confession

We begin the Lenten season with a look at four texts from the Old Testament, each dealing with themes of divine grace and human commitment. We'll then return to the New Testament for the last weeks before Easter.

The season of Lent is designed to remind believers of their story, the story of how Christ came to earth to reveal the richness of God's love and forgiveness, to deliver us from our servitude to sin, and to call us into faithful living within God's kingdom.

Today's text has a similar purpose, except that it recalls the story of how God had been revealed to Israel, had redeemed the people from servitude in Egypt, and called them forth to live faithfully in a new land.

These ancient words from Deuteronomy remind us that we are only the latest chapter in a long story of faith and failure and reaffirmation that has been ongoing for thousands of years. Remembering the past is crucial for those who would make the most of their present and future.

An offering of thanks (vv. 1-4)

Do you belong to a church, or have you been to one, where reciting the Apostle's

Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house. (Deut. 26:11)

Creed is a regular part of worship? It may feel strange if you're not familiar with it, or if you grew up in a Baptist church. Historically, Baptists have been famously non-creedal, proclaiming "no creed but the Bible." ▽

But even Baptists understand confession, and tend to think of a "confession of faith" as integral to salvation and beginning a relationship with Christ. Today's text focuses on the twin themes of gratitude and confession, with elements of thanksgiving serving as the frame for two central and significant confessions.

Our passage derives from near the end of what critical scholars believe to be an early version of Deuteronomy (see "The Hardest Question" online for more). This early core (chapters 12–26) is often called the "Deuteronomic Code." It consists mainly of instructions for how the Israelites were to live and behave once they came into the land of Canaan.

The text is written in the form of speeches delivered by Moses as summary instructions before the people crossed into the land of promise.

The first verse speaks to a time when the people were already settled in Canaan: "When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it ..." This verse introduces a key theme of the

land as a gift from God. A form of the verb "to give" occurs no less than six times in 11 verses. ▽

To acknowledge the gift-like nature of the land, Israelites were to take some of the first of each year's produce "from the land that the LORD your God is giving you" and carry it to "the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name" (v. 2). That place came to be understood as Jerusalem. ▽

Presenting their offerings to a priest, worshipers were to confess: "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us" (v. 3).

This initial confession affirmed the worshiper's reception of a place in the land as a gift from God, a privilege to be acknowledged through periodic offerings and worship at the temple. The priest would then set the basket of produce before the altar as a sign of consecration to God and for later use by the priests.

The tithes and offerings we bring to church are likewise a way of acknowledging that our lives and our ability to earn income are gifts of God. Most of us deal in cash rather than crops, and don't have to wait until harvest season to bring an offering. Still, the ideal is to think of our tithes as being the "first fruits" of our income.

A confession of faith (vv. 5-9)

Having delivered the offering, worshipers were to utter a second confession, one of identity as Hebrews and indebtedness to God. Scholars generally regard this ancient credo as one of the

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oldest parts of the Bible. The confession, to be spoken directly to God, begins: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor ...”

The ancestor (literally, “father”) in question was Jacob, thought of as the father of the 12 tribes, and the one who “went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous” (v. 5). He is called an Aramean because he spent most of his adult life in an area known as Aram before returning to Canaan.

Hebrew tradition held that God had promised both progeny and property to Abraham. The first part of the confession acknowledges the promised “descendants like the sand of the sea” as Jacob’s fertile family grew exponentially while in Egypt – to become so “mighty and populous” that the Egyptian leaders felt threatened and enslaved them (v. 6).

The second part of the confession points to the promise of property. It testifies that, after the people cried to Yahweh for help (v. 7), “The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (vv. 8-9).

The confession reflects God’s promise to Moses in Exod. 3:8: “I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey,” symbols of the agricultural richness of the land.

The confession declares an awareness that God has fulfilled the promise, delivering the Hebrews from captivity and leading them to the land foretold to the ancestors.

Though Sarah, Rebekah, and

Rachel all had difficulty getting pregnant and the promise of progeny seemed threatened, God came through and Jacob’s family grew into a great multitude in Egypt. Though the Egyptian rulers enslaved and oppressed the Hebrews, God delivered them in mighty ways and brought them to the promised land.

What is at the heart of *our* confessions? Whether we recite something like the Apostle’s Creed or a similar confession of faith, the focus is not on rules for living, but on our belief that God in Christ has intervened to deliver us from bondage to sin, to empower us with the Spirit, and to bring us into the Kingdom of God.

A celebration of goodness (vv. 10-11)

When we remember what God has done for us, we should be motivated to respond with worship and thanksgiving, including the act of giving back to God. Thus, as the Hebrew worshiper concluded his confession of God’s deliverance and promise, he or she concluded “So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me” (v. 10).

Following the rituals of offering and confession, the Hebrews were to worship in another way: through celebration! “Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house” (v. 11).

It was time to party. As we enjoy fellowship meals and holiday parties with our church family, the Hebrews were to celebrate God’s goodness by enjoying the bounty of the land. Such meals would include not only everyday bread and cheese, but also rare dishes of meat and an abundance of wine.

Significantly, this was not just

a family celebration, but was to be “together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you.” Originally, Levites were priestly families who were not allotted land, but spread among the tribes to serve in various capacities. The term for “aliens” usually refers to immigrants who had come into the land seeking a better life.

The writers of Deuteronomy had a special concern for such people, calling for the Hebrews to be kind to immigrants as a sign of obedience, “so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake” (Deut. 14:29, 24:19). Elsewhere, the command to show kindness to aliens came with the reminder “for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 22:21, 23:9; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19).

Kindness to immigrants was often combined with the call for compassion for widows, orphans, and other oppressed peoples not only in the law, but also by the prophets (Isa. 1:17; Jer. 7:6, 22:3; Zech. 7:10). It was understood as an outgrowth of worship, a recognition of God’s blessing, and sympathy for the plight of others. Jesus echoed these teachings in his life and ministry, showing kindness to outcasts and outsiders along with others.

Consider the message of this text when a significant slice of Americans, including many who claim to follow Jesus, harbor just the opposite sentiment. They resent the presence of immigrants, want to send those without certain documents back to their home countries, and design walls of both concrete and law to keep more from coming in. How does this square with the consistent teachings of scripture?

The beginning of Lent is an ideal time to remember how fortunate we are, to confess our failures as well as our faith in the Lord who has redeemed us – and to remember God’s call to show kindness to all. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 17, 2019

Genesis 15:1-18

A Hair-Raising Prediction

Are you afraid of the dark? How about being in thick darkness while spooky things happen and the voice of God shakes your world? Today's text deals with just such an experience, in which Abraham was overwhelmed by "a terrifying darkness." Would you like to have been in his sandals?

A state of despair (vv. 1-6)

Today's scripture lesson drops back in time from last week's, all the way to Abraham, from Israel in the promised land to the ancestor who first received the promise.

Genesis 15 follows a chapter in which the narrator has reported a string of successes for Abram, as he was still called. With a small army of his own servants he reportedly defeated a coalition of five "kings" who had pillaged the city of Sodom and captured many citizens, including Abram's nephew Lot.

As we will see more clearly in a later lesson, "kings" is a relative term in Genesis. During the Middle Bronze Age, there were no large kingdoms in Canaan. Each city of any size considered its leader to be a king. Thus, the

And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gen. 15:6)

five "kings" Abram fought would have been equivalent to the mayors of five small cities.

After chasing the invaders across the country, according to the story, Abram freed the captives, recovered their goods, and returned them to their owners. He refused to keep even a small share, save a tithe offered to Melchizedek, the "priest of Salem," who then blessed him (14:1-24). 📖

One would think these victories should leave Abram feeling upbeat, but none of his success could make up for the fact that he and his wife Sarai still had no children, though Yahweh had promised to make him the father of many nations (Gen. 12:1-3).

As Abram lamented in despair at having no heir, the story says, Yahweh appeared in a vision, declaring "I am your shield" (compare Ps. 3:3, 28:7, 33:20) and "your reward shall be very great" (v. 1b). Divine encounters through visions are characteristic of the Elohist author, who is responsible for much of today's text (see "The Hardest Question" online for more on this). 📖

Abram was doubtful, however. He wanted children, not rewards, and despaired that he had no son to inherit his wealth and carry on his name, leaving him to name his steward Eliezer as his heir (v. 2). Verse 3 repeats the same thought in different words, probably due to the awkward combination of two similar stories.

Again "the word of the LORD" came to Abram, assuring him that his

heir would be a natural son (v. 4). God challenged Abram to go outside, look at stars in the night sky, and to count them if he could. As Abram marveled at the myriad stars, God promised that Abram's descendants would be their equal in number (v. 5).

Abram's response was so memorable that it was quoted multiple times in the New Testament and was a favorite of Reformers such as Martin Luther. 📖 The narrator declared: "And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness."

The Hebrew word behind "believed" is *'aman*, which basically means "to be firm" or "to trust." It is the root from which the English word "Amen" is derived. Abram trusted God's promise, with the result being that God "reckoned it to him as righteousness."

But what does the text mean by "righteousness"? In this context, "righteousness" is not a reference to ritual purity or perfection: it indicates a state of being right with God, which comes from trusting God and following God faithfully. This is why the Apostle Paul was so fond of the text: it reinforced his belief that salvation was through faith, not works: Abram believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness.

A covenant promise (vv. 7-11)

Though v. 6 indicates that Abram trusted God implicitly, he seems more doubtful in vv. 7-8. These verses do not follow smoothly from v. 6, and are more characteristic of the Yahwist author. God speaks to Abram, not in a nighttime vision by "the word of the

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LORD” (as in vv. 1, 4), but in a direct conversation during daylight: “I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess” (v. 7).

“I am Yahweh” is a self-description of God’s divine identity. Here, as usual, the statement is followed by a relative pronoun that says something about God. In this case, Abram is reminded that it was Yahweh who brought him to his present position of power and influence.


But Abram wasn’t satisfied: he reminded Yahweh that he was a long way from possessing the land, as God had promised. How could he possess the land if he had no children to live there and spread through it? “O Lord GOD,” he asked, “how am I to know that I shall possess it?” (v. 8).

Yahweh responded with both patience and understanding. If Abram needed further reassurance, God offered to give it by entering a formal covenant with him. The Hebrew language for covenant-making was to “cut a covenant.”

In this formal ceremony, partners entering a covenant would kill one or more animals and cut them into two parts, arranging the halves opposite each other with a space between. The two parties would then walk between the slaughtered animal parts as a way of swearing “May God do to me as to these animals if I do not keep the covenant.”

God instructed Abram to prepare for the ceremony by bringing a heifer, a nanny goat, and a ram that were each three years old, a sign of their maturity and value. In addition, he was to bring a dove and a pigeon (v. 9).

Knowing the ritual, Abram slaughtered the animals, split each of the large ones into two parts, and placed them on the ground in proper order. Because of their small size, perhaps, the birds were

not split apart, but considered as a unit, with one bird placed on each side of the path (v. 10). 

After preparing for the ceremony, Abram was met with silence. As hours passed, nothing happened: God did not appear to walk between the carcasses with him and ratify the covenant. In time, vultures spotted the dead animals and gathered for a feast, so that Abram had to chase them away. The narrative suggested that Abram waited patiently through the day, not charging God with dereliction, but trusting that Yahweh would make the next move.

He had only to wait until nighttime.

A deal sealed (vv. 12, 17-18)

“As the sun was going down,” the narrator says, “a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him” (v. 12).

Yahweh then spoke, but in a surprising way. As explained in “The Hardest Question” online, vv. 13-16 interrupt the story and are probably a later addition. The subject at hand is the birth of children and possession of the land, but vv. 13-16 jump ahead to predict that Abram’s descendants would spend 400 years “in a land that is not theirs.” The reference is clearly to the Israelites’ sojourn in Egypt. They would return from Egypt, the text says, when “the iniquity of the Amorites” (an alternate name for Canaanites) had reached a certain point.

The insertion appears to explain why the narrator believed Israel was justified in killing the Canaanites and taking the land away from them – he believed their sinfulness had reached a limit that called for punishment.

After the insertion, the natural flow of the original story returns at vv. 17-18, with another reference to

darkness after the sun had set. Whether still in a deep trance or not, Abram saw “a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch” appear and float between the pieces. Abram was not asked to follow: Yahweh bore the weight of the covenant oath alone.

Why the firepot and torch? The “smoking fire pot” might refer to a pot used to carry coals from place to place to start a new fire, but the same word was used to describe the large clay oven used for baking bread.

The meaning of these particular symbols is unclear, though we might suggest that the divine smoke and fire in combination with common household items could indicate a covenant between Yahweh in heaven and Abram on earth.

The section concludes with a summary statement: “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.” An interesting thing is that, despite Abram’s despair over being childless, the covenant focused mainly on the land: “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates” (v. 18).

But property and progeny go together: the land could not be possessed without a multitude of descendants to live in it.

Modern readers have different issues in our lives. We are not in Abram’s place, waiting for a promised string of descendants to fill an entire land. We do, however, have hopes and dreams, as well as real needs. The text challenges us to ask if we can express the same sort of faith that Abram showed, living with such faith and trust that God would “count it to us for righteousness.”

Both God and Abram showed patience with each other, and trust in each other. Could you describe your ongoing relationship with God in a similar way? [NFJ](#)

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 24, 2019

Isaiah 55:1-13

A Stunning Invitation

Relationships can be fragile. Whether intentionally or inadvertently, we all know what it is like to offend someone, and to experience the outburst – or silence – we get in return. Have you ever sought to admit your fault and apologize to someone who wouldn't accept your apology, or even talk to you long enough to hear it? That's frustrating.

We also know how easy it is to fall short of what God expects of us, and how often we need to seek forgiveness. Fortunately, God does not turn a deaf ear to our pleas, but actively desires to live in supportive relationship with us.

Today's beautifully composed passage comes from the period of the Babylonian exile. It invites the exiles to get on board with God, accept God's gift of covenant promises, and follow God both in righteous behavior and on the road back to the Promised Land. 📖

A thirsty people (vv. 1-5)

The oracle in Isaiah 55 may have been preached in a public marketplace, for it sounds like a sales pitch from someone hawking wares in the crowded streets of Babylon. Vendors selling bread, wine, milk and other foods would have

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near. (Isa. 55:6)

been commonplace in any ancient urban setting. 📖

Isaiah offered food and water said to be beyond price, but at no charge: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters," he cried. "And you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (v. 1). 📖

Passersby may have wondered if the prophet was a little crazy, for he claimed to offer free groceries, but had no visible food or drink to give.

On the surface, Isaiah of the Exile may have been promising the availability of good water and abundant provisions in the Promised Land for those who would return. On another level, he spoke of priceless spiritual food that can be found only – but freely – in relationship with God.

In either case, the prophet charged that what the exiles were buying in Babylon was not real bread, and that their efforts to build fortunes there could not fully satisfy. Instead, he offered "rich food" to those who would "listen carefully" and choose rightly (v. 2).

In addition, the prophet promised that the eternal covenant God had made with David – that his descendants would always lead Israel – would be transferred or extended to all Israel (vv. 3-5). 📖

"I will make with you an everlasting covenant," Isaiah said, echoing language from God's promise to build an everlasting "house," or dynasty, for David. The promise, however carried

with it a responsibility. Because of God's blessings, David had become "a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples" (v. 4).

Israel was also called to be a witness, no longer politically, but as spiritual guides. In particular, they were to live as a testimony before people who did not know God: "you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that you do not know shall run to you ..." (v. 5a).

While David's promised "house" was a witness to the people he ruled, Israel was also promised an everlasting future along with a commission to live as a witness to people who do not know God.

The prophet believed that if the exiles would trust God's promise and return to build up Jerusalem as a people fully committed to God's way, they would become such an inspiration that other nations would "run" to them in search of the secret to success and life that they had discovered in "the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you" (v. 5b).

An awesome God (vv. 6-9)

How does one enter this promised relationship? How does one "Seek the LORD while he may be found," or "call upon him while he is near" (v. 6)? In some texts, such as Deut. 12:5 and Ps. 105:4, "to seek the LORD" is to come and worship in the temple. For the prophets, however, seeking the Lord involved more than temple worship: it called for a commitment to following God's way. 📖 📖

The Babylonians had destroyed the Jerusalem temple in 587 BCE, so

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the prophet and his fellow exiles in Babylon could no longer “seek God” through temple worship, but God’s presence was not dependent on a special building or priestly intervention. For Isaiah, seeking God began with repentance (v. 7). Thus, he called for the wicked to forsake their wicked ways, and the unrighteous to give up unworthy thoughts. Writing at the end of the exile, the prophet may also have been encouraging people to accept Cyrus’ offer to return home and rebuild the temple while the opportunity was available.

The exilic Isaiah’s call to repentance led to a promise of pardon. If the people would seek the Lord, they would find mercy and forgiveness. The prophet declared that the exiles’ time in Babylon had paid the penalty for the sins of the ancestors. They were now free to “get out of jail” and return home to live a better life.

For some hearers, accustomed to Babylonian ways and settled in their Babylonian homes, Isaiah’s words may have sounded like foolishness. From a human point of view, the call to pull up stakes and return to an uncertain future made little sense. But God knew things the people did not know, Isaiah said. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD” (v. 8).

Human minds are limited, but God’s knowledge knows no boundaries: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (v. 9). As much as we may like the idea of understanding everything, we have to acknowledge that God remains far beyond our full comprehension, always shrouded in mystery. Still, the good news is that God wants to be found. For Christians, God’s good future can be found through Christ, who became human, in

part, to make God’s invitation clear and unmistakable.

A fruitful word (vv. 10-13)

Isaiah returned to the image of the heavens as higher than the earth and built on it to assure the people he was an authentic channel of God’s powerful and effective word. The metaphor takes on more depth when we understand that in Hebrew, the notions of “word” and “deed” are connoted by the same term. God’s words and God’s deeds go together. Just as rain and snow come from the heavens to water the earth and make it fruitful, so God’s spoken word would accomplish its purpose (vv. 10-11).

And what was that purpose?

It was the return of Israel to the land of promise. Isaiah painted the kind of glorious image you’d only expect to see in a happy-ending movie. He envisioned a joyful journey of gleeful people embracing a new era of peace, with nearby mountains singing a happy serenade while roadside trees applauded the people as they marched past like heroes on parade (v. 12).

The rough thorn bushes and briars in the ruins of Jerusalem would give way to fragrant cypress and myrtle trees, Isaiah said, which would stand as a living reminder of God’s deliverance for Israel. The true memorial of God’s work, however, would not be found in tall trees, but in a faithful and fruitful people.

Unfortunately, those who did return to Jerusalem did not experience a happy homecoming. The city was a ruin, the neighbors were hostile, and the land was in the midst of a drought. How do we square the prophet’s pretty picture with the ugly scene the returnees actually faced?

Isaiah’s over-the-top metaphor may have been sparked by the

overwhelming joy of realizing that the exiles could finally return home. Though his hyperbolic description of their return did not match the desolate scene they would find in Jerusalem, the prophet looked beyond the ruined land to a spiritual spring when God and people would live together in a joyful setting not unlike Israel’s tradition of Eden.

Sometimes, things have to get worse before they get better.

How often have we anticipated a delightful vacation, only to be sidetracked by cranky children, long lines, or bad weather? Despite the difficulties, we manage to make good memories and remember the trip fondly, carsickness and all.

I can remember imagining how much enjoyment a small shaded patio might add to my backyard – but before the first relaxing glass of lemonade, there were long days of backbreaking labor to dig out a level spot, build a retaining wall, smooth the ground, fill in the substrate, fit the pavers, and landscape the surroundings.

There is a future for us, and the prophet declared it to be bigger and more beautiful, happier and more peaceful than the Jerusalem we know will ever be. Despite the best prophetic efforts, from Ezekiel’s visions to John’s apocalypse, we cannot know exactly what that future will be like, except that it will be with God, so it must be good.

The one thing we can hang our hopes on is that we serve a God who wants to be known, and who wants to bless us. As we “seek the LORD while he may be found,” we embark upon a journey through valleys and hills that may be more stressful than musical, but we do not travel alone – and when we can be confident that the end of the road brings us closer to God, every step will be worth the effort. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 31, 2019

Joshua 5:1-12

A Cutting Reaffirmation

Do you think of yourself as someone who belongs to God's family? If so, how do you express or experience that relationship?

For those who believe faith comes through conscious repentance and acceptance of Christ, baptism is the most common way of identifying with Christ. In it, the new believer undergoes a symbolic burial and rebirth, dying to the old self and rising to a new life in Christ.

Other denominational groups think more in terms of family identity, practicing baptism or a formal Christening service for newly born children. Even Baptist churches often hold "baby dedication" services to declare the parents' intention of committing the child to Christ and raising him or her in the faith.


While initial rituals are important, periodic opportunities for renewal of our commitment are important, too. When carefully done, a baptismal service calls for observing members of the congregation to remember their own baptism and renew their commitment to living in the way Jesus taught.

The believing community also celebrates the Lord's Supper as a

The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. (Josh. 5:9)


solemn ceremony designed not only to remember Jesus' sacrifice, but also to remember the promises we have made to Christ, and pledge anew our intention to live in Christ's way.

These ceremonies invoke a memory of God's promises to forgive, to save, and to empower those who commit themselves to the body of Christ. They also involve human promises to be faithful to the God.

Today's text is about ritual and renewal. 

A new land (v. 1)


The text begins in Joshua 5, with the people encamped at a place called Gilgal, which means "circle." Perhaps it was located on a raised area that was circular in shape, but it so often appears as a cultic site that some scholars have speculated that there may have been a circular shrine of some sort, perhaps a ring of stones.

Whether the site was previously considered to be sacred or not, Joshua made it so by piling up stones he had instructed the people to bring from the bottom of the Jordan River. He declared that the rocky monument would serve as a constant reminder of God's miraculous action in bringing the people safely into the land (4:19-24). 

The narrator reports that the Hebrews did not do this unobserved, but that kings throughout Canaan heard

about the Israelites' arrival, and were afraid. The statement is clearly hyperbolic, claiming that "all the kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites by the sea" heard about the miraculous crossing, so that "their hearts melted, and there was no longer any spirit in them, because of the Israelites" (v. 1).

Archaeology does not support any sort of mass invasion by a huge army of Israelites such as that described in the book of Joshua. Rather, many of the sites said to have been conquered by Joshua were not even occupied during that historical period. It's more likely that the Israelites first settled in the hill country of Samaria, a difficult area where there was little competition, and only later extended their reach into more fertile and populated areas.

The book of Joshua itself preserves differing traditions. While some texts declare that Joshua conquered "the whole land" in a swift attack (10:40-43, 11:16-20, 21:43-45), other passages clearly describe areas they were not able to take (13:13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:11-13, 16-18). The book of Judges, likewise, contains a catalog of peoples and territories they were unable to take (1:27-36). 

It's unlikely, then, that leaders of the surrounding peoples suffered from terror and melting hearts at the arrival of the Israelites, but the narrator can be forgiven for his enthusiasm over Israel's arrival in the land.

A renewed ritual (vv. 2-9)

With v. 2 we come to an intriguing passage that is bloody, but not deadly. The Israelites had not practiced

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circumcision during the reported 40-year interlude since their departure from Egypt, according to the story. Thus, Yahweh commanded Joshua to order the people to knap sharp flint blades and use them to circumcise all the males who had been born along the way. This would include everyone except Joshua and Caleb, the only two veterans of Egypt who were allowed to cross the Jordan (vv. 4-7). 📖

Bronze knives had been in use for some time, but circumcision was done ceremonially with flint blades, which can be razor sharp. Joshua obeyed the command, we read, making flint blades and directing the circumcision of all males at a place that came to be known as Gibeath-haaraloth – which literally means “Hill of the foreskins” (v. 3).

A surface reading of the text implies that everyone lined up for Joshua to personally conduct the circumcisions, but it is more likely that priests or other family members would have carried out the procedure. Jewish families today rely on a specialized rabbi, known as a *mohel*, to circumcise male infants.

Circumcision, especially for children and adults big enough to know what is happening, could be a harrowing experience, and more painful afterward than before. In an age when sanitation was difficult, baths were rare, antibiotics and anti-inflammatory medications were non-existent, infections were common. The people would have certainly suffered greatly, with wine – probably in short supply – about the only available analgesic.

The ceremony was intended to acknowledge the people’s disobedience in the wilderness and express a renewed and united commitment to God. The narrator reported a positive response, citing Yahweh as saying “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” This leads to an

alternate tradition about how Gilgal got its name. While the noun form means circle, the verbal form (*galal*) is “to roll.” For this reason, he added, “that place is called Gilgal to this day” (v. 9).

A fresh start (vv. 10-12)

As a second indication of renewed commitment, the people observed the Passover – a sacred reminder of God’s deliverance from Egypt – “on the fourteenth day of the month,” and for the first time, on the soil of the Promised Land (v. 10). 📖 Surprisingly, while the narrator devoted nine verses to the ceremony of circumcision, he allots only one verse to the Passover, mainly noting that it occurred appropriately on the 14th of the month, when a full moon would have shown high in the sky.

The stated purpose of the Passover meal was to recall the death of the firstborn just before the Exodus from Egypt, when God passed over Israelite homes marked by the sign of blood on their doorposts.

The following day, the text says, “on that very day,” the people “ate of the produce of the land, unleavened bread and parched grain” (v. 11). The meal is not really described as a cultic rite: the narrator is emphatic that the people were provisioned by local food, eating grain they had either gleaned, purchased, or taken by force from the local people who had raised it.

Grain could be parched and eaten as a crunchy snack or ground into coarse flour and used to make a quick batch of unleavened bread, but that was about all one could do in a single day.

The narrator’s concern is to show that God had faithfully brought the Hebrews to the land of promise, a land “flowing with milk and honey.”

As the people broke the rough and unleavened bread of Canaan, they left

the wilderness and entered the next phase of their relationship with God. No longer needed, the miraculous manna God had provided in the wilderness ceased “on the day they ate the produce of the land” (v.12).

Israel still had a long way to go: many opportunities for obedience or sin, success or failure. They were not always successful, but God was always faithful. In time, God showed even greater faithfulness, not just to Israel, but to all people, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Modern believers who read this story may wonder why we bother. We are not Israel, and we have not just emerged from the wilderness to cross into the promised land.

Or have we? Are there any among us who have not spent time in the wilderness? Any who have not fallen short of their baptismal hopes?

The story of Israel at Gilgal reminds us that we worship a God of second chances, and that sometimes ritual is an important aspect of renewal. It wasn’t that long ago that many churches held annual “revivals” designed not only for evangelism, but also to call members to a renewed commitment and public rededication.

Israel’s ritual renewal of their covenant commitments at Gilgal serves as a reminder that we could also benefit from periodically renewing our commitment to follow Christ’s way. Through observing others’ baptism, let us remember *our* baptism. When we partake of the Lord’s Supper, let us remember that we are also called to a life of sacrifice and love.

But we don’t have to wait for special events to occur: every new day that God gives us is an opportunity to remember and renew our relationship with the one who calls us to abundant life in a new land — not in Canaan, but in the kingdom of God. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Reminder: the password for online teaching resources is *spring*.

April 7, 2019

John 12:1-8

The Scent of Love

Are you proud of your feet? Do you long for summer so you can go barefoot, or wear flipflops or sandals that reveal the stunning beauty of your nicely aligned toes and their perfect nails?

I thought not. Most of us are more likely to be embarrassed by our feet rather than proud to put them on display. Even when we know our feet are clean, we may feel self-conscious about them.

Imagine, then, how it would feel to walk some distance on dusty paths while wearing worn leather sandals. Your host offers a bowl of water and a towel to wipe the dust off, but when you sit down, imagine that someone kneels down and gives your feet his or her undivided attention, rubbing in an expensive and fragrant ointment from ankle to toe – and does it for love.

Would you be comfortable with that, especially if other guests held harsh opinions of the person pouring such soul into your soles?

That, of course, describes the spot Jesus was in when Mary showed up with a jar of perfume and proceeded to treat his feet with deep adoration.

You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.
(John 12:8)

Someone Jesus loved (vv. 1-2)

The placement of today's text is significant. It follows the account (John 11:1-43) of how Jesus' friend Lazarus died and was buried while Jesus was away. It's interesting to note that the first part of that story identifies Lazarus' sister Mary as "the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair" (11:2), even though that story doesn't appear until the next chapter.

Jesus' closeness to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus is seen in his use of the term "friend," (11:11), his empathic interaction with Mary and Martha after Lazarus' death (11:17-34), and his own tears of shared grief (11:35). After declaring to Martha that "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25a), Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, a foreshadowing of his own coming death and resurrection.

That story is followed by a reference to the religious leaders' plot to kill Jesus, another reminder of Christ's impending death that helps set the stage for today's text. Chapter 12 returns to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who lived just a mile or so from Jerusalem in the village of Bethany. As Jesus neared the eminent city and his imminent death, his friends hosted a dinner party for him.

The text paints a Norman Rockwell-style portrait of a family meal with a beloved guest, relaxing and enjoying

each other's company. We normally think of Jesus as being so driven and committed to his mission that we miss the many hints in scripture that he spent a lot of time having fun at dinner parties – so much so that the scribes and Pharisees criticized him for it.

Jesus knew how to be a friend: he understood that true friendship involves both giving and receiving. As he gave of his time, energy, and compassion to others, he also allowed others to show love and kindness to him. Try to imagine having Jesus as a faithful friend you can call on when in need and return the favor when he needs you – then remember that Jesus still lives and wants to be in relationship with us.

Someone who loved Jesus (v. 3)

There seems to be little question that Lazarus, Mary, and Martha all felt close to Jesus, but the text portrays Mary as being most expressive in her feelings. We recall the story of another time when Martha complained that Mary was sitting with Jesus instead of helping with dinner (Luke 10:38-42), but Jesus pronounced a blessing on Mary for her attention. In John 12:1-8, Martha is again occupied with serving food, while Mary demonstrates her love more extravagantly.

As they dined, Jesus and any other men would have been reclining on cushions spread about a low table while the women served. It's likely, then, that when Mary approached Jesus and knelt at his feet with her container of ointment, she would have been largely behind him. Mary brought with her a substantial quantity of "nard," an

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expensive imported perfume. ⚓

If Judas' estimate of 300 denarii is valid (v. 5), the fragrant ointment could have been worth as much as a common laborer's annual income: the minimum wage was typically one denarius per day.

How would Mary have obtained such wealth to lavish on Jesus? No husband is ever mentioned. Since her brother Lazarus was living, it is unlikely that Mary would have received any inheritance. This seems to represent money that Mary had worked for and saved. As such, her gift was a great financial sacrifice and display of devotion to Jesus.

Expositors often note that Mary sacrificed not only her money, but also something of her dignity. Her behavior would have been considered shocking in first-century Palestine.

In Luke's version of the story – or the account of a similar occurrence – the woman is described as a “sinner,” so her actions might not have been so surprising. But Mary of Bethany was an upstanding, respectable Jewish woman. For her to lavish expensive ointment on the humblest parts of Jesus' body and then to wipe them with her own unbraided hair (the most “glorious” part of the body, according to 1 Cor. 11:15) was nearly unthinkable in her cultural setting – but that did not stop her from pouring love onto Jesus' feet.

We often think of our service to Christ as growing from duty or obligation. How often do we show real generosity in Jesus' name, simply for love? ⚓

Someone less loving (vv. 4-8)

Mary's actions – and perhaps the strong smell of perfume – may have set several of the guests back on their heels. Matthew and Mark say the disci-

ples were offended by their perceived waste of a valuable commodity, while Luke says it was the host who took umbrage. John, in an intentional preview of Judas' character, names the troupe's treasurer as the one who criticized Mary for “wasting” the ointment and Jesus for allowing it.

John apparently had no sympathy for Judas. He made no attempt at naming anything but the basest motives, describing the disciples' money-man as a thief, a double-crosser, and a false disciple who thought only of personal gain.

Judas, like those who took offense in the other gospels, complained that the ointment could have been sold to help the poor, but John's parenthetical statement leads us to believe that Judas wanted to sell the perfume so he could skim some of the price for himself (v. 6).

Responding to Judas, Jesus again brought up the subject of his coming death. “Leave her alone,” he retorted. “Leave her alone. She has kept it for the day of my burial. For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me!” (vv. 7-8, NET).

Jesus' charge to Judas that Mary should be allowed to keep the ointment for his burial implies that she had not used the entire amount, which is certainly reasonable. Mark's version says the woman “broke open” the jar, and preachers often make homiletical hay of the notion that Mary gave it all and didn't hold anything back. It's not necessary, however, to assume that Mary poured out the entire contents of the container. ⚓

Think about it: many of today's perfumes come in bottles holding two ounces or less, and they last a long time. None of us would use a full 12 ounces of cologne or perfumed body lotion at one time. Unless Mary was being intentionally extravagant, it's

reasonable to presume that she would have used what ointment was needed to rub Jesus' feet rather than dumping the entire box, with most of it running onto the floor. Jesus' prophetic admonition to let her keep it for his burial suggests that ointment remained to be used for that purpose. This could have been done when Jesus' body was initially prepared (John 19:40), or on the third day, when women were first at the tomb, bearing spices designed to mask the odor of decomposition (Luke 23:56, 24:1).

The other disciples seemed to be in denial over Jesus' continued predictions that he would be killed. Perhaps John wants us to see that only Mary understood, that her profligate gift was not only an outpouring of love, but of grief and a desire to spare no expense in showing love to Jesus while she could.

Jesus' statement that “the poor you have with you always” must not be read in any way as an encouragement to ignore the less fortunate. If anything, Jesus pointed out that there would always be a need for Christians to help those who live in poverty, and texts such as Matthew 25 leave no doubt that his followers were called to care for those who are hungry, poor, or imprisoned. At the moment, however, Jesus' need was most urgent, and Mary was perceptive enough to see it. Her gift was as prophetic as it was generous.

While Mary's immediate intent was to demonstrate pure love for Jesus, she accomplished far more than she ever knew. Many Christians through the years have learned from Mary and have been inspired to demonstrate greater love for Christ and those Christ loves. In the same way, our own self-giving love can accomplish far more than we know – provided we're willing to open our jars and our hearts to those who need it most. ⚓

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 14, 2019

Luke 23:1-49

Of Passion and Pain

Some things are beyond our comprehension. It's as simple as that. We cannot begin to imagine what it was like for Jesus to experience the pain and the shame of crucifixion. We cannot envision how he could have faced an excruciating death with forethought and some measure of serenity.

And yet he did, and at least once each year Holy Week rolls around with a challenge for us to remember, to contemplate, to watch, even from a distance.

From Pilate. . . (vv. 1-5)

We're familiar with the story. After Jesus shared a final meal with his disciples, he led them to an olive grove on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives, a few hundred yards from the nearest gate to Jerusalem (22:14-46). ⚓

As Jesus prayed late into the night, with no crowd of sympathizers to interfere, a party of priests, elders, and temple guards arrived – led by Judas – to take him into custody. After a brief struggle with the disciples, they escorted Jesus to the high priest's house for the remainder of the night. Peter followed and remained outside the house as Jesus was mocked and beaten,

But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

(Luke 23:49)

but when confronted, famously denied any connection (22:47-65).

As soon as it was day, the members of the Sanhedrin gathered to accuse Jesus in a "trial" designed to convict him of heresy for having claimed to be the Son of God (22:66-71). ⚓ That was punishable by death as far as the Sanhedrin was concerned, but the Romans did not grant them the right of capital punishment, and they were unlikely to support it for religious reasons in any case. To get Jesus out of the picture, his opponents had to accuse him of insurrection against Rome.

Thus, the assembly dragged Jesus before Pontius Pilate, who ruled Jerusalem as the Roman Procurator of Judea. They sought to convince Pilate that Jesus was an insurrectionist, charging him with "perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king" (v. 2).

The first two charges were patently false: Jesus had steadfastly kept himself apart from nationalist politics, and he had even commended the paying of taxes to Caesar (Luke 20:20-26). The last accusation was an exaggeration. Luke records no explicit claim from Jesus that he was the Messiah, and Jesus certainly never portrayed himself as the kind of king that Pilate would be interested in executing.

Pilate attempted without success to get Jesus to incriminate himself, and he quickly dismissed the charges, saying "I find no basis for an accusation against this man." Still, the chief priests continued to insist that Jesus had made trouble from Galilee to Jerusalem.

To Herod. . . (vv. 6-12)

Hearing the reference to Galilee, Pilate saw a way to get himself off the hook, for as a Galilean Jesus would be under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, who ruled that area from his capital city of Tiberias, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, but had apparently come to Jerusalem for the Passover. ⚓ Perhaps Pilate knew that Herod had wanted to see Jesus (9:7-9) and saw the additional advantage of currying favor by sending Jesus to him (vv. 6-8). Luke is the only gospel that includes this part of the story.

Herod had killed John the Baptist (Matthew 14), but with mixed emotions. We learn from v. 8 that Herod's main interest in Jesus was his desire to witness a miracle (v. 8). In this, he was sorely disappointed. Jesus refused to display any miraculous sign of divinity or to answer Herod's lengthy questions, despite the taunting accusations of the chief priests and scribes (vv. 9-10).

Herod found no evidence of guilt, but perversely joined the Jewish leaders in mocking Jesus before sending him back to his new friend, Pilate (vv. 11-12). The royal robe he draped on Jesus' shoulders was a sign of sarcasm and ridicule, not respect.

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and back again. . . (vv. 13-25)

By the time Jesus was dragged back before Pilate, the ruler had tired of the legal charade and sought to end it. He recounted the accusers' charges and reminded them that neither he nor Herod had found Jesus worthy of death (vv. 13-15). Since Jesus had apparently become something of a nuisance, however, Pilate ordered that he be flogged and released (v. 16).

Luke does not portray Pilate as negatively as the other gospel writers. His primary interest was to show how the two Roman rulers affirmed that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death. The word for "flogged" (*paideusas*) literally means "teach him a lesson." It could indicate anything from a stern warning to a beating. Mark's gospel says that Pilate had Jesus scourged with a whip (Mark 15:15).

The growing crowd of accusers refused to let Pilate off so easily, shouting down his efforts to have Jesus released. Pilate made one last effort, offering to set one prisoner free as a goodwill token for Passover. Given a choice between Jesus and a noted insurrectionist named Barabbas, the angry crowd called for Barabbas to be released, and for Jesus to be crucified (vv. 17-25).

The entire scene was an obvious miscarriage of justice, as Barabbas (cf. Mark 15:7) was patently guilty of the very crime for which Jesus was accused. Luke has Pilate insist for the third time that Jesus was innocent (v. 22), before agreeing to allow his execution.

Evaluating the mob scene at his door, perhaps Pilate decided that this was the only way to preserve order, and he saw an opportunity to ingratiate himself to the influential Jewish leaders as well. Luke believed that Pilate had

betrayed justice, but carefully laid the blame for Jesus' death at the feet of his own people. 🇺🇸

To Calvary. . . (vv. 26-31)

Jesus' sleepless night, constant torment, and final scourging apparently left him too weak to bear his cross beam, as was the custom. A man named Simon of Cyrene, a native of northern Africa, was pressed into service to carry it for him (v. 26). 🇺🇸

Jesus' march to the cross was much like a funeral procession before the actual death. To the taunts and jeers of Christ's opponents were added the loud wails and ululations of women (v. 27). Jesus, however, addressed them with shocking words. If they really understood what was happening, he said, they should be weeping for themselves and their children. Jerusalem had rejected Jesus, and he predicted that the city would be destroyed (vv. 28-30).

and the cross. . . (vv. 32-43)

Jesus prayed for his tormentors even as they nailed him to the cross and hung him up to die. The executioners gambled for his clothing (perhaps the new robe given by Herod), while the mob surrounding the cross taunted him as a would-be king receiving his proper comeuppance (vv. 32-38).

The scene was steeped in irony. Some shouted: "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" (v. 35). They did not understand that, precisely because Jesus was the chosen one of God, he *could not* save others (including them) *and* save himself at the same time. Christ had to lose himself in order to save the world.

Do we understand this truth any better than the throng surrounding the cross? Are we willing to surrender

ourselves (or even some of our time or treasure) for the sake of others? Have we caught Jesus' lesson yet?

Jesus was crucified alongside two convicted thieves. Mark and Matthew say both of them joined in mocking Jesus (Mark 15:32b, Matt. 27:44), but Luke's gospel suggests that one of them perceived the truth that Jesus was truly the Son of God. He confessed his guilt and asked Jesus to remember him "when you come into your kingdom." Jesus promised to do so, saying "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (v. 43). 🇺🇸

and death (vv. 44-49)

In the final account of Jesus' death, Luke continued to focus on the truth that Jesus died as an innocent man, and even recorded a centurion's testimony to that effect (v. 47). Supernatural signs heralded Jesus' true divinity and the curtain separating the Holy of Holies in the temple was torn from top to bottom, suggesting both the Father's grief and a new era of God's availability to all people. Jesus died with a cry on his lips, publicly committing his spirit to the Father by quoting Ps. 31:5 – "Into your hands I commend my spirit."

Luke concludes with a reminder that "all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle *saw* what had taken place" (v. 48), and also that Jesus' followers, including the women from Galilee had helplessly watched the day's events (v. 49). Though they could only bring themselves to watch from afar, there was no shortage of witnesses to the defining moment that was at once the most horrible and the most wonderful event in the history of humankind.

Today we stand at an even greater distance, not only in space but also in time. Through the words of the Gospels, however, we can still see. Will we watch, or turn away? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 21, 2019

John 20:1-18

Best. News. Ever.

What is the most important day of the year to you? For Christians, Easter is clearly the highest and holiest of days. It marks Christ's resurrection from the dead, overcoming death and in some mysterious way beyond our comprehension, freeing us from death, too.

Easter is a day of stories about an early-morning garden and angels robed in white and brave women who come to the tomb despite their fear, then tell the good news with breathless wonder.

The four gospels relate the discovery of the empty tomb in different ways. Each has a slightly different cast of characters, but all of them agree that one of those present was Mary Magdalene.

In the Fourth Gospel, Mary Magdalene is never mentioned until we meet her at the foot of the cross, but she becomes the first witness of Jesus' resurrection, and the first to declare the good news.

An unlikely witness (vv. 1-13)

Do you think Mary had slept very much between the late afternoon when Jesus had been carefully placed in the tomb and that dawn hour on Sunday when she returned? Mark and Luke suggest

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"
(John 20:18a)

that she came with others, laden with spices for Jesus' body, but John portrays her as coming alone, perhaps rushing ahead of the others, drawn to the tomb even as we might feel pulled to stand by the casket of a loved one. Whatever the reason, she seems to have come as soon as the law and light allowed.

We don't really know much about Mary, called "the Magdalene" in reference to her hometown of Magdala, which lay near the Sea of Galilee between Capernaum and Tiberius. She appears to have been the leader of a group of women who followed Jesus and provided financial support for his ministry (Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1; Matt. 27:55-56; Luke 8:2-3, 24:10). Among the stories of Jesus' ministry and last days, Mary Magdalene features more prominently than any other woman.

Jesus' earlier predictions that he would die and rise again are not as clear in John as in the synoptic gospels, where each one includes three specific pronouncements (for example, Mark 8:31-33, 9:31-32, 10:32-34). In contrast, John's gospel contains one mysterious reference to Jesus' dying and being lifted up (12:23-34), and a cryptic prediction that the disciples should anticipate a time of grief and mourning that would be followed by joy (16:17-20).

All the gospels agree, however, that the disciples were shocked by the resurrection. Even the faithful Mary Magdalene did not expect to find Jesus

alive. When she found the tomb empty, she assumed that his body had been stolen, and ran back to the disciples to report "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (20:2).

When Peter and John bolted for the tomb to check her story, Mary followed again, her account vindicated only when Peter and John saw the empty tomb. Despite the cocoon-like and carefully arranged grave clothes that the Fourth Evangelist describes – which should have alerted them that the body had not been stolen – the fearful followers did not yet appear to understand that Jesus had arisen from the dead (v. 9).

Though the men returned home, John tells us, Mary remained at the tomb. Still thinking that someone had stolen the body, she had little to do but weep over loss upon shocking loss.

After a while, the story suggests, Mary crept inside the small tomb, where she saw something Peter and John had not seen. Two men were there, clad in brilliant white, sitting at the head and foot of the rock-cut shelf where Jesus had been laid. John clearly calls them *angels* (v. 12), as opposed to Mark, who speaks of a single young man, dressed in a white robe (Mark 16:5), Luke, who speaks of two men in dazzling clothes (Luke 24:4), and Matthew, who speaks of a single angel whose "appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow" (Matt. 28:3).

Mary was too grief-stricken to be impressed by angels, however, and when they asked why she was weeping, she answered as she would have to any person. We can still sense

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the hollow grief in her heart as Mary replied: “They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him” (v. 13). 📖

A tearful witness (vv. 14-17)

Mary’s grief soon came to an abrupt and surprising end. It’s not clear whether Mary had left the tomb when she “turned around and saw Jesus standing there” (v. 14), but the author of John’s gospel insists that Mary did not recognize the man she had loved and followed so closely.

How could Mary be so confused as to think Jesus was a man who had come to work in the garden? Was she too numb with grief or too blinded by tears to see clearly? Had Jesus’ resurrection body taken on a different appearance? Could she simply not wrap her mind around the idea that Jesus could be standing up? 📖

A brief conversation between Jesus and Mary followed her interaction with the angels almost verbatim – until Jesus said one word, one magical word: “*Mary.*” In hearing the familiar way Jesus called her name, Mary’s eyes and heart were opened. Can you imagine the many things she wanted to say in that moment of recognition? But all she could get out was “*Rabbouni!*”

Although the Fourth Evangelist describes it as a Hebrew word to his Greek audience, “Rabbouni” is actually the Aramaic form of a word also known in Hebrew. While the author explains that it means “teacher” (v. 16), the word is an intensive and personal form of the word, which can also mean “master,” and could be rendered here as something like “my dear lord.”

We can imagine how Mary must have yearned to run into Jesus’ arms for a big hug filled with happy tears. Wouldn’t you? The story suggests that Mary must have wanted to hold onto

Jesus, but he would not allow it (v. 17).

This seems troublesome to us. Surely Jesus knew how much Mary longed to touch him, perhaps to confirm what her eyes had seen as much as to express affection. Why did he respond as he did?

The language is ambiguous, because the Greek verb used in v. 17a could mean either “touch” or “hold.” Jesus’ first post-resurrection command could be interpreted as “Don’t touch me,” or “Don’t hold on to me.” Did Jesus sense Mary’s intent and wave her away before the first touch? Or had she already taken hold of an arm or his feet, so that he was indicating she could not keep clinging to him?

Later, Jesus did not object to being touched, and even invited Thomas to inspect his wounds (v. 27), so the latter option may be more likely. In either case, Mary had to learn that Jesus’ reappearance in physical form was only temporary. Both she and the others would have to let go of his physical presence and to depend on his spiritual reality after his ascension.

The Fourth Evangelist considered the ascension to be particularly important, as seen in the instructions he has Jesus give Mary: “I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (v. 17b).

In these astonishing words, Jesus indicated that his death, resurrection, and ascension had created the possibility of a new relationship in which human disciples can know God even as Jesus does: Jesus speaks of the disciples as his *brothers*. 📖

A joyful witness (v. 18)

An earlier part of the text told us that when the apostle John had entered the tomb and saw the empty grave clothes,

“he saw, and believed” (v. 8). Whether John yet believed Jesus had risen from the dead or just believed that his body was missing is not clear. There’s no question, however, that Mary’s newfound belief, spawned by hearing as well as seeing, included Jesus’ new life.

Jesus not only lived, but also gave Mary a command to go and tell the other disciples important news. Surprisingly, she was not to report simply that Jesus had risen from the dead and would meet them again, but that “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (v. 17b – see “The Hardest Question” online for more on this).

With her abject fear transformed to giddy joy, Mary tore herself away from Jesus and obeyed his command, running to tell the other disciples: “*I have seen the Lord!*” (v. 18).

John’s insistence that the resurrection news was first entrusted to Mary Magdalene is an amazing thing. In first-century Israel, a woman’s word was not considered as trustworthy as a man’s (cf. Luke 24:11). In addition, certainly Mary was over-tired, over-stressed, and possibly blubbing with tearful excitement. Why should anyone believe her? A committee of humans might never have selected Mary to be the first bearer of such life-changing, world-changing news, but God chose her.

Mary’s experience implies a profound truth for modern disciples. Although we may feel like the least of God’s children, we may become harbingers of hope to a world that often feels lost in darkness. Like Mary, we may shed tears of fear, of grief, of despair — but through it all the Lord Jesus calls our name, beckons us to believe, and turns our tears to joyful faith. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 28, 2019

Acts 5:27-32

First Allegiance

Would you go to church if it was against the law? Would you stand up and take a leadership role if you knew that spies were in the congregation and the police would be waiting? We can hardly imagine such a scenario, but we also know there are places where such scenes continue to be played out. Struggling Christians who face government censure in oppressive nations take comfort from the examples of early apostles who chose to obey God even when it meant imprisonment, or death.

Most of us face no such obstacles in our walk of faith. We are free to worship, to evangelize, and to live out our faith. Our greatest opposition comes in the form of common selfishness, greed, and peer-pressure. Perhaps a closer look at the faith and courage of these early apostles may give us greater motivation to obey God rather than any human person – even when that person lives inside our own skin.

Imprisoned apostles

Let's set the stage for today's short study passage. 📖 Freshly empowered by the Spirit after Pentecost, Jesus' disciples preached boldly, though the leading Jewish authorities tried to

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." (Acts 5:29)

squelch them. The authorities arrested the disciples once and let them go with a warning, which the disciples ignored. Peter and John insisted that they could not keep from proclaiming what they had seen and heard (4:19-20).

As the Jesus movement continued to grow, high priest Caiaphas and his closest supporters felt a need to act. They ordered the temple police to arrest the apostles and lock them in the public prison for a hearing on the next day. However, before dawn an angel quietly appeared to the disciples, unlocked the prison doors, and instructed the apostles to go and preach in the temple as they had before (5:17-20).

In the meantime, the high priest had called the full Sanhedrin into session to deal with the advocates of Jesus. How surprised they were when the temple police could find no prisoners! The prison doors were still locked, and the guards were unaware that their charges were missing. To their great chagrin, the council heard reports that the impudent apostles were preaching as usual in the courts of their own temple, so they sent the police to arrest them again, though carefully (5:21-26).

A telling charge (vv. 27-28)

In his capacity as president of the Sanhedrin, the high priest reminded the apostles of his emphatic order that

they should desist from preaching about Jesus, though he seemed to find it distasteful to use Jesus' name. "We gave you strict orders not to teach *in this name*," he said (v. 28a). 📖

The high priest was concerned that the disciples' preaching seemed calculated to blame the Sadducees for Jesus' death and to turn the tide of public opinion against them: "you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us" (v. 28b). 📖 The disciples were not concerned with vengeance against the Jewish leaders for Jesus' bloody death, but they were very much interested in proclaiming the *significance* of Jesus' death, and why he was willing to shed his blood for the sake of others.

The issue of motivation raises an important issue. Why do *we* proclaim the gospel or support the church? Do we do it to preserve a cultural icon? To improve our reputations? To keep up with other churches? Or, do we testify of our faith and support the church's ministries to express our natural love for Jesus and our willingness to obey him?

A no-nonsense response (vv. 29-30)

Peter seems to have spoken for the rest of the apostles, declaring "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (v. 29b). Jesus had instructed them to proclaim the gospel throughout the world, beginning in Jerusalem (1:8). The angelic messenger had just commanded them to continue preaching in the temple, and they planned to obey.

As Hebrew men, the disciples had

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been taught to respect the rabbis and the priests as God's spokespersons, but they recognized that the temple leaders were just another level of human authority. Without question, the Sanhedrin was powerful, but the apostles no longer felt themselves subject to its control. They lived under the direct authority of God.

Peter's response contrasted the difference between God's command and the Sanhedrin's instructions by recounting the recent activities of both. He reminded the Jewish leaders that they were in fact responsible for the death of Jesus, "whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree" (v. 30b). By using this terminology, Peter insisted that they not only caused Jesus' death, but in a most disgraceful manner.

The law, as expressed in Deuteronomy 21:23, pronounced a curse on anyone who was hanged on a tree. The passage actually had to do with those who were executed for capital crimes and then apparently hung up for public display, but Peter thought it applicable to crucifixion, too.

Thus, in Peter's mind, the Sanhedrin was guilty of bringing great shame on Jesus, but God, in contrast, had raised Jesus from the dead. When Peter said "the God of our ancestors raised up Jesus" (v. 30a), it was a reminder that Jesus' followers worshiped the same God as the Jewish leaders. It was "the God of our ancestors" – that is, the Hebrew ancestors – who had not only sent Jesus to the earth but raised him from the dead.

Why should the disciples listen to a power-hungry cartel of religious authoritarians when they could listen to God? Why should they obey a group of men so insecure that they would kill Jesus, when they could obey the very God who raised Jesus from the dead? For Peter and the other apostles, the answer was simple: "We must obey

God rather than any human authority."

Peter's statement should lead us to ask ourselves: "Who (or what) has the most influence (authority) when we make decisions about life?"

An implied invitation (vv. 31-32)

As Peter continued to describe the difference between what human authorities had done with Jesus and what God had done, he reminded the Jewish leaders that they could also repent and accept Jesus as Savior. "God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (v. 31).

Peter's choice of words is significant: God had exalted Jesus as "Leader and Savior." The Greek *archēgos* is derived from the words for "first" and "to go." As such, it could be used in the sense of "leader," "pioneer," or "originator." 📌 The issue has to do with authority. Whom should we obey? The apostles had chosen to follow Jesus, whom God had exalted to the first position.

Christ's position of leadership derived from his willingness to become our *Savior*. For hundreds of years, Hebrews had longed for a messianic savior to set them free from the domination of stronger nations. Peter reminded the temple authorities that their greatest concern should be with the power of sin, not of nationhood. Jesus had come as Savior to redeem people from the power of sin through repentance and forgiveness.

While the dignified assortment of Sadducees, Pharisees, priests, and scribes were troubling themselves with personal reputations and political strategies, they had failed to perceive that Jesus' purpose was to save them from their sin.

Peter closed his bold address with

words of confidence: "and we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him" (v. 32). Peter believed those things about Jesus because he was an eye-witness. He had been with Jesus as he taught the people and healed the sick. He had seen Jesus die, and had witnessed the empty tomb. He had been present when Jesus reappeared to the disciples, and according to John 21:15-19, had received a particular challenge from the risen Lord.

The Gospels recall a brief time when Peter was so afraid that he denied knowing Jesus, but those days had passed. The apostles had not only witnessed those things, but they also were determined to *be* witnesses in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. The presence of the Holy Spirit continued to witness of God's presence and to inspire their continued boldness in preaching.

Today's lesson text ends here, but the story does not. The religious leaders were so enraged by Peter's speech that they wanted to kill the apostles outright (v. 33). They were saved only by the intercession of Gamaliel, a wise rabbi who advised caution (vv. 34-39). The authorities then subjected the apostles to the humiliation of a public beating and commanded them to cease from preaching (v. 40). Yet, the apostles rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for Christ (v. 41), and "every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah" (v. 42).

Again the apostles' experience should challenge us to ask how easily our own public witness for Christ is intimidated. Does it take much to keep us silent when an opportunity to share or defend our faith arises? What can we learn from the apostles' example? **NFJ**

W.C. Fields remembered for firm commitment to a free religious press

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Wilmer C. Fields, who died Dec. 2 at age 96, led Baptist Press, the news service of the Southern Baptist Convention, before retiring in 1987. During his tenure the network of journalists he developed provided a trusted source of news to denominational and secular publications.

“We have to be honest, transparent, trustworthy,” said Fields in a 2015 interview with Baptist News Global, which reported his death. “Maybe that includes telling them some things Baptists wouldn’t want them to know, but they depend on their sources.”

Fields retired from his denominational leadership role, which included serving as vice president of public relations, as the

Southern Baptist Convention was continuing its rightward shift that resulted in a weakened commitment to an open press and editorial freedom.

In 1990, Fields’ successor Al Shackelford and Baptist Press news editor Dan Martin were abruptly fired by the SBC Executive Committee. Fields called the action a “shameless attempt by fundamentalists to intimidate, bully, and undermine Southern Baptist journalists and their publications.”

That event led to the formation of the independent Associated Baptist Press (now Baptist News Global) that presented its Religious Freedom Award to Fields in 2006.

A memorial service was held Dec. 8, 2018 at Woodmont Baptist Church in Nashville. Fields is survived by his wife, Lawana, and other family members. **NFJ**



Minister to Students

First Baptist Church, Wilmington, N.C., is seeking an individual to provide leadership for ministry to/with students. Applicants should have experience leading student ministry for grades 6-12 in a congregational setting and also enjoy working relationally with youth. The strongest applicants will also have some combination of the following:

- undergraduate/graduate education in ministry and/or education
- experience in volunteer recruitment and development
- experience working on a church staff
- experience working with youth in a variety of settings
- awareness of the particular challenges and opportunities that arise out of ministry to/with students in a changing cultural context

First Baptist Wilmington is affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. While we are open to people from a variety of backgrounds, any candidate should feel comfortable serving in a congregational context in which:

- A breadth of political and theological diversity is celebrated.
- Women are embraced in any and all levels of congregational leadership.
- Mission and ministry are intentionally holistic, focused on both the material and spiritual needs of persons.

Please send all inquiries, recommendations and résumés to searchcommittee@fbcwilmington.org with the subject line “Minister to Students Position.”

Senior Pastor

First Baptist Church, Hickory, N.C., seeks a Spirit-filled senior pastor who is able to minister to a multi-generational congregation. Qualifications include: accomplished preacher/teacher of the Bible; a Master of Divinity degree or higher; minimum of five years full-time senior pastor experience; and a servant-leader who serves as a role model of the Christ-like life, exhibiting humility and integrity. FBC is affiliated with the SBC and CBF. Send résumé and cover letter to PSC, First Baptist Church, 339 2nd Avenue, NW, Hickory, NC 28601 or pscfbchky1819@gmail.com. Sermon audio and/or video recordings may be submitted.

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Higher calling

Lessons from the past, a gospel for the future

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Underneath the motto “With God as our Defender” and “invoking the favor and guidance of Almighty God,” a white Christian utopia “authorized by the Bible and by the God of the Bible” emerges from a whirlwind of human rights controversy.

Condemning human equality as “the final antichrist,” evangelical leaders praise their “superior civilization and purer religion” as “a blessing to humanity.”

We are “a Christian nation,” proclaims a leading religious politician. “Behold what God hath wrought!” declares a prominent media personality.

Finally, God’s chosen people are free from the pervasive “atheism,” “free thinking” and “infidel spirit” of a wicked and godless enemy. “Alleluia!” shouts an evangelical pastor from the Southwest, “the Lord reigneth; let the earth rejoice.”

From Virginia, another minister proclaims: “In the gradual unrolling of the mighty scroll, on which God has written the story of our future, as fold after fold is spread before the nation, may there stand, emblazoned in letters of living light, but this one testimony: ‘They are my people, and I am their God.’”

Across the land, sermons extol the superiority of the chosen race and offer praise to God for walling off God’s people from the unrighteous and unclean.

A fervent commitment to God-ordained white supremacy thus fueled the imaginary nation of the Confederate States of America, a world in which member states were required to uphold the enslavement of African Americans, a minority people tortured, terrorized and raped for the finan-

cial benefit and pleasure of white men, but who nonetheless remained “peaceful and happy” according to slave owners, politicians and religious leaders.

Of great prominence among Christian enthusiasts of the Confederacy was Basil Manly Sr., a Southern Baptist pastor, pro-slavery apologist and owner of some 40 slaves. Manly played a leading role in the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention (1845) and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1859). He was also the chaplain of the Confederacy.

In 2018, amid a resurgence of racism and white supremacy in America, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary rediscovered its white supremacist foundations. Issuing a report analyzing the institution’s long-running commitment to white supremacy in the form of black slavery, Jim Crow laws, and southern apartheid, the seminary’s president blamed “a sinful absence of historical curiosity” for not previously acknowledging the obvious.

And obvious it was. Historians have long known what today’s seminary leaders suddenly rediscovered. The seminary, too, has long known. For much of the institution’s history, its presidents and faculty were unapologetic white supremacists.

Just as oddly, the report praises the slave-owning, white supremacist founders of the seminary as champions of “gospel truths.” Nothing could be further from the truth.

White supremacists, whether of the Confederate era or the present day, are deniers, not followers, of Jesus’ teachings. Jesus taught the inherent oneness of humanity created in the image of God.

In the Beatitudes, parables and Greatest Commandments he centered the Kingdom

of God — God’s vision and will for humanity — on human rights and equality. This, not doctrine, creeds or otherworldly fixations, is the essence of Christianity.

A lack of recognition that human rights and human equality are central to the teachings of Jesus, and hence Christianity, mars the seminary’s report on the institution’s historical white supremacist identity. Despite renouncing the inferiority of black persons, the seminary yet discriminates against women and LGBTQ persons, and has given no indication of doing otherwise.

Have they actually learned anything from their slavery past? Or, for that matter, has the larger community of white evangelicals ever truly grappled with the sin of discrimination?

By forsaking Jesus and remaking God into their own white supremacist image, the imaginary Christian utopia of the Confederate States of America was antichrist. To this day, many white evangelicals yet condemn Jesus’ universal message of human rights and equality.

There is another way. At their best, Christians have taken Jesus’ life and teachings to heart in advocating for all of humanity. Historical and contemporary examples include support for abolition, civil rights, women’s rights, uplift for the poor, justice for the marginalized, welcoming of immigrants, LGBTQ rights, equal freedom of conscience and equal religious liberty for all.

According to the Gospels, followers of Jesus do not seek special privileges for themselves or discriminate against others. And while all Christians sometimes fail to live up to Jesus’ life and teachings of human rights and equality, the Gospels remind the world of the higher calling of a common humanity created in the image of God. **NFJ**

Being church

Thoughts about traditions, trends and changing times

In this new series, Nurturing Faith Editor John Pierce raises questions with a variety of leaders about the future of congregational life. This first entry features responses from Eddie Hammett, church and leadership coach for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina and president of Transforming Solutions, LLC.



NF: Sunday school attendance has been a primary measuring stick, at least for many Baptist churches. Now there is less engagement in that designated hour, for most churches, and more activities during other times during the week. What do you see happening, and how might a church now better measure its faithfulness?

EH: Sunday school continues to work for some — particularly those who come from “church culture” families. In many ways it is no longer a fair way of measuring church effectiveness because of multiple factors.

The trends of today and tomorrow are moving outside traditional programs and structures into community engagement opportunities. Groups are meeting in coffee shops, businesses, homes, community clubhouses and in a growing variety of “Fresh Expressions.”

These groups are measured not by attendance or participation, but impact. What impact has the “church experience” had on the community, business, families, etc.?

Also, what impact does the experience have on participants? What are we learning about the faith life? About scriptures, values, traditions, other cultures, etc.?

Basic spiritual formation experiences are moving beyond printed curricula and traditional church gatherings to experience immersions that are part of theological reflection dialogues. There’s also a movement exploring the “artistic dimensions of spiritual formation and expressions.” It is very exciting and powerful.

NF: What trend, which doesn’t necessarily surface to the top, needs more attention from church leaders right now?

EH: Trends abound today. Some will last; others will fade. A few I see that need attention:

One is the reshaping of family. Traditional families are fading. New expressions and experiences of family are emerging rapidly. Some are moving against traditional

values of church culture. However, we need to learn how to *be* and show up *as* church in new family expressions.

Second is to reframe “stewardship” (generosity) for today’s culture in families, communities, churches and denominational entities. How does giving/generosity show up as a vehicle for spiritual formation in community life, business life and church life?

Third is to embrace, and value equally, church inside the church walls and church that happens beyond the church walls.

NF: How has “church attendance” changed in meaning, and what are the results?

EH: The hot-button issue today has to do with church policies and practices regarding membership and attendance. Diversification of families, communities and faith backgrounds brings people with many traditions, values and faith traditions that differ from traditional church experiences.

These raise questions like: Who can lead? Who are members? Do we not need membership anymore, or just evidence of participation?

Community is a major key to growing faith communities these days, not necessarily church membership. Sometimes these can be similar but, more often than not, very different sets of expectations guide these efforts.

NF: Divisive politics are present in every aspect of American society, including church life. What advice do you have for congregational leaders in dealing with that reality? Is it enough to simply avoid hot topics as much as possible?

EH: Avoiding hot topics will turn off the younger generation, who looks for authenticity and realism. I understand leaders wanting to avoid political topics in sermons and promotions. I don't understand churches that do not offer relevant, unbiased, guided conversations around a host of difficult topics.

Christians are hungry for guidance and a way of processing how our values show up as redemptive, reconciling expressions of church, while remaining a congregation of integrity.

NF: How might a congregation better identify, assess and maximize its assets?

EH: First and foremost, a congregation that wants to exist in 10 years needs to identify, assess and maximize assets *inside*, but mostly *beyond* the walls of its local church. Community assets are pathways to vitally important partnerships and alliances, as church unfolds in communities over the next decade.

Leaders need regular “windshield tours,” walking prayer groups and community-based learning and worship experiences *in* the community *as* the church. (I speak to this more in my book *Spiritual Leadership in a Secular Age*.)

NF: If congregational culture is shifting, how might ministerial staffing correspond?

EH: Church staffing is in a period of rapid change, [for example], downsizing, reframing ministry descriptions/titles and office placements, not to mention a radical retooling of staff to effectively function in this culture.

Those who are courageous and make these shifts survive and thrive. Those who are fearful of such changes usually fade away or find themselves in deep periods of personal and professional stress.

This issue, along with current realities in many divinity schools, calls for a serious rethinking of theological education curricula design. It seems we need to move from programmatic/traditional theological frameworks to a more incarnational ministry design and theological venue for action.

NF: Many pastors live under the shadow of a previous pastor from a time (usually in the '50s or '60s) when there was less competition for churches. What are the realities churches face today regarding competition that was unknown in the “glory years” some still remember?

EH: Churches need to move beyond competition strategies, which only create division, discouragement and disillusionment. Churches and particularly key leaders and staff must develop values and skills of collaboration, not competition.

When churches compete, churches lose. When churches collaborate and partner, everyone usually wins.

Ministers, for the most part, need to prepare for a multi-career ministry. Also, churches are being challenged to rethink, reframe their expectations of pastor/staff roles/functions in today's world.

There's much strife among pastors/staff and congregations today because expectations are not clear upfront and usually there's no ongoing support for evaluation, encouragement and retraining.

NF: Churches don't seem to be the socioeconomic enclaves they were in times past. Rather they seemed to be formed more by affinities such as worship styles and theological orientation. Is that accurate? If so, what impact does it have?

EH: Churches are no longer the major gathering place for people. Our 24/7 world creates many other such issues that people choose. Gatherings are far more diversified among younger generations.

Different ethnic groups, lifestyle groups, socioeconomic groups, faith traditions, etc. assemble formally and informally and offer experience of more value, to many, than traditional church gatherings.

The impact is a real challenge to ministers and congregations to reframe how we *see* church, *do* church and *be* church today. Most of my writing for the past 15 years has been to explore these issues.

Currently I am working on a manuscript and conferencing on the topic: “Where is church going from here?” My purpose is to help leaders and churches rethink, reframe, retool to improve effectiveness and deepen impact.

NF: Many churches are learning to do more with less. What advice would you have for navigating this reality?

EH: Church is being challenged to learn to create and embrace multiple streams of income, beyond traditional tithing expectations. Another stretch and challenge for most churches is reaching and keeping people under age 30 while keeping people over 60.

A wide variety of age groups, traditions and faith perspectives brings challenges and great opportunities. Most churches now have fewer young people, primarily because they don't want to lose their current leadership and financial base from those over 60.

Reaching People Under 30 While Keeping People Over 60 (the title of my 2015 book) has been a passion of mine for two decades now. The challenge for churches seems to be getting more difficult and challenging as time rolls on and as seniors age out, leaving churches with fewer younger leaders.

NF: What's the most hopeful sign you see today in congregations?

EH: Here are three:

- The perseverance of the few leaders who are open to the Spirit's leading, innovative thinking and risk-taking leadership strategies (I'm offering a training course this year titled “The Coach Approach to Introducing Innovation in Traditional Settings” where we'll work on needed leadership skills to reframe ministry for tomorrow.)
- Christian coaching offers me and many others much hope as we walk with individuals, teams, churches and denominations that face steep learning curves, overwhelming challenges but seek “the new” and something that is more transformational and focused on life change. Coaching helps leaders explore, build confidence, and create and follow intentional goals for the purpose of moving forward, not just maintaining what is.
- Congregations open to the Spirit and to new ways of thinking, collaboration and empowerment rather than a control-and-conquer mentality and vision. **NFJ**

PART ONE

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1933–1945)

By Bruce Gourley



Deep in the darkness of record unemployment, numbing hunger, relentless despair, raw fear and boiling anger, hope all but evaporated in the winter of 1932–1933.

A tsunami of bank failures washed across the nation. Drought sapped the most fertile of agricultural lands. Farmers by the hundreds of thousands succumbed to foreclosure. Unemployment skyrocketed to 25 percent.

Formerly middle-class city men fought over scraps of food in restaurant garbage cans. Millions staved off starvation only by the meager charity of soup kitchens. Revolution was in the air.

“There is a feeling among the masses generally that something is radically wrong,” Oklahoma Attorney General Oscar Ameringer declared before a congressional subcommittee. “They are despairing of political action. They say the only thing you do in Washington is to take money from the pockets of the poor and put it into the pockets of the rich. They say that this government is a conspiracy against the common people.”

On the brink of internal collapse, America desperately prayed for a miracle. The answer would arrive in unexpected fashion.

YOUNG FRANKLIN

Fifty years earlier and some 90 miles north of New York City, the idyllic hamlet of Hyde Park quietly prospered on the banks of the Hudson River. A small Episcopalian church, St. James, served as a spiritual home

This is part one of the 32nd 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.

to prominent local families quite contented with their Gilded Age lifestyles.

In 1882 a son was born to one of the wealthy St. James families. Unlike most church members, James Roosevelt I and Sara Ann Delano were Democrats. As customary, the parents had their baby, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, baptized at St. James.

Little can be said with certainty about young Franklin's childhood at St. James, but his affinity for the church endured, as years later and from a distance he personally helped ensure the church buildings' upkeep.

Young Franklin straddled two worlds. Born into high society and wealth, he enjoyed the fine living, international travel, recreational opportunities, elite education and political connections afforded by his family's prominence. Yet at the same time he grew up on a quiet country estate — "Springwood" — and absorbed his father's love of the land. Much later as an adult Franklin occasionally listed his occupation as "tree farmer."

Like many children of wealthy parents, Franklin attended a private boarding school. Atypical of many elite private Christian boarding schools, however, the progressive Episcopal Groton School of Massachusetts reinforced the family's commitment to public service above and beyond professional endeavors.

Afterward young Roosevelt attended Harvard and graduated with a degree in history. While there he was active in the school's Social Service Society, a religiously-oriented organization focused on helping the poor and unfortunate.

A stint at Columbia Law School came next, followed by a successful passing of the New York bar exam and a subsequent and prestigious Wall Street job.

'SIMPLE FAITH'

Charismatic and outgoing, Franklin in 1905 married Eleanor Roosevelt, a distant cousin from a different branch of the elite and wealthy Roosevelt clan.

Similar backgrounds aside, their marriage was no fairy tale. Prone to socializing, smoking and drinking, Franklin also had numerous extramarital affairs. Yet rather than divorcing, Eleanor and Franklin

raised a family and eventually settled into a meaningful relationship in the form of a common progressive political alliance.

While Eleanor and the children sometimes attended church on Sunday mornings, Franklin golfed. Only later in life did he, for pragmatic political considerations, occasionally attend church services.

"A simple faith," Eleanor once said of her husband's religious beliefs. Roosevelt expressed belief in God and considered himself a Christian. Yet when Eleanor asked him if he believed in Christian doctrine he replied, "I never really thought about it much. It think it is just as well not to think about things like that too much."

Historians, too, have tried to understand Roosevelt's personal religious faith. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., a contemporary of Roosevelt's and one of the most prominent 20th-century American historians, concluded Roosevelt "had a deep sense of religious assurance, though its character remains a puzzle. His faith was unanalyzed, non-theological, a matter of tradition and propriety."

According to historians Merlin Gustafson and Jerry Rosenberg, Roosevelt had "a liberal optimism about human nature . . . belief in progress, and the importance of the environment in shaping human behavior." These convictions formed "the basic premises in his philosophy," from within which "he was never able to accept a conservative interpretation of human nature based upon pessimistic theological assumptions about original sin."

POLITICS

Republican President Theodore Roosevelt, fifth cousin of Franklin and uncle of Eleanor, shared a similar philosophy.

President from 1901–1909 during a time of popular resistance to late 19th-century excesses of capitalism, Theodore turned America leftward. He became, according to biographer Alonzo Hambry, "the leading figure in the multifaceted push for social and political reform that was beginning to be called the progressive movement."

Theodore Roosevelt's politics influenced Franklin as the latter, disinterested in law, in 1910 ran successfully for the New York Senate, the one and only political

contest in which the Republican enclave of Hyde Park and Dutchess County voted for their native son. In office Franklin embraced the progressive policies of Theodore and, despite opposition from citizens of Hyde Park, won a second term in 1912.

Franklin's entry into national politics came with his 1913 appointment by Democratic President Woodrow Wilson as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Retaining the position through World War I, Roosevelt competently helped mobilize and manage naval resources during the global conflict.

After the war in 1920 Roosevelt was selected by the national Democratic Party as its vice-presidential nominee. Yet just as suddenly, the winds of fortune shifted. Not only did the Democratic ticket lose the presidential election, but also less than a year later Roosevelt was diagnosed with poliomyelitis, or polio.

POLIO

Undeterred and supported by his wife Eleanor, Roosevelt chose to continue his political career. From his physical disability he gained a personal understanding of and affinity for the hardships faced by ordinary Americans.

Politically, Roosevelt set about carefully cultivating an image of health. He hid his wheelchair from the public eye. With the help of steel braces he taught himself to walk short distances. He stood upright in public appearances, often with the help of an aide or one of his sons. And seeking relief from his illness, he embraced occupational water therapy.

In his quest for a cure, Roosevelt in 1924 visited the tiny rural community of Bullochville in Meriwether County, Georgia, locally renowned for geothermal springs with alleged healing powers. He quickly fell in love with the springs and the simple, rural countryside that reminded him of the farm of his childhood.

Bullochville, renamed Warm Springs in 1925 at Roosevelt's behest, became an integral part of the New Yorker's identity. There he built a second home and established a rehabilitation center and polio foundation on the grounds of the geothermal springs.

GREAT DEPRESSION

Meanwhile, during a decade of Republican dominance in Washington, D.C., and unrestrained capitalism in America, Roosevelt remained active in New York and national Democratic politics. Elected governor of New York in 1928, he introduced “fireside chats,” radio broadcasts communicating his progressive agenda to constituents and legislators.

A sudden and dramatic stock market crash in October 1929 plunged the nation into an economic depression and soaring unemployment. Republican President Herbert Hoover and many state governors believed the economy would right itself without government intervention. Roosevelt, convinced otherwise, established a state unemployment commission to combat joblessness.

Ignoring progressive voices like that of Roosevelt, Hoover maintained his faith in unfettered capitalism and used federal money to prop up struggling banks, all the while steadfastly refusing to provide government aid to millions of destitute Americans.

Governor Roosevelt, offering an opposing perspective from the nation’s most populous state, called for aid to farmers, full employment, unemployment insurance, and pensions for senior citizens. He also called upon the federal government to enact national economic relief legislation. Hoover ignored him.

Inaction on the part of Hoover and Republicans in Washington plunged the nation further into the greatest economic calamity in American history. From coast to coast, the devastating Great Depression became the overwhelming singular issue confronting candidates during the 1932 presidential election.

‘STRUCK A CHORD’

Although vastly unpopular, Hoover sought a second term. Chosen by the Democrats as their presidential candidate, Franklin Delano Roosevelt immediately became the front-runner.

Roosevelt, claiming the mantle of the former progressive Democrat Woodrow Wilson, excoriated Republicans’ alliance with greedy capitalists, an alliance that had

crippled the nation and almost snuffed out the American dream.

“Let us now and here highly resolve,” he declared upon accepting the Democratic presidential nomination, “to resume the country’s interrupted march along the path of real progress and of real justice and of real equality for all our citizens, great or small.”

Pledging to govern on behalf of “the common man,” Roosevelt condemned the Republican Party’s theory of enriching a “favored few” in the “hopes that some of their prosperity will leak through to labor, to the farmer and to the small business man.”

Republicans’ trickle-down economics had “ruined prosperity,” he said. Amid “a depression so deep that it is without precedent in modern history,” Roosevelt promised to fight for “the greatest good to the greatest number” of Americans, many hungry and unemployed.

NEW ORDER

Drawing upon his own personal familiarity with the nation’s rural landscapes, north and south, including vast swathes of soil erosion from poor farming practices, Roosevelt pledged meaningful employment for millions, jobs that would help impoverished citizens and soil alike.

Roosevelt had in mind a plan that he had successfully implemented in New York: the “conversion of certain marginal land into timber land through reforestation.” Enacted nationwide, reforestation would rejuvenate the land, address the problem of agricultural surpluses, boost commodity prices, counter the harmful effects of protective tariffs, and drive down crippling interest rates.

A “simple moral principle” undergirded Roosevelt’s plan: federally-funded jobs providing “work with all the moral and spiritual values that go with it” and “a reasonable measure of security” for the employed and their families.

“I pledge you, I pledge myself to a new deal for the American people . . . a new order of competence and courage,” Roosevelt promised, “to return America to its own people.”

Roosevelt’s plain language gave voice to a progressive civil religion of basic moral-



Roosevelt as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, 1913

ity beneficial to ordinary Americans in dire straits. His words struck a chord. In the November 1932 election Roosevelt in a landslide defeated Hoover and Democrats took control of Congress.

Yet in the desperate, starving, fearful winter months that followed, America remained on the brink of a revolution against the federal government.

FIRST LADY

In December incoming First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, perceiving the importance of allying with influential Christian leaders to right a capsizing America, courted Protestant clergymen by offering her own view of “What Religion Means to Me.”

“To me, religion has nothing to do with any specific creed or dogma,” she declared. “It means that belief and that faith in the heart of a man which makes him try to live his life according to the highest standard which he is able to visualize . . . in all cases the thing which counts is the striving of the human soul to achieve spiritually the best that it is capable of and to care unselfishly not only for personal good but for the good of all those who toil with them upon the earth.”

At a time when churches struggled in vain to feed tens of millions of hungry Americans, Eleanor declared that the government had a spiritual responsibility “to see that no one starves.”

Her words served to prepare clergy for her husband's progressive agenda framed in inclusive spiritual language and designed to soothe Americans' fears and despair.

In his inaugural address of March 4, 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt spoke to the soul of a deeply troubled nation. Amid the many words he voiced to a crowd of 100,000 in Washington and tens of millions listening via radio, 10 simple words pierced the darkness: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

FLICKER OF HOPE

"We are stricken by no plague of locusts," the president declared, but rather are victims of "unscrupulous money changers . . . who have no vision, and when there is no vision the people perish."

Now, the "money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization," he said. Heads nodded.

In the "dark days" of the recent past and the present the government had not helped its citizens in need. Now, Roosevelt pledged to lead the nation to follow "the policy of the good neighbor — the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others."

Soothing words, familiar words, reasonable words.

Most Americans recognized the references. Roosevelt's calming words came from the Bible, revered by many as a source of comfort, strength and inspiration in difficult times. This was a far different Bible than 1920s-era stunted scripture used to justify riches for the few, debt for the middle class and poverty of the masses.

Suddenly, the script was flipped. Here were the social justice teachings of Jesus, teachings that championed the uplift of persons impoverished, desperate and hopeless. These were words of healing and restoration.

Although far from pious, Roosevelt knew the power of the words he uttered. Historians tend to believe the religious references were inserted, perhaps at the president's behest, by a speechwriter familiar with the Bible, a pattern that would continue throughout his presidency.

Nonetheless, it was the speaking of the words that unleashed glimmers of hope.

NEW DEAL

Words alone were not enough. "Our greatest primary task is to put people to work" in order to increase family income and restore hope and dignity, Roosevelt asserted. "We must act and act quickly."

Roosevelt and his hand-picked administration of "New Dealers" did act quickly. A mandated, temporary banking holiday stemmed bank failures. National radio "fireside chats" employed the president's charm in warm, personal messages to American families.

From March to June, and buttressed by a like-minded Democratic Congress, Roosevelt enacted a string of robust "New Deal" legislation designed to restore Americans' faith in government via a two-fold approach of working for "the common good" through federally-funded jobs, while simultaneously establishing structural government reforms to protect Americans from the excesses of capitalism.

For the "benefit of the public" and the "building of human happiness," Roosevelt and his New Dealers crafted legislation such as the Forest Restoration Act. Birthed from the legislation, the Civilian Conservation Corps provided millions of jobs for unemployed young men — white, black and Native American — in the reforestation of land, construction of new roads, establishment of state parks, infrastructure enhancement of current national parks, development of new national parks, and other projects.

In rapid fire, other legislation provided funding for states to assist the impoverished; established federal subsidies and commodity prices for farmers; created the Tennessee Valley Authority to build dams and power plants to provide electricity for rural residents; mandated federal regulation of stocks and bonds; used federal power to expand state employment; provided mortgage assistance to homeowners; established the Public Works Administration to hire jobless men to build dams, bridges, roads, hospitals, schools and other public infrastructure; and created the National Recovery Administration (NRA) to set "fair practices" for businesses and minimum wages for workers.

MIXED RESPONSES

Collectively, the components of FDR's first "hundred days" of legislation in 1933 dramatically transformed America's mood and direction, generating newfound hope. Religious Americans responded to the administration's legislation in divergent ways.

Many Catholics, of immigrant backgrounds and concerned with the plight of the poor and marginalized, welcomed Roosevelt's New Deal. White Protestants, accustomed to a gospel of unbridled capitalism, legislated morality and discrimination against minorities, voiced mixed feelings.

The repeal of Prohibition in December 1933 set the tone for the president's uneasy reception among Protestants. While Catholics and Jews cheered the repeal, the conservative Southern Baptist Convention's Social Service Commission decried the decision as "a calamity to the nation." Yet at the same time the organization praised Roosevelt for securing employment for "millions of men."

While applauding Roosevelt's policies as likely to usher in a better social order, some liberal clergy in the Federal Council of Churches feared that the repeal of Prohibition would ultimately impede political progress by increasing social drinking in the nation's capital.

On balance, however, the Council believed the New Deal represented "Jesus' teachings of love and brotherhood" expressed in "daily bread, shelter and security." In similar fashion, the famed liberal Protestant minister Harry Emerson Fosdick praised the New Deal and appealed for the support of all Americans.

Roosevelt welcomed the Council's endorsement. Careful to avoid mingling church and state doctrinally or ecclesiastically, he nonetheless believed the two spheres intersected at one crucial non-religious, humane and universal juncture.

"If I were asked to state the great objective which church and state are both demanding for the sake of every man and woman and child in this country," he declared to the Federal Council of Churches in 1933, "I would say that that great objective is 'a more abundant life.'"

ON RACE

Simultaneous with the repeal of Prohibition, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, encouraged by Eleanor, spoke out forcefully against lynching in biblical language.

Describing lynching as “vile” and “collective murder” in a December 6, 1933 radio speech, the president declared: “We know that it is murder, and a deliberate and definite disobedience of the Commandment, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ We do not excuse those in high places or in low who condone lynch law.”

The Federal Council of Churches praised Roosevelt’s announcement. Eleanor lobbied her husband to support a congressional anti-lynching bill. But when southern white Christians and their Democratic representatives in Washington opposed the legislation, Roosevelt pragmatically backed down, declaring “If I come out for the anti-lynching bill now, they will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing. I just can’t take the risk.”

By not challenging southern apartheid, Roosevelt hoped to hold together his Democratic coalition for the purpose of a greater good. Yet criticism came from both right and left. Southern white Protestants remained on guard against any hint of an agenda of human equality within New Deal programs, while some liberal white Protestants and many black clergy condemned Roosevelt for heeding the voices of white supremacists.

In addition to defending white supremacy, some conservative Christians criticized what they perceived as Roosevelt’s anti-capitalist agenda. Conditioned by the presidencies of Christian capitalists Warren Harding and Herbert Hoover, many Christian leaders detected socialism lurking in the foundation of Roosevelt’s New Deal.

FUNDAMENTALISM

Some hostile premillennial evangelicals, for example, detected the “mark of the beast,” a symbol of the antichrist in their literal reading of the Book of Revelation, in the worker-oriented National Recovery Administration’s blue eagle symbol.

Southern Baptist Calvin B. Waller,

pastor of the largest church in Arkansas, warned that the NRA signaled the beginning of the fulfillment of Revelation’s prophecy of the coming of a “World Dictator,” possibly Roosevelt.

Not all conservative evangelicals agreed. Texas fundamentalist J. Frank Norris defended Roosevelt against his Christian detractors. “To hell with your socialism or whatever you want to call it! People are starving!”

Others stood uneasily in the middle. Appreciative of the much-needed relief the New Deal provided for the hungry, sick and indigent in their own communities, many southern evangelicals nonetheless watched with worry as the government took over many community and relief roles previously filled by churches.

One Mississippi Southern Baptist leader spoke for many when he lamented, “Must the government do our religious work for us?”

Shrewd politician that he was, Roosevelt recognized and personally sought to overcome criticism from the right. From his second home in Warm Springs, Ga., commonly known as the Little White House, Roosevelt spent much time in conversation and correspondence with rural southerners in an effort to better understand their world. As unemployment remained stubbornly high, their feedback helped shape new, longer-lasting policies in a “Second New Deal.”

ROUND TWO

Legislation enacted from 1934–1936 created additional protections and benefits for ordinary Americans. The Securities and Exchange Commission established government regulation of the financial securities industry. The National Labor Relations Board enforced labor law and prosecuted unfair labor practices.

The Social Security Act guaranteed income for the unemployed and retirees. The Soil Conservation Service (later renamed Natural Resources Conservation Service) provided federal assistance to help farmers develop better agricultural methods. The Rural Electrification Administration provided federal loans to extend

electricity to underserved rural areas.

In addition, the administration raised taxes on wealthy Americans and created the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The largest New Deal Agency, the WPA hired millions of jobless men and women to build thousands of wide-ranging public infrastructure projects such as 600,000 miles of highways and roads; 124,000 bridges; and many city halls, schools, zoos and museums, while also investing in public arts and literacy.

Through the WPA Roosevelt also seized the opportunity to hire thousands of African Americans in the North, many of whom found employment for the first time in white-collar occupations. Meanwhile, the Indian Reorganization Act sought to assist tribal self-government.

Collectively, the Second New Deal provided enough jobs to drive the unemployment rate downward to 14 percent, almost one-half of that in 1933.

BRIDGE TOO FAR?

At the same time the progressive nature of the various government programs garnered increasing criticism from conservative Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike.

During his first presidential run Roosevelt had won the support of the populist, anti-Semitic and widely influential Detroit-based radio priest Charles Coughlin. This was a matter of pragmatism for Roosevelt who, although evidencing some anti-Semitic sentiments, did not share Coughlin’s growing extremism.

In agreement with Roosevelt that government should provide justly for the poor and working class, Coughlin supported the president’s efforts to reign in the excesses of capitalism. At the same time, the Catholic radio personality controversially advocated for a populist uprising against the national financial system.

Inevitably, Coughlin realized Roosevelt’s unwillingness to adopt his anarchist-leaning agenda. The Second New Deal in particular became a bridge too far. By 1936, as Roosevelt sought a second term in the White House, Coughlin reversed course entirely and railed against Roosevelt over the nation’s airwaves.

Calling Roosevelt a “great betrayer and liar,” “Double-Crossing,” and a “Communist,” the Catholic priest set the tone for religious divisions that would characterize the remainder of Roosevelt’s presidency.

Moving ever further rightward, to his 15 million listeners Coughlin soon promoted authoritarian and fascist ideologies as the answer to the shortcomings of democracy.

Coughlin was not alone. Many Protestant evangelicals also opposed Roosevelt, though from a different direction. While appreciative of New Deal programs that undeniably assisted millions of Americans in a time of deepest need, they perceived an assault on personal liberties and free markets.

Southern Presbyterian minister Francis Miller and his wife Helen summarized the conundrum. Speaking favorably of New Deal projects, they nonetheless criticized the “New Deal paradox” of using top-down democracy to foster self-government. Evidencing libertarian thought, the Millers insisted that true democracy must be local in nature.

CHARM OFFENSIVE

Thus, from multiple religious quarters, by 1936 FDR’s policies increasingly garnered opposition. Nonetheless, the president continued to employ spiritual language and imagery in an ongoing charm offensive toward America’s religious leaders.

Addressing the National Conference of Christians and Jews in February 1936, he declared: “No greater thing could come to our land today than a revival of the spirit of religion — a revival that would sweep through the homes of the Nation and stir the hearts of men and women of all faiths to a reassertion of their belief in God and their dedication to His will for themselves and for their world. I doubt if there is any problem — social, political or economic — that would not melt away before the fire of such a spiritual awakening.”

Even so, as the 1936 presidential election loomed and despite notable improvements in the living conditions of ordinary Americans, the whirlwind of controversies and resistance grew all the more.

Most visible was the American Liberty League, a conservative political organization comprised of many leading wealthy and elite capitalists convinced that Roosevelt and his New Deal policies were socialist or communist. At the same time an ascendant socialist movement on the left criticized Roosevelt for being too conservative.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic an avowedly racist, conservative Christian nationalist named Adolph Hitler, chancellor of Germany, having for years persecuted Jews, homosexuals and liberals, was now amassing military power. Roosevelt’s American Catholic nemesis Charles Coughlin praised Hitler, as did a growing number of conservative American Protestant leaders.

Facing the wrath of powerful capitalists, grassroots socialists and an emerging religious right movement at home, along with the prospect of a second world war abroad, President Franklin Delano campaigned for reelection.

Would his popularity among ordinary Americans overcome his detractors? **NFJ**

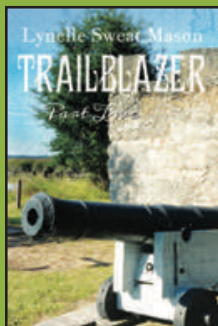
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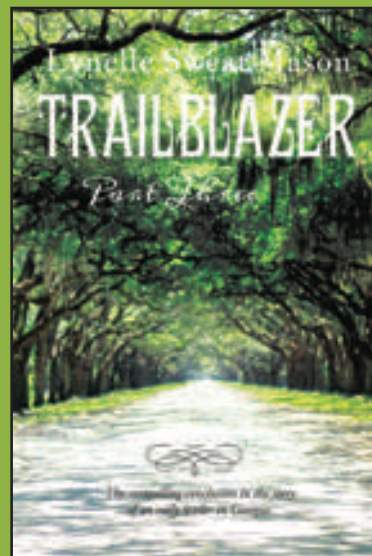


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View from the underside

Bonhoeffer's perspective needed to address injustices today

BY AL STAGGS

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had all of the promise of distinguishing himself as one of the world's great theologians — completing his doctorate at the University of Berlin at age 21.

He also possessed the advantage of being a member of one of Germany's noted families. His father, Karl, was one of the nation's leading psychiatrists.

Nothing in Dietrich's earlier years suggested his life might lead to spending his last two years as a prisoner of his own nation and subsequently being executed by hanging on April 9, 1945, as a result of his participation in the conspiracy against Adolf Hitler.

During Bonhoeffer's two-year internment as a prisoner of the Third Reich, he wrote to his friend, Eberhard Bethge, about an important lesson he had learned during his captivity:

"There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled — in short, from the perspective of all those who suffer."

Bonhoeffer's "View from Below" was harmonious with Jesus' teachings concerning "the least of these" found in Matt. 25:31-46 — sometimes called "The Great Omission" in contrast to the more regarded "The Great Commission" in Matt. 28:19-20.

Bonhoeffer was introduced to this theme while a post-doctoral student at Union Theological Seminary in New York during the 1930-31 academic year. There he met Frank Fisher, an African-American student who introduced Dietrich to life in Harlem.

The effects of racism, segregation and

Jim Crow affected Bonhoeffer deeply. He was also impacted by worshipping with the Abyssinian Baptist Church, his spiritual center during that year of study.

When Dietrich left the U.S. in the spring of 1931, Fisher was there to see his friend off to Germany. Fisher made one request: that his friend would tell the people of Germany what life was *really* like for African Americans living in a society of gross injustice.

On Nov. 9, 1938, in an incident known as "Kristallnacht," Nazis in Germany torched synagogues, vandalized Jewish homes, schools and businesses, and killed nearly 100 Jews. Bonhoeffer's response reflected his growing Christian conviction of the significance of the persecution of the Jews.

In his Bible he wrote "Nov. 10, 1938" next to the words of Psalm 74:8: "They said in their hearts, let us plunder their goods! They burn all the houses of God in the land . . . O God, how long is the foe to scoff? How long will the enemy revile your name?"



Al Staggs has performed his one-man play, *A View from the Underside: The Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, more than a thousand times. For more information, visit peacewithjustice.com.

Among his most damning statements, Bonhoeffer affirmed "only those who cry out for the Jews may sing the Gregorian chants," indicating that true worship must be accompanied by advocacy for the Jewish people. In his "Confession of Guilt" from his book, *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer said, "The church is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenseless brothers and sisters of our Lord."

In his indictment, Bonhoeffer leveled criticism against the church for its treatment, not only of Jews, but of all those who are oppressed:

"The church confesses that it has looked on silently as the poor were exploited and robbed, while the strong were enriched and corrupted. The church confesses that it has coveted security, tranquility, peace, property, and honor to which it had no claim, and therefore has not bridled human covetousness, but promoted it. By falling silent, the church became guilty for the loss of responsible action in society, courageous intervention, and the readiness to suffer for what is acknowledged as right."

Recent developments in our own nation reveal some troubling trends. Self-proclaimed white evangelicals overwhelmingly support perspectives and policies that energize extremist groups targeting African Americans, Jews, immigrants, the LGBTQ community and non-U.S. citizens.

Economically, the gap between the affluent and the middle and poorer classes is ever widening.

Bonhoeffer's life and legacy have much to teach us about what he called "a church for others" — one that views life from the perspective of those who are imprisoned, marginalized, powerless, reviled, oppressed, poor. In short, the "View from the Underside" is the perspective of all those who suffer. **NFJ**

The Letter: An Easter story

BY RON PERRITT

Dear Matthew:

Ft is a special treat for a grandfather to get a letter from his grandson. I wish we lived closer together so I could talk to you more often. You said your Sunday school class is gathering stories about Easter. Your grandmother probably told you that I have one, about my time in the war.

I lost many friends during that time and sometimes find it difficult to talk about. However, I believe you are old enough to appreciate this story now.

War is no respecter of tradition. It was Easter week and our platoon was told to move up, just over the next hill.

We had been dug-in for several days and were taking small arms fire, but no artillery at the time. Several of us decided to make a run toward a group of trees that could provide us good cover, but we had to cross an open field to get there. Just as we got into the opening, an enemy machine gun opened up on us.

The two men to my right were killed instantly, and I was hit in my shoulder and in both legs. I remember thinking as I was falling to the ground that I was lucky and I sure didn't want to die on Good Friday.

While I was in pretty bad pain, I knew I could survive if I could just get some help. I tried to tie a bandage around one leg to stop the bleeding, but discovered that because of the shoulder wound, I had only one good arm and one hand to use. I couldn't do it by myself.

While wondering if I were going to live or die, a young corpsman, a medic, came running across the field. I guess the machine gunners were looking elsewhere at that moment. I didn't know the young man's name at the time and he didn't know me, but he was willing to risk his life to reach me.

As we lay there together in the dirt and dust, he carefully bandaged my wounds and told me not to give

up hope. He then stood up, picked me up like a sack of potatoes, put me over his shoulder and started back to our lines.

We made it within a few yards of safety when the machine gunners noticed him. He was hit two or three times — I couldn't tell exactly — and we both fell to the ground. I thought to myself, I am a goner now for sure. We lay there for what seemed a very long time, and I wondered if I would ever see your grandmother again.

Suddenly, I felt a hand grab my uniform and I began to move, dragged through the dirt, slowly, one foot at a time. I turned to see who had me and it was the corpsman, covered with blood and in obvious pain, dragging me slowly over an embankment to safety. About that time I passed out. I woke up in a field hospital the next day.

I asked what happened to the corpsman and was told he died shortly after dragging me to safety. I also learned his name was Joshua, a young Jewish man, a pacifist who hated violence and war.

Why would he be a corpsman I asked? I was told he said his calling was to save life, not destroy it. I owe my life to that young Jewish man. He lived by his commitment to saving life, regardless of the cost to his own.

You might say he was my savior. He died for what he believed in. I will always remember the scripture verse, "Greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for his friend."

I have always believed God was tremendously saddened by that young man's death, and have tried to live my life to honor his commitment.

So, Matthew, that is my Easter story. Your grandmother and I love you. We hope you will learn to live in a way that honors those who have loved you and sacrificed for you. **NFJ**

—Ron Perritt is retired from Louisiana State University where he taught engineering and is a member of University Baptist Church in Baton Rouge.

I owe my life to that young Jewish man.

He lived by his commitment to saving life, regardless of the cost to his own.



Life & Death

Varied, evolving ideas shape beliefs about eternal destiny

BY E.B. SELF

There is no way to determine all the beliefs about life and death by every human who has ever lived. We can, however, review many of the thoughts people have expressed or may have had.

BREATH

When ancient people considered life and death, a main idea was probably breath. If a person was breathing, the person was alive.

If the person was not breathing, at least for an extended time, the person was dead. He had “taken his last breath” or “breathed his last.” Only in recent years have we heard that a person can be breathing, perhaps with the help of a respirator, but be “brain dead.”

People long ago questioned where breath came from and what happened to it at death. They didn’t understand that breathing in and breathing out were different. Breath was breath. There had to be

some explanation for it.

We read in Gen. 2:7 that “the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” The King James Version says “man became a living *soul*.”

Belief in the divine origin of breath probably made it easy to think of breath as representing a life force that could be called a soul or spirit. That soul or spirit might survive bodily death.

DEATH

In the Old Testament, death is often associated with Sheol. There are many references to Sheol but no full account of it.

Sheol seems to have been a synonym for death, but it also suggested some kind of continued existence. An assumption was that the souls or spirits or shades of all of the dead, both righteous and unrighteous, went to Sheol.

It was a shadowy, gloomy existence. There were no joys but also no extreme punishments.

There is, for example, no biblical mention of fire in connection with Sheol. (For a guide to notes on the many Old Testament references to Sheol, see the subject index in the third edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.)

When the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek, Sheol was translated as Hades. The ancient Greeks used Hades as the name of the god of the underworld, the god of death. They also used Hades to designate the world of death itself.

Although Sheol and Hades both referred to the realm of death, Greek myths had some additions. A few people in Hades suffered terrible punishments, apparently related to some kind of physical existence.

Tantalus always had food and drink beyond his reach (a “tantalizing” situation). Sisyphus had to roll a large stone up a hill

repeatedly because it would roll back down each time. Prometheus suffered from having his constantly renewed liver eaten every day by a bird of prey.

In the Greek myths the punishments are bad, but they do not involve suffering by fire. There are no such stories in the Old Testament.

IMMORTALITY

Ancient Greek philosophers did not always agree with Greek mythology. Socrates and Plato, two famous philosophers who lived several centuries before Christ, expressed their thoughts about life and death in Plato's famous dialogue "The Apology." They emphasized the immortality of the soul, with little said about punishments or suffering in the next life.

Socrates thought death was the separation of the soul from the body. A lover of wisdom, he looked forward to freedom from bodily restrictions. He hoped death would allow him to speak to gods and good men of the past. (Did he ever wonder how he could speak without a body?)

The soul of a *philosoma*, a lover of the body, would seek to be born into another body after death. Continuing reincarnation after each death would suit a *philosoma*.

Reincarnation for everyone, or the view that persons are born many times and with many different bodies, is a major belief in Hinduism and Buddhism.

An important goal is seeking to have a better reincarnation after each bodily death. The ultimate aim is to escape bodily suffering altogether by never being born again.

Those who achieve enlightenment gain nirvana, or complete happiness through the end of all suffering. There could be a kind of strange fulfillment by nonexistence of the self.

Nirvana might be like a drop of water that falls into the ocean and is no longer an individual drop: a person blends into the whole.

A scientific concept is somewhat similar. According to the law of the conservation of energy, our individual bodies do perish after death but the atoms that make up our bodies do not die; the atoms continue to exist in other combinations.

RESURRECTION

If we go back to the Old Testament, we find some references to the resurrection of the body that seem to refer to new life for old bodies:

"Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!" (Isa. 26:19).

"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2).

According to the New Testament, Paul believed in the resurrection of the dead when he was a Pharisee and continued with that belief when he became a Christian. He spoke of his hope "that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous" (Acts 24:15).

Perhaps ancient Hebrews, once held captive in Egypt, were influenced by ancient Egyptians concerning resurrection. The Egyptians used the process of mummification to keep at least some bodies in the best possible shape for resurrection.

Jews at the time of Jesus disagreed over resurrection. Pharisees accepted the belief of resurrection (see Acts 23:8), while Sadducees said there was none (see Mark 12:18, Acts 23:8). The latter accepted as authoritative only the first five books of the Old Testament, and resurrection is not mentioned in those books.

HEAVEN/HELL

Returning again to the Old Testament, we find hints of heaven but no fully developed ideas of a place for the dead.

We read in Gen. 5:24 that God took Enoch, but are not told exactly where. We assume it was heaven.

According to 2 Kgs. 2:11, "Elijah ascended by a whirlwind into heaven," but further information is missing.

The Old Testament does not have a fully developed concept of hell, but does have some beginning ideas.

According to 2 Kgs. 23:10, Topheth in the valley of Ben-hinnom was a place for the horrible practice of offering children as burnt sacrifices to Molech.

A prophecy in Jer. 7:32 notes that

Topheth, "which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom," would be used as a burial ground.

The valley of Hinnom, located near Jerusalem, eventually included a garbage dump where fires burned constantly. These continuing associations of death and fire in this particular place may have contributed to the belief in hell as a place of extreme punishment for the dead.

According to the etymology provided in a standard dictionary, the Hebrew word for this location was *gehinnom*, translated into Greek as *geenna* and then translated into Latin as *Gehenna*. At some time, Gehenna began to be thought of as hell or at least as representing hell.

Gehenna may have influenced Jesus' thinking about the next life, such as in his story of the deaths of a rich man and a poor man Lazarus. The rich man went to Hades and was tormented in the flames (see Luke 16:19-31), but Lazarus found rest in the bosom of Abraham. There is no direct mention of heaven, but Lazarus fared far better than the rich man.

Accounts of Hades in Greek mythology do not mention fire. Not everyone interprets the story literally, but Hades in this story sounds much more like Gehenna than Sheol. Jesus' statements about hell in Matt. 10:28 and Mark 9:43 both refer to Gehenna in the Greek New Testament.

PARADISE

While hanging on the cross, Jesus said to one of the criminals beside him: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Many people think of paradise as heaven, but a note in the third edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* claims that paradise is a contemporary term for the place of the righteous dead prior to the resurrection.

Once Jesus did not speak specifically of heaven but surely was thinking of it when he spoke with comfort to his disciples: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2).

When Paul was a Jewish Pharisee, he

believed in the resurrection of the body. As a Christian, he enhanced that belief by speaking of a spiritual body: "It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44).

While the spiritual body would be resurrected, it would be more than a dead body that came to life. It would be a transformed, glorified body.

Paul interpreted the resurrection of believers in relation to Christ this way: "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor. 15:49).

AFTERLIFE

What did Paul think of heaven? He did not believe he could describe it: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9).

Many Christians agree with the beliefs of Socrates that souls are real, that the soul separates from the body at death, and that souls are immortal. Basic Christian doctrine, however, agrees with Paul's view that Christians in the next life will have resurrected and transformed bodies.

A combination of these beliefs has led to some confusion and also some speculation as to when souls will reunite with resurrected bodies.

Augustine, whose main writing was *The City of God*, expressed some of the most severe thoughts about the destiny of unbelievers. His critics had said that suffering in hell could not be eternal, reasoning that bodies would burn up in the flames. Augustine replied that God was capable of making bodies that could burn forever without being consumed.

Also, Augustine believed in the necessity of baptism for salvation and concluded that infants who died unbaptized would go to hell. He further thought that God had already decided who would go to hell and who would go to heaven.

Thomas Aquinas, known mainly for his *Summa Theologica*, agreed with Augustine that unbaptized infants who died would go to hell but found a more merciful interpretation. Aquinas thought such infants went to limbo or a border of hell,

where they would be forever separated from God but would not suffer physical pain.

Baptists and some others have claimed that baptism is only for believers and thus is inappropriate for infants, thereby posing the question: What happens to infants who die?

The view is that infants have not reached the age of accountability and are not held responsible. They are within God's mercy.

PUNISHMENT

Many thinkers have continued in the tradition of Augustine of having a severe view of hell. Dante, for example, in *The Divine Comedy* imagined that hell had a series of circular layers.

Each layer supposedly had drastic punishment appropriate for a particular group of sinners. Dante elaborated on the idea that there are special places in hell for various people.

Other scholars, perhaps influenced by Thomas Aquinas, have had more lenient interpretations of hell. Might all of hell be like limbo? There would be the punishment of eternal separation from God but no flames or physical suffering.

Also, there is the concept of annihilation. The wicked might be totally destroyed in a mass mercy killing. People would be gone, but so would their suffering.

How much did Jesus have in mind when he said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28)?

The idea of the destruction of both soul and body sounds like the complete end of a person.

There are some special beliefs related to heaven. According to the concept of purgatory, only saints and martyrs go directly to heaven; others will be allowed into heaven at a later time after additional spiritual cleansing through suffering.

SKEPTICISM

A further view is universalism, or the conviction that all people will ultimately be saved and go to heaven because of the belief that God wants everyone to be saved.

As to hell, some have questioned its reality. In 2014 Ron Reagan, the son of a U.S. president, presented himself on television as an atheist, saying he was not afraid of burning in hell. He meant, of course, that he was not afraid of something he considered untrue.

There are those who think there is no hell and no heaven or anything beyond this body, believing that this life is all there is.

It is indeed difficult to find scientific evidence for heaven and hell or for any kind of individual continuation after death. A certain degree of skepticism or perhaps an admission of ignorance is nothing new or completely unbiblical.

The writer of Ecclesiastes stated: "For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?" (3:19-21).

MATTER OF FAITH

Breathing in and out seems to be such a simple thing to do. We do it without thinking much about it unless we occasionally are short of breath or momentarily run out of breath.

But thinking about breath can lead us to consider important concerns about life and death. What do you believe? Are you as ready as you can be for what may happen?

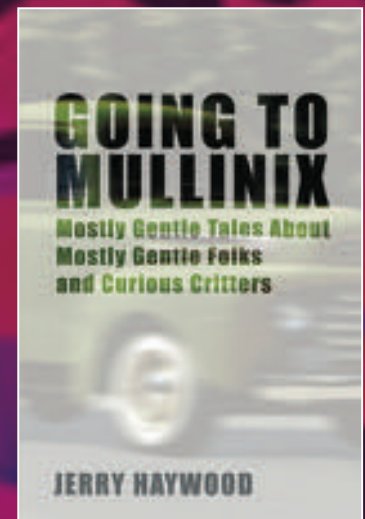
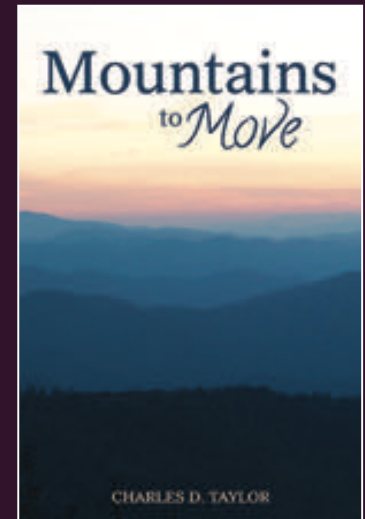
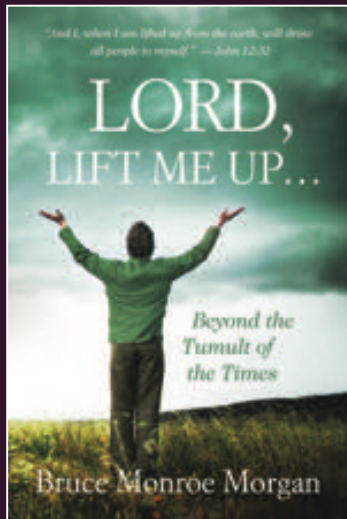
Belief in life after death is a matter of faith. Many believe, but some do not. There are different ideas among those who do believe.

While a consideration of common sense might lead us to be cautious, I am trusting that Paul was correct in anticipating resurrected, transformed and glorified spiritual bodies. **NFJ**

(Unless otherwise indicated, scripture references come from the NRSV.)

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

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Time to hold the line on physician-assisted suicide

BY CHARLES C. CAMOSY
Religion News Service

The American Medical Association's official opposition to physician-assisted suicide is admirable and clear: "Physician-assisted suicide is fundamentally incompatible with the physician's role as healer, would be difficult or impossible to control, and would pose serious societal risks."

The AMA currently insists, in other words, that health care providers focus on killing the pain, not the patient.

But at their annual meeting in June 2018, the AMA's House of Delegates voted to continue to review the policy, with assisted-suicide supporters arguing for the group to take a neutral stance.

Later last year, in a move called "startling" by the president of the Catholic Medical Association, the American Association of Family Physicians changed its official position from opposed to neutral.

Then, at the AMA House of Delegates' interim meeting last fall, the discussion over assisted suicide was so vociferous that it "could split the association," reports say. While at least temporarily leaving the current opposition to physician-assisted suicide intact, delegates referred the discussion back to committee, setting up a more disruptive battle for the 2019 meeting.

Eight U.S. states have now passed laws permitting physician-assisted suicide, and a younger group of resident physicians appears ready to abandon the wisdom of nearly every professional code of medical ethics going back to the Hippocratic oath.

The intense debate on this issue touches the very foundations of the profession. What counts as health care? What does it mean to be a professional physician?

Should eminent medical organizations bend their views to provide access to what a handful of states have legalized? What do patients have a right to demand of medical teams?

Much of the opposition to physician-assisted suicide comes from religious health care providers. A huge number of Catholic hospitals and clinics see their religious vocation and mission as totally incompatible with killing.

Professional groups such as the Catholic Medical Association, Ascension Health, and the Christian Medical and Dental Associations did their best to activate their members against changes in the AMA's view. But opposition to physician-assisted suicide need not be explicitly religious.

Many of us are sympathetic to end-of-life cases where someone is wracked with terrible pain. According to Oregon's public health department data, however, physical pain doesn't make even the top five reasons people request physician-assisted suicide:

- loss of autonomy (91.4 percent)
- decreased ability to engage in enjoyable activities (86.7 percent)
- loss of dignity (71.4 percent)
- loss of control of bodily functions (49.5 percent)
- becoming a burden on others (40 percent)

A study of Canadian practices found those who requested relief "tended to be white and relatively affluent and indicated that loss of autonomy was the primary reason for their request."

Unmoored from a Hippocratic understanding of health care, younger physicians would support assisted suicide. Like other privileged populations, they disproportionately consider the loss of autonomy and bodily function — along with becoming a burden on others — to make life so undignified as to be unlivable.

Disability rights groups such as Not Dead Yet are leading efforts to educate people to see how legal assisted suicide affects the value of the lives of the disabled. Indeed, disability rights groups

have been the most effective opponents of the practice worldwide.

Sick and disabled people despairing of life in an ableist, consumerist, youth-worshipping consumer culture are already made to think they don't matter — that they are "takers rather than makers." Paving the way for them to kill themselves is diabolical. We should instead provide nonviolent physical and mental health care and attempt to become a culture that welcomes rather than discards our most vulnerable.

Traditionally marginalized groups tend to understand this better than privileged populations. The overwhelming majority of those who request physician-assisted suicide are white. Overall, 53 percent of whites support legal physician-assisted suicide, compared with only 32 percent of Latinos and 29 percent of African-Americans, according to Pew Research.

More study needs to be done, but it is likely that racial minorities' well-placed distrust of the medical community plays a significant role. Georgetown law professor Patricia King argues that racial minorities have a justified fear of becoming "throw-away people" in medical contexts.

But law shapes culture for us all, and physician-assisted suicide is bound to shape culture in ways that are not good for the most vulnerable.

The AMA has refused to blindly support multiple procedures that have been legalized by U.S. states. The organization has insisted, for instance, that physicians must not participate in the death penalty.

So it should remain with physician-assisted suicide. The professional practice of medicine requires a coherent and non-violent commitment to patients' health, one that bears with them in ways that refuse to conclude anything other than it is good they exist. *NFJ*

—Charles C. Camosy is associate professor of theological and social ethics at Fordham University.

On growing up

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Recently, over dinner with friends since childhood, one of them asked reflectively: “When we were growing up could you have imagined your life turning out as it did?”

“No,” I said.

That seems to be one of many amazing things about life. We don’t simply chart a course in our youth and then mindlessly follow the route.

There are unplanned and unexpected twists and turns, an assortment of open and closed doors, and the ongoing discoveries of gifts and opportunities.

The greatest asset seems to be an openness to learn and experience new things that contribute to who we are and are becoming.

For me, the goal is to find and embrace a balance between that which has long shaped my life and the free pursuit of becoming the person I might be. One doesn’t have to choose between one’s roots and one’s future; both can make important contributions.

I’m a nostalgic person who enjoys reflecting on those persons, institutions and other shaping factors in my life. But I do so with gratitude that I’m not stuck in the same mindset of the past.

For example, I still like pinto beans and cornbread (the primary entrée — though we didn’t use that word — for family meals) but not the ethnocentrism we also shared.

I still listen to Johnny Cash but find more insights now in “What is Truth?” and “The Ballad of Ira Hayes” than I did when the spinning records echoed in



my younger ears.

I still get misty-eyed when singing “Amazing Grace.” But I see God’s wide and loving embrace with far fewer restrictions than the ones assumed during my upbringing.

I want to be nostalgic but not stuck in the past.

Recently my colleague Bruce Gourley and I were discussing the many things we seek to do through the expanding ministry of Nurturing Faith. Bruce rightly noted that these resources and experiences, while diverse in form and content, all provide for lifelong learning.

It’s up to us to decide if we’ll keep growing up or just grow old.

Speaking of Johnny Cash, recently I found a CD a publicist sent to me some years ago. It was a collection of hymns his mother loved and sang, including “Where We’ll Never Grow Old.”

In his rich baritone voice the aging Cash yearns for “a land on the faraway strand,” which he has now found, “where we’ll never grow old.”

In this earthly meantime, however, we keep growing older — with the option of growing up as well.

It is wise to not stop growing until the end. There is way too much out there to be either learned, experienced or missed. [NFJ](#)



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Questions Christians ask scientists

What do you think about global warming? —HELEN ADAMS, TUCKER, GA

BY PAUL WALLACE

When thinking about global warming, I think about two planets — Mars and Venus — and two books of the Bible — Genesis and Matthew. Let me explain.

With the exception of our own dear Earth, Mars has, over the last half century, been the most visited, the most probed, the most orbited, the most closely inspected, the most roved-over and the most photographed object in the solar system.

We have learned much about its topography, its weather, its seasonal dynamics, its harboring of water and organic compounds, and its geology past and present. Mars will be the first planet inhabited in any future colonization of the solar system, and it stands as a symbol of the possibility of extraterrestrial life.

Mars has so overshadowed the game of planetary exploration that it's easy to forget it was not the first planet to be flown by or visited — nor the first to be orbited or landed upon. Nor was Mars the first planet to have its atmosphere analyzed, its winds clocked or its landscape photographed.

The Soviet *Venera* program, which lasted from 1961 to 1984, achieved all of this with Venus well before the United States' *Viking 1* touched down on the Red Planet in July 1976.

You may wonder why, despite not being visited first, Mars has come to the forefront of our planetary exploration while Venus has languished in obscurity. It's not because of Venus' distance, size or gravity. It's not because Venus rotates so slowly (once every 225 Earth days) or because it contains

traces of sulfur dioxide in its atmosphere.

It is because, while Mars chills at an average of -80 degrees Fahrenheit, Venus broils at 870. At this temperature lead melts, electronics cannot function more than a few hours, and life cannot exist. And make no mistake: the exploration of the solar system is all about life, ours included.

Venus' proximity to the sun and its thick atmosphere help drive up the planet's temperature. But these alone are insufficient to make it so hot. Only when you consider the *composition* of the atmosphere (96.5 percent carbon dioxide [CO₂]) does it begin to make sense, because this gas absorbs heat very efficiently.

Carbon dioxide makes up only about 0.04 percent of Earth's atmosphere but, from the point of view of climate, it plays an outsized role. If it were not present, Earth would be about as cold as Mars.

However, due to deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels, the amount of CO₂ in our atmosphere is *increasing*. Even a small boost translates into large-scale global changes.

Since the late 19th century, the surface temperature of the earth has risen by about 1.6 degrees Fahrenheit, and this trend is accelerating. Most of the warming has occurred over the last 35 years, with the seven hottest years on record occurring since 2010.

We'll never become Venus, but we're moving steadily in that direction. This increase of 1.6 degrees may not seem like much, but when it's spread over the planet it adds up to an enormous amount of energy.

In response, the oceans have risen about eight inches over the last century,

largely due to thermal expansion. Much of the CO₂ has been absorbed by those same oceans. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution the acidity of the seas has risen by about 30 percent. The consequences for marine life are dire.

Other consequences of global warming include more extreme highs *and* lows, and increased frequency and intensity of severe weather events.

A marked decrease in the extent and thickness of Arctic Sea ice has been documented. There is less snow cover in winter. Glaciers are retreating. Vast sections of Antarctic ice shelves are calving every summer and are not being replaced during colder months.

The potential consequences of the continuation of global warming to human health and happiness, to political and technological systems, and to nonhuman life, are severe.

It is between 95 and 100 percent certain that human influence has been the dominant cause of observed warming since 1950, and these findings have been recognized by the national science academies of the major industrialized nations and are not disputed by any national or international scientific body.

Therefore, as a scientist and citizen of the world, I understand and accept global warming as a legitimate and looming problem. As a Christian, how do I see this problem, and how do I understand my response?

It may sound strange, but I start with the claim made in Genesis 1 that we are created in the image of God. But what does that phrase mean? Many answers have been suggested over the centuries, but the word *dominion* has something to do with it.



Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to editor@nurturingfaith.net.

Gen. 1:26-27 reads:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make human-kind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Unfortunately, the word *dominion* (like the related word *domination*) often carries the suggestion of tyranny or plunder or subjugation. Therefore, this concept of the divine image is fraught with difficulty, and may have encouraged us to believe the environment was made to be exploited for human use.

However, this is clearly an improper reading of this passage. In our search for a better understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God, we are often called to interpret the Old Testament through the New Testament. In Matthew 20 we find a story to shed light on this question.

It is late in Jesus’ ministry. He has set his face toward Jerusalem and explained to the disciples that he will be arrested, crucified and killed. But the disciples aren’t hearing it; they’re too busy trying to figure out who among them is the greatest.

James and John assume it must be one of them. So, as brothers will, they fight it out. Eventually they send their mother to ask Jesus about it for them. (Yes, they had their mother do it. I am not making this up.)

She approaches Jesus and says, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” Jesus answers, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?”

Apparently, James and John are standing right behind Mom, and reply: “We are able.”

Jesus said, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

Jesus calls his disciples together and

says, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”

Hear this: God is a servant, not a tyrant, and the divine image in us calls us not to subjugate but to serve. This radical piece of theology sits at the foundation of a faithful response to global warming.

Old notions of dominion as domination vanish in the light of this call. In Jesus’ upside-down ethic we are to rule not by dominating but by serving.

We are to humble ourselves, seek forgiveness for our sins against the created order and work diligently in the service of one another, God, the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, all the wild animals of the earth, and every creeping thing upon the earth.

May each of us seek and find ways to do that today. *NFJ*



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Giving voice

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Shaping and sharing perspectives on faithful living in challenging times is a privilege and responsibility afforded to the editors and writers of this publication by those who support the ministry of Nurturing Faith. For that I am very grateful.

Nurturing Faith — more broadly than my voice — provides a needed platform, both digitally and in print, to share information, offer analysis, and tell stories that encourage and inspire our faithful engagement.

So often the loudest public expressions of Americanized Christianity are exclusionary doctrinal claims and self-serving, political ideologies lacking the very essence of what Jesus came to offer.

Therefore, alternative voices — crying in the wilderness of the harsh and demeaning civil religion rampant in American culture today — are greatly needed.

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protective, institutional restraints is what makes us fragile. Your generous giving amplifies this needed voice.

This mission is ongoing; we pray that your support will be as well. NfJ

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Please contact us to let us know... let us help...let us thank you!

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“How my life may connect to spiritual and moral teachings, which is how I today describe what others may call ‘faith,’ is a part of my writings — automatically. No conscious intention is involved.”

Telling stories

A conversation with author Clyde Edgerton

Author Clyde Edgerton is a North Carolina treasure. Two of his 12 books have been adapted to film. In 1997 he received the North Carolina Award for Literature, the highest civilian award bestowed by the state.

Edgerton teaches creative writing at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, and attends Winter Park Baptist Church in Wilmington. The following conversation is adapted from an interview by Rick Jordan, church resources coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina, with Edgerton who will be a keynote speaker at the CBFNC Annual Gathering March 28-29 at First Baptist Church of Greensboro.

RJ: What has been your best experience with a Baptist church?

CE: My best experience with a Baptist church is a kind of combination of (a) the feelings of protection, safety and direction in the Southern Baptist church of my childhood, a fundamentalist church; and (b) listening to and singing the hymns that



bring back those memories in a Cooperative Fellowship Baptist church just before hearing a CBF sermon that comes from a worldview that is relaxed, intent, coherent and not “fundamentalist.”

RJ: You are an advocate for racial justice. What is the Crossroads Project? What are you learning from your students as they are involved in the project?

CE: The Crossroads Project is a consequence of a course I taught in 2014

that led me to a fuller understanding of “whiteness” in our culture, something I had been less aware of before teaching the course. As has been told before, two young fish meet an older fish, and the older fish asks, “How’s the water?” and one of the younger fish says to the other, “What is water?”

RJ: Do you intentionally integrate your faith in your writing?

CE: How my life may connect to spiritual and moral teachings, which is how I today describe what others may call “faith,” is a part of my writings — automatically. No conscious intention is involved.

One interesting experiment I did was to have a character start reading the Bible front to back for the first time. As I recall, I did that in *Walking Across Egypt* as well as in *The Bible Salesman*.

That meant I had to become that character and start reading. I didn’t get too far in the Old Testament, and then I jumped to the New Testament. The experiment helped me understand the richness of the literature in the Bible, and the possibility of reading it through eyes that were not my own was fun.

RJ: You are an expert at telling stories — short stories, novels, poems, essays, songs. How do you think the church is doing at telling the Jesus story?

CE: It's hard for me to answer that. I can say that I think people who consider themselves Christian are doing a great job telling the Jesus story when they tell the Jesus story in the way Jesus told stories — in parables.

Parables are usually relatively open-ended, and many can be applied to today's problems, but not all of them. I'm thinking maybe that since Jesus did not seek earthly riches and his followers are supposed to aspire to be like him, that "message of example" may not be reaching many of us.

RJ: Tension is an essential ingredient in a good story. Baptists have been known as dissenters. From your perspective, are we still dissenters?

CE: I think most people trying to live by the teachings of Jesus find it difficult to not be dissenters. There seems to be a good bit going on today that Baptists can find to dissent — like pharmaceutical ads. I'm not sure why that popped into my head; that's just a notion.

I mean, the whole idea of Jesus watching TV is an interesting concept. What would he watch? And what do Baptists watch? Maybe there's a dissertation topic in there for a Liberty University scholar.

I can't quite get over finding out about the TV show called *Naked and Afraid*. I wonder if Jesus might watch that, think-

“I think most people trying to live by the teachings of Jesus find it difficult to not be dissenters.”

ing that it was a show about the Garden of Eden. I've drifted from the question. Yes, Baptists must dissent — and do sometimes at cross-purposes.

RJ: What are you reading these days?

CE: I'm reading and re-reading the works of William Faulkner, most recently *As I Lay Dying*. Like many high school students, I was fed Faulkner too early, and I've had to learn how to read many of his works.

I'm also reading some short stories by Mark Richard (pronounced RiCHARD). I highly recommend "Her Favorite Story" (in *The Ice at the Bottom of the World*) and "The Birds for Christmas" (in *Charity*).

Also, as a consequence of this interview, I've re-read many of Jesus' parables and find them fascinating. I can easily understand biblical scholars spending their lives in search for answers to only a question or two.

RJ: I am not a reader of novels normally. But years ago a good friend told me I was

required to read *Walking Across Egypt* to remain her friend, so I did. And, I loved it.

Early in this novel you describe an elderly woman gliding toward her cane bottom chair as she remembers that it has no cane, and then she gets stuck inside the chair — all the thoughts that went through her mind as she drifted downward, realizing what she was doing but unable to stop. I laughed so hard.

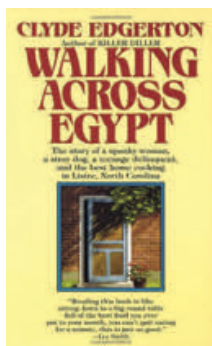
Later in the novel she is bothered by the scripture insisting that prisoners are some of "the least of these" who should be visited. This nudge drives her to go to the local rehabilitation center to take homemade cake and pie to a 16-year-old prisoner, Wesley, who eventually escapes and wants to hide out at her house.

She wants to be faithful in keeping Matthew 25, yet it is not easy with this young prisoner. I really enjoyed reading the book.

CE: Thank you, Rick. *Walking Across Egypt* came about as a consequence of my mother sitting in a chair without a bottom and then saying, "I wasn't going to tell anybody what happened, but..." The character I started writing about resembled my mother, but wasn't her.

At the time I knew an Episcopal priest named Lex Matthews who lived by the verse in Matthew saying, "Inasmuch as ye have done it to the least of these . . ." and because my mother fed stray animals and visited the sick people and otherwise took parts of the Bible literally, a theme came into view and the rest of the book fell into place.

I was lucky to have grown up among people who inspired characters for that novel and other novels. NFJ

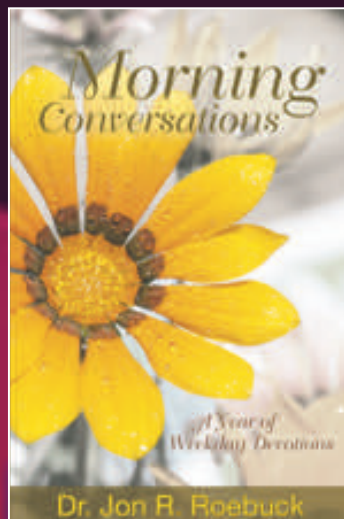
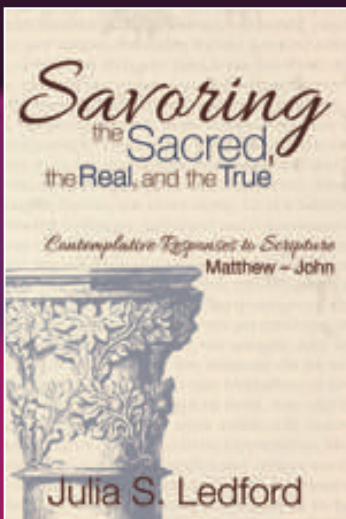
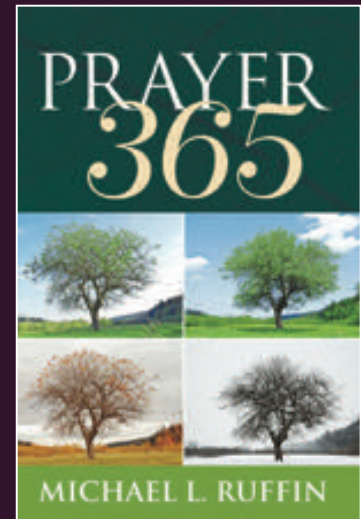
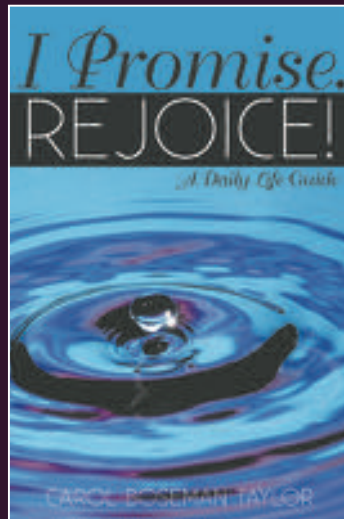
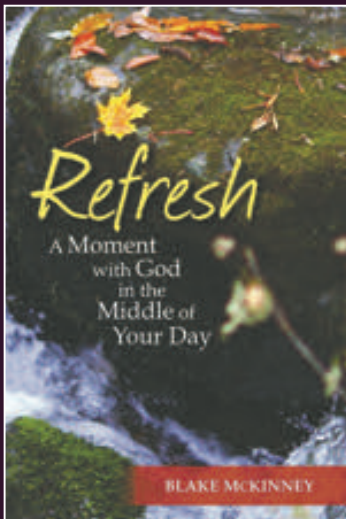


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