



*Baptists*  
**ODAY**  
NEWS JOURNAL



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# ISRAEL

## *Faith, friction and firm foundations*



Nazareth from Mount Precipice

The sunset over Nazareth is nothing short of spectacular when viewed from high atop Mount Precipice. Every turn of the head gives a worthy perspective on grandeur.

**T**he gathered Christian pilgrims ponder the words — taken from the prophet Isaiah — that Jesus spoke in a synagogue below some two millennia ago to launch his public ministry:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19).

As the melon-like sun disappears, the reverberating sounds of the Islamic Call to Prayer rise from the many minaret-topped mosques scattered below. The city looks and sounds little if anything like it did when the young Jewish family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus called it home long ago.

Sabbath approaches in Jerusalem, and

distinctively dressed Jewish men rush through the Muslim Quarter of the Old City in order to reach the Western Wall before sunset. There they pray fervently and faithfully — and, as the night grows late, yeshiva students and young soldiers break into joyful dances in the expansive plaza.

Physically, this ancient retention wall is as close as one can get to the beloved Temple that was destroyed in 70 CE. Spiritually, it is the holiest site in Judaism.

Just above, on the Temple Mount, rises a golden dome with colorful mosaic features that defines the landscape of modern Jerusalem: the Dome of the Rock.

It is the flashpoint for ongoing conflicts between the Muslims who have long occupied the space and some Jewish leaders seeking the right not only to visit but also to pray at the site considered sacred by both religious groups — as well as many Christians.

Friday evening activities also occur within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre — regarded by many as the crucifixion site called Calvary or Golgotha. Conflict among the multiple Christian groups that occupy the church has

been so frequent and intense for so long, however, that no part of the shared facilities can be rearranged without the consent of all the groups.

This conflict-over-cooperation environment is most subtly noted in a wooden ladder that has remained unmoved from a church window ledge since 1852 — out of fear that someone’s view of hell might break loose.

The drive from Jerusalem down to Bethlehem is just six to eight miles — depending on which Christmas Eve sermon you’re listening to. But access is not easy.

A stark, towering, prison-like wall — arbitrarily placed with little regard for accepted territorial boundaries — isolates Palestinians from work and travel. Even their own vineyards and other sources of livelihood can become inaccessible.

Christians are disappearing from the birthplace of Jesus — due to Islamic pressures from within and political pressures from without the West Bank. These Palestinian Christians say they are further isolated and offended by the supposedly divine cover that their American evangelical brothers and sisters provide to overreaching Israeli officials.

Holy Land, at times, seems to be a misnomer. Yet this place is so foundational to religious faith for so many that it cannot be ignored.

From its rugged, rocky hills to its fertile fields and lakeshores to its sparking coastline to its numerous and historic places of worship, this place tells story after story of faith that has endured.

Such faith is often made more real for visiting longtime Bible readers and believers who now find a fresh context for the divine stories embedded in their minds and hearts since childhood.

Whether envisioning a giant of a combatant in the Valley of Elah, a violent storm on an angry sea, or a much-needed savior praying in anguish in a hillside garden of olive trees, this place is different from all others in the world. **BT**



The Western Wall





Capernaum, the hometown of Peter where Jesus spent much time as well. (Right) Remains of a synagogue built of volcanic basalt uncovered in Korazim, a fourth-century Jewish village built atop a first-century village in Galilee that Jesus likely visited.

## SEE ROCK CITIES: Indeed, these stones can talk

**T**here's an old rabbinic tale that goes something like this: When God sent out an angel with 10 bags of rocks to scatter over the earth at the time of creation, the angel dropped nine bags on Israel and the remaining one on the rest of the world.

Rocks are everywhere in Israel, providing such sturdy building materials that the remains of ancient civilizations can be uncovered thousands of years later.

Many archaeological sites in Israel have been developed by the National Park Authority, while other tels and digs dot the map of Israel and the West Bank as well.

Tels — flat-topped mounds layered with history — tell much when properly excavated.

### UPON THIS ROCK

Caesarea Philippi, near the northern Golan Heights, rings a bell with Bible readers as the place where Jesus queried his disciples about his identity. Simon answered: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16).

In turn, Jesus responded: “... You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (v. 18).

A massive rock setting across from the city seems most fitting for such an affirmation — and the giving of a new name (in Greek) that means rock.

Some scholars believe “the gates of hell” was a reference to a deep grotto beneath the rock. A strong stream used to flow from it, which some believed connected with the mythical river Styx, which led to the underworld.

The stark, cliff-faced area with flowing springs was known for the frenetic worship of the god Pan — usually represented as a

part-goat, part-man deity playing a flute. Temples to various Greek deities were built into the rugged setting with niches carved into the stone walls to hold images of the gods.

The ancient worship site became known as Panyas (or Panias), also known by the Arabic pronunciation “Banyas.” The flowing stream is one of three tributaries forming the Jordan River, which flows into the Sea of Galilee.

### NORTHERN ISRAEL

Tel Hazor and Tel Dan also provide archaeological evidence of life in northern Israel. Hazor was a major city that controlled the main road from Egypt to Mesopotamia. The large site testifies to a rich Canaanite and Israelite history, but is often ignored by tour groups and other visitors.

Dan was so close to the northern border — a border that has moved about from war to war — that biblical writers would speak of the entire country by saying “from Dan to Beersheba” (the southernmost city).

A nature trail leads to the remains of the infamous temple built by Jeroboam after Israel split into northern and southern kingdoms in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE. One of Dan's most impressive features is an ancient city gate constructed of mud bricks atop basalt stones.

Given the popular name of Abraham's Gate — because Abraham traveled to Dan to rescue Lot according to Genesis — it is estimated by archaeologists to have been built around 1750 BCE, during the time of the patriarchs.

Continued on page 6



Jay Avery and his mother, Nannette Avery, of Signal Mountain, Tenn., stand before the impressive rock setting near the northern Golan Heights where images of Greek deities were once placed in the carved niches. Nearby, at Caesarea Philippi, Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ. Photos by John Pierce





## SYNAGOGUE FINDS

Finding remains of a synagogue is a highlight of archaeological quests. Sites around Galilee afford several views of such success.

**Korazim** is a fourth-century Jewish village built on a first-century village that Jesus likely visited when traveling in Galilee. It is one of three places — with Capernaum and Bethsaida being the others according to Matthew 11:20-24 — upon which Jesus pronounced “woe” for the peoples’ lack of repentance.

Wrecked by a massive earthquake in 749, the ruins include an impressive synagogue and other structures made from darkened volcanic basalt. Some visitors are surprised by the Greek symbols and architecture found in the ancient Jewish synagogue there.

But as veteran guide Doron Heiliger noted: “If you live with another culture, you get influenced by another culture.”

An even more impressive synagogue (fourth to fifth century) is found in **Capernaum** — the hometown of Peter where Jesus lived for a few years. Its columns of limestone rise high against the blue sky.

This newer synagogue — built atop a

first-century basalt foundation — included a school and likely a second-floor balcony where women would have been seated.

## STILL DIGGING

In **Migdal** — known in biblical times as **Magdala** — the digging continues. Best known as the hometown of Mary Magdalene, this recently discovered town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee also has a noteworthy synagogue.

Excavations continue as private funding is acquired to do so. The dig began in 2009 after efforts to build a hotel and shopping center near the shoreline led to the discovery of the ancient town that had been hidden for two millennia.

Archaeological connections to Mary Magdalene, a close friend and supporter of Jesus, have not been recovered, but an archaeologist who has worked at the site remains hopeful. In the meantime, she sells shirts and other souvenirs in an effort to keep the ground moving.

The name Migdal means “watchtower” — in reference to the lookout towers that fishermen would build in the area to search for schools of fish.

## MEGIDDO

Talk about layers of civilization: **Megiddo** was destroyed 25 times and rebuilt 25 times. Did anyone think of remodeling?

At Megiddo, 7,000 years of history lie stacked, layer upon layer. Archaeological finds include imposing gates from both the Canaanite and Israelite periods, Canaanite temples and altars, a grain silo, stables for horses, and a deep water shaft and tunnel to a

David and Lindsey Haun of Fredericksburg, Va., walk through the massive, ornate ruins at **Scythopolis** on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. The Greek/Roman/Byzantine city was built at the foot of a tall tel called **Bet She’an** where archaeological evidence has been found from civilizations existing thousands of years before Christ.

hidden spring that provide visitors with a cardio workout.

Strategically located along the **Via Maris** — the ancient Egypt-to-Mesopotamia trade route — **Megiddo** saw many kingdoms come and go throughout its long, rich history.

While the archaeological evidence is most impressive, some people are primarily captivated by the town’s Greek name: **Armageddon**. The city was associated with so many battles in its history that it came to symbolize the final battle in some end-time prophecies.

## ROMAN RUINS

**Sepphoris** (or **Zippori** in Hebrew) was a bustling Roman city when nearby **Nazareth** was but a small village and the hometown of Jesus. Therefore, some scholars believe it likely that Jesus and his father, Joseph, would have worked in Sepphoris.

Joseph was said to be a carpenter (a *tektōn* according to Mark 6:3, which also can mean “craftsman”). Such work could have included stone masonry.

The capital of the Galilee region during Roman times, **Sepphoris** featured fine streets lined with shops, elaborate government buildings, and villas for the rich atop the acropolis, or highest part of the city.

Elaborate mosaic floors — many featuring Egyptian or mythological motifs — have been uncovered in numerous buildings.

On the eastern side of the Galilee, **Scythopolis** was an impressive Greek/Roman/Byzantine city built at the foot of a many-layered tel known as **Bet She’an**, where the Philistines reportedly hung the bodies of Saul and his sons.

Excavations have uncovered a well-preserved theater, elaborate bathhouses, and two main streets running at right angles, each lined with shops, administrative buildings and temples. There is even a public latrine — very public.

Those with enough energy can hike to the top of the tel for a view back down on the ancient city. An imposing cross-like tree on the tel is not ancient history, but a movie prop from the 1973 film, *Jesus Christ Superstar*.



## OLD AND OLDER

“Herod was the great builder,” said guide Doron Heiliger. “Nothing was big before Herod.”

The grand-scale harbor construction at Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean — the most modern port in the world at that time — would attest to such a statement. Marble was imported from Turkey and columns from Egypt.

At the beautiful waterfront now, a few columns and lower walls of Herod’s palace and the outline of a spectacular pool serve as reminders of what grandeur once welcomed ships loaded with riches from distant places.

The regal theater has been refurbished and is still used for entertainment today.

To students of the Bible, the site is known as the headquarters of Pontius Pilate and as the place where Peter, in Acts 10, encountered the centurion Cornelius — opening the gospel to persons of all nationalities. It was also the city in which Paul defended himself before the Roman officials Felix and Festus.

Many miles to the south and east is Jericho, the oldest known city in the world. It is now part of the West Bank, near the Jordanian border and the north end of the Dead Sea.

Here Kathleen Kenyon uncovered a watchtower she dated to 10,000 BCE, making it the earliest structure of its kind ever found. Many buildings in ancient Jericho were made of mud brick, making their remains difficult to distinguish.

And, no, no one’s found exactly where “the walls came tumbling down.” In the Old Testament, the book of Joshua refers to Jericho as the first Canaanite city to fall to the invading Israelites when they came into the Promised Land, but excavated remains don’t match the story.

A large sycamore tree in town reminds Bible students that this is where Jesus called the outcast tax collector Zacchaeus down from the limbs and shared dinner and salvation with him.

New Testament Jericho was a mile or two from the older city. It featured multiple palaces built by Herod the Great as a winter retreat. Reportedly, he gave the city to Cleopatra as a wedding gift when she married Mark Anthony.

\*\*\*

Much of the rich, multi-layered history of Israel and the West Bank have been and are continually being uncovered thanks to careful archaeologists — and construction material that lasts and lasts and lasts.

But as Doron Heiliger often quips to tour guests: “If you want to take a rock home with you, it’s OK. We have plenty.” **BT**



Left to right: Bruce Gourley, Lindsey Haun, John Woodruff, Ina Woodruff and Meghann Cotter sift rocks and soil for archaeological treasures at Tel Maresha.

## Dig for a day

It’s not every day that novices get to dig up 2,200-year-old pottery pieces and bring history to light, but the 48 participants in *Baptists Today’s* Nurturing Faith Experience to Israel and the West Bank got that opportunity in November.

**T**el Maresha, part of Bet Guvrin National Park, welcomed eager and inexperienced hands in the excavation of bell-shaped caves created by an Idumean community that lived there in the second and third centuries BCE.

Following the Maccabean Revolt, in which the Jewish people regained control of the land for about 100 years, the Idumeans were required to convert to Judaism or move. Many of them threw their possessions — the ones they could not carry — into the caves they had dug into soft chalk beneath their homes. Then they collapsed their houses into the caves.

More than 5,000 such caves have been found in the area, all filled with the detritus of those who once lived there. Because the site is not layered but rather from the same time period, our untrained volunteers

could dig, bringing to light pottery, bone, and other finds unseen for more than two millennia.

Participants then formed a bucket brigade and schlepped the buckets of finds, along with those filled with dirt and rocks, to the surface. At the top, sifting the debris through wire screens uncovered smaller treasures.

Not all valuable finds are easily noticed. A gold earring bearing a winged figure was found earlier at the site. Amazingly, the matching earring was found as well.

The figure on the earring is likely representative of the Greek goddess Nike, said one archaeologist. If so, she added with a smile, it would be the oldest and most valuable pair of Nikes in the world. **BT**



Deep in a cave at Tel Maresha, Loretta Bryson of Julian, N.C., digs up 2,200-year-old pottery pieces.

# quotation remarks

“We pledge ourselves here today to do all in our power, within our faith communities and beyond, to work together for the freedom of all those who are enslaved and trafficked so that their future may be restored.”

—From a declaration signed by leaders of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and other faiths who gathered at the Vatican last month to call for an end to slavery by 2020 (RNS)

“It’s hip right now to have weird and artsy people at church. There are many churches that welcome these people as a way of being culturally relevant. I even heard about one mega-church in town putting photos of all the congregants’ tattoos on a wall inside the church building. So we are still a place for misfits, but we are not as hung up on that. Being a club for weirdos is not as important as being the church.”

—Pastor Michael Sares of Denver’s *Scum of the Earth Church*, an evangelical congregation known for welcoming persons that other churches might turn away (RNS)

“Christians take their moral cues from Jesus; that’s why they are called ‘Christians.’ We can say that Jesus was naïve, simplistic, impractical and shortsighted; but you don’t get to say these things and still call yourself a Christian. The kingdom ethic of Jesus applies to all of life or it doesn’t apply at all.”

—Alan Bean, executive director of *Friends of Justice* (BNG)

“The Gospel is a very dangerous idea. We have to see how much of that dangerous idea we can perform in our own lives. There is nothing innocuous or safe about the Gospel. Jesus did not get crucified because he was a nice man.”

—Bible scholar *Walter Brueggemann* (*onbeing.org*)

“Individualism is a good thing. Christianity helped to develop respect for the uniqueness of each person, and it is the foundation of our privacy rights and our freedom of religion... But individualism must be tempered by the recognition that we are social beings who exist, and indeed thrive, in relationship with one another. Our best ideas, our greatest advancements as a society, and our greatest gains in culture and government have primarily resulted from people collaborating.”

—Larry Eubanks, pastor of *First Baptist Church of Frederick, Md.* (*ethicsdaily.com*)

“Have you studied the history of the country or neighborhoods where you’re going? Do you understand the role that the U.S. has played there? Do you know what the role of the Church and missions has been? Do you know the current needs and issues of the people?”

—Michelle Acker Perez, who hosts short-term mission teams in Guatemala, on the importance of participants knowing the cultural context in which they’ll serve (Relevant)

“We expected to find people who were burned out, but it was that they couldn’t stand the politics of church.”

—Josh Packard, a sociologist at the University of Northern Colorado, on recent data concerning the growing number of Christians (called “dones”) who are leaving church (*Baptist News Global*)

“Jesus’ call to his disciples did not appear to be based on what would happen to them if they didn’t follow, but on a vision and a promise of a new kind of community that would facilitate a more profound expression of what it meant to be children of God. Hope, not fear, was the basis of Jesus’ message.”

—Colin Harris of *Stone Mountain, Ga.*, professor emeritus of religious studies at *Mercer University*, writing at *ethicsdaily.com*

“In a friendship, people don’t sit around talking about their friendship. They do things together. Through common endeavor, people overcome difference to become friends.”

—Columnist *David Brooks* in *The New York Times*



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# For good or bad: the witnessing dilemma

No one can argue with your “personal testimony.” It’s you telling what God has done in your life.

That was some of the advice — or urging — that was part of my Christian upbringing that highly valued the notion of being faithful witnesses.

To witness was to tell others — in a most persuasive way — of God’s good working in one’s own life in hopes that listeners would want some of the same. Various resources were available to get those persuaded through the proper steps of salvation.

The intent was noble: If you find something that’s good for you, share it with others because it will be good for them as well. Pass it on. It only takes a spark . . . , remember?

It never dawned on me through the earlier decades of my life that a “personal testimony” might come across more like: Look what Jesus has done for me — and you should be so lucky.

Now it is much easier to see how and why many would not find such faith to be very attractive if the best case is one’s own goodness and winsome ways.

Honestly, many of the more vocal and higher profile representatives of Christianity today are not the life models that others might find appealing. It’s not that they don’t live up to some unreasonable standard of perfection — but that they seem to view themselves more highly than others.

This applies not to some fringe group that markets hatred in the name of Christianity. They are easily dismissed.

No, the challenge is the much broader public witness of evangelical Christians that seems so unlike the One to whom listeners are being asked to commit their lives.

Through formal communications, social media and daily interactions, harsh and disrespectful political ideology, false accusations and other expressions of ignorance, and even hostilities rooted in hatred are often advanced as part and parcel of what it means

to be “Christian.”

When someone prefaces his or her pronouncement with a claim of offering “the Christian” perspective or position on an issue, it induces severe cringing. What now will be blamed on Jesus?

Pointing fingers at others and expressing embarrassment over their words and deeds, however, are less productive than looking inward at our own ways of misrepresenting the faith that we claim to hold so dear.



It’s painful but appropriate to ask: How do those whose understanding of the gospel is shaped by their experiences with me feel about it?

Honestly, if all I knew of the Christian gospel were what comes through social media and the larger media, as well as casual conversations overheard and public pronouncements about social issues of the day, I’d be on the constant run from it.

Grace, humility and those apparently irrelevant “fruits of the Spirit” often take a backseat to theological and political certainty, disrespect for those who differ, and shallow, uncritical thinking.

Publically, Christianity is too often defined by pseudo claims of persecution, the spread of outright false information and accusations, silly defensiveness over holiday greetings, and all sorts of fear-mongering when facing any and all social change.

And these “Christian testimonies” are advanced with the ease of a few keystrokes or simply hitting a “share” button, or parroting them in daily conversation.

The evangelical subculture of my upbringing put a strong emphasis on overt (even aggressive) “witnessing” — regardless of one’s personality type or gifts. It was not enough to be responsible for one’s own spiritual course and condition; the “gospel” was to be shared with, if not imposed on, others.

Through the years I’ve continued to struggle with what faithfulness looks like when it comes to sharing one’s faith and “making disciples.” Too often the emphasis seems to be on getting others to think and act like me — rather than to experience the grace needed by all.

“You can be like me” is not very appealing, however — especially when coming from those of us who consider ourselves to be the more faithful Christian witnesses.

Too often, the result is more harm than good. Ignorance, arrogance, inflexibility and worse often provide very good reasons for others to not want any part of that which is deemed “Christian.”

What might be more appealing — as well as more authentically Christian?

Perhaps it would be unexpected selflessness and compassion, an openness to change without fear, a stronger dose of humility and grace, or a quicker and clearer confession of “I don’t know” when it comes to life’s many mysteries.

A friend of another faith tradition interacts closely with church groups in his work. Recently, he told of hearing these participants constantly degrading people of religious faiths and nationalities other than their own.

So much of what he picks up from them, he said, is both unloving and untrue. It is quite unappealing.

However, a woman with one church group was simply astonished to learn that he was not a Christian — having had so much exposure to the faith. It seemed incomprehensible to her that he had not made that decision.

With great sincerity and apparent concern, she asked him incredulously: “Why don’t you become a Christian?”

His actual response was kind, but dismissive. But his silent reaction was: “You! It’s because of people like you!”

There is an old preacher line that goes something like this: “It’s not a question of whether you are going to be a witness — but rather what kind of witness.”

That seems to be true. **BT**

*Honestly, many of the more vocal and higher profile representatives of Christianity today are not the life models that others might find appealing.*

# Nearly one-fourth of American families turn to church food pantries

By Bob Allen  
*Baptist News Global*

In an online survey of 1,158 adults last year, 22 percent said they are in families who have received food from a church-run food pantry in the past.

Among churchgoers, the percentage is 26 percent, while just 18 percent of those who never attend have gone to a church for help.

More than one-third of African Americans (37 percent) answered “yes,” compared to 19 percent of whites and 25 percent of Hispanics. Americans with no college degree are more than twice as likely as college graduates to say yes.

Thirty-five percent of those who say they have used a church-run food pantry identify as evangelical Christians. The rate is higher in the

West (28 percent), compared to 20 percent in the South and 17 percent in the Northeast.

Americans least likely to receive food from a church (11 percent) are 65 and older.

Scott McConnell, vice president of LifeWay Research, said while churches have a reputation of providing coffee and donuts and covered-dish suppers for church members, they are also supplying food to many people in need.

According to Bread for the World, about one in seven American households is not always sure where their next meal is coming from. The USDA uses the term “food insecurity” to distinguish those who are literally starving from people who miss a meal, worry about running out of food or sometimes go to bed hungry.

Feeding America, a nationwide network of 200 food banks, provides food assistance to an estimated 46.5 million Americans a year.

“There is an abundance of food in the U.S., but plenty of people still go hungry,” McConnell said. “Many churches respond by faithfully following the biblical principle of being open handed to the poor and needy by maintaining well-stocked food pantries to share.” **BT**



—With reporting by Bob Smietana of LifeWay Christian Resources.

## Court rejects atheists’ demand to end tax break for clergy housing

By Kimberly Winston  
*Religion News Service*

A federal court of appeals rejected a case brought by an atheist organization that would have declared tax-exempt clergy housing allowances — often a large chunk of a pastor’s compensation — unconstitutional.

“This is a great victory for fair treatment of churches,” said Luke Goodrich, deputy general counsel for the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which filed an amicus brief on behalf of pastors from several major denominations.

“When a group of atheists tries to cajole the IRS into raising taxes on churches, it’s bound to raise some eyebrows,” he said. “The court was right to send them packing.”

The Nov. 13 ruling overturns a 2013 decision by U.S. District Court Judge Barbara Crabb, who had ruled that the exemption “provides a benefit to religious persons and no one else, even though doing so is not necessary to alleviate a special burden on religious exercise.”

But the Freedom from Religion Foundation, a Madison, Wis.-based First Amendment watchdog group that has

pursued the case since 2011, vowed to fight on.

“We are disappointed but we are not giving up,” said Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF’s co-president. “We are so clearly right and the law is so clearly unconstitutional.”

The Chicago-based 7<sup>th</sup> U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals overturned Crabb’s ruling in favor of the atheists because it found Gaylor and FFRF lacked “standing” — meaning they had no right to sue because the law did not affect them.

Gaylor and Dan Barker, her co-president and an ordained minister, did not seek a housing allowance for themselves under the law.

“Dan took the allowance when he was a minister, but now that he is head of the largest atheist and agnostic organization in the country, he cannot take it,” Gaylor said. “That clearly shows preference for religion.”

Churches routinely designate a portion of a pastor’s salary as a housing allowance. So, for example, a minister who earns an average of \$50,000 may receive another third of income, or \$16,000, as a tax-free housing allowance, essentially earning \$66,000. Having to pay taxes on the additional \$16,000 (\$4,000 in this case) would mean a 6 percent cut in salary.

The exemption is worth about \$700 million per year, according to the Joint Committee on Taxation’s Estimate of Federal Tax Expenditure.

Supporters of the tax break say it helps alleviate government costs for social services by routing that assistance through houses of worship. Tony Perkins, president of the Washington-based Family Research Council, said “society has tried to relieve the clergy’s housing burden because of the tremendous social benefits churches offer the culture.”

Most clergy, he said, “despite their exceptional educations, receive only modest salaries.”

The Orthodox Union, which represents Orthodox Jews, noted that the housing allowance helps many rabbis live in homes they might not otherwise be able to afford because “congregational rabbis and other clergy members must reside within walking distance to their synagogues” because observant Jews do not drive on the Sabbath or most holidays.

Gaylor said FFRF was reconsidering its legal options and would not drop the case. The only venue left to hear the case would be the U.S. Supreme Court. “We are regrouping,” she said. **BT**





Hundreds of faith leaders and immigration activists participated in a protest in front of the White House in July. RNS photo by Heather Adams.

## Evangelicals a mixed bag on Obama's immigration move

By Adelle M. Banks  
*Religion News Service*

WASHINGTON — While Republican leaders blast President Obama for taking executive action on immigration reform, some prominent evangelical leaders are welcoming the president's plans to keep about 5 million undocumented immigrants from being deported.

Evangelicals are a key voting bloc for the GOP, but on immigration some are taking a pragmatic step away from the party. They include Hispanic leaders such as Samuel Rodriguez who say the time has come to manage what has become a "de facto humanitarian crisis" for millions of immigrants.

"This merciful action takes place because for years our government, under the leadership of both parties, failed miserably as it pertains to immigration," said Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference.

Likewise, Noel Castellanos, CEO of the Christian Community Development Association, and Gabriel Salguero, president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, welcomed the executive action on immigration.

"As pastors, we welcome the relief of action and call on Congress to provide long-term solutions," said Salguero, who has made visits to Capitol Hill to push for reform.

But not all evangelicals praised the president's action, even as they embrace the need for immigration reform.

Southern Baptist ethicist Russell Moore, who has pushed Obama to act on immigration, said in a *Time* op-ed that executive action is the wrong approach.

"We can debate whether the President has the authority to undertake these actions unilaterally, but, regardless, this is an unwise and counterproductive move," he wrote.

A recent LifeWay Research survey found that while 91 percent of evangelicals said the U.S. should be responsible for stopping illegal immigration, 77 percent agreed that "Christians have a responsibility to assist immigrants, even if they are in the country illegally."

Florida megachurch pastor Joel Hunter, an evangelical who is also Obama's spiritual adviser, said he celebrates the "partial step" Obama is taking, even as he must still work with Congress on comprehensive reform.

"I welcome this incremental step," Hunter said. "I don't look upon it as amnesty. I look upon it as a partial solution to an ongoing problem and I do see the need in human terms, in terms of keeping families together and bringing people out of the shadows."

Other Christian groups, such as Church World Service, welcomed the president's move but questioned whether it goes far enough.

"However impressive 5 million people sounds," said John L. McCullough, CWS' president and CEO, "the fact of the matter is that there still are 11 million ... who wait with anticipation and have a deep concern about what will unfold over the course of this day." **BT**

## Guide for nonbelievers offers 10 commandments not written in stone

By Kimberly Winston  
*Religion News Service*

STANFORD, Calif. — An atheist, a humanist and an agnostic walk into a restaurant.

The hostess says, "Table for one?"

An old joke, yes, but its essence lies at the heart of *Atheist Mind, Humanist Heart: Rewriting the Ten Commandments for the Twenty-First Century*, a new book by Lex Bayer and John Figdor.

Bayer, 36, is a Stanford grad and longtime humanist, and Figdor, 30, is the new humanist chaplain at Stanford University. The two met when Bayer, a venture capitalist and engineer, wrote a news story about Figdor's arrival at Stanford. The two soon discovered they liked hashing out difficult ideas about the way people live.

They began meeting regularly for coffee, brought along their computers and were soon on their way to drafting a book — a kind of philosophical roadmap to essential beliefs for nonbelievers.

"There are lots of books out there about why you should not believe in God," Bayer said. "But there aren't any about what do secular people believe in. I think that's the question John and I felt hadn't been adequately addressed."

In exploring that, the two men — both of whom have studied philosophy and logic — came up with 10 essentials. For the extra-nerdy, there's even "a theorem of belief" in the appendix that looks like something a mathematician might scribble.

The result is 10 "non-commandments" — the authors' irreducible statements of atheist and humanist belief.

First up: "The world is real, and our desire to understand the world is the basis for belief."

No. 2 on the list: "We can perceive the world only through our human senses."

Halfway through, at No. 5, the authors conclude: "There is no God." Once over that hurdle, the non-commandments become less controversial — an ethical society is good, as is moral behavior.

But it is the last non-commandment that makes these maxims very different from the biblical version: All of the above is "subject to change in the face of new evidence." They are, quite literally, not written in stone.

The goal of the book, the authors say, is to encourage atheists and humanists to define what they believe so they can articulate it better, both to themselves and to a broader society that often regards atheists as immoral and untrustworthy. **BT**

# Pastors opposed to same-sex marriage vow not to participate in any civil ceremonies

**W**hat's the surest way conservative pastors can avoid any government mandate to perform same-sex marriages? According to one prominent religious journal and a growing number of ministers, the answer is not to perform any civil marriages at all.

*First Things*, a conservative religious publication, has launched a movement encouraging pastors to refuse to perform marriages as representatives of the state. A signing statement called "The Marriage Pledge" has been posted to the journal's website, where ministers can affix their names electronically.

The pledge was drafted by Ephraim Radner, an ordained Anglican and professor of historical theology at Toronto School of Theology's Wycliffe College, and Christopher Seitz, an ordained Episcopal priest and senior research professor at Wycliffe.

"In many jurisdictions, including many of the United States, civil authorities have adopted

a definition of marriage that explicitly rejects the age-old requirement of male-female pairing," the pledge says. "In a few short years or even months, it is very likely that this new definition will become the law of the land, and in all jurisdictions the rights, privileges, and duties of marriage will be granted to men in partnership with men, and women with women."

The document concludes: "we, the undersigned, commit ourselves to disengaging civil and Christian marriage in the performance of our pastoral duties. We will no longer serve as agents of the state in marriage. We will no longer sign government-provided marriage certificates. . . . We will preside only at those weddings that seek to establish a Christian marriage in accord with the principles articulated and lived out from the beginning of the Church's life."

The concept that civil and religious marriage should be separate is not entirely novel. At *U.S. Catholic*, columnist Bryan Cones has asked, "Is it time to separate church and state

marriages?" And writer Len Woolley raised similar questions at the Mormon-run *Deseret News*.

But the idea isn't just limited to conservatives. Gene Robinson, the first openly gay Episcopal bishop, proposed the idea as early as 2009.

By 2011, three North Carolina church pastors and at least one in Virginia quit signing marriage licenses as a way of opposing state bans on same-sex marriages.

And in July of last year, Paul Waldman argued at *The American Prospect*, a progressive publication, that religious couples should fill out state-mandated marriage forms and then have the religious ceremony of their choosing.

"The wedding, in other words, should be a ritual with no content prescribed by the state, no 'By the power vested in me by the state of Indiana' at all."

Waldman added: "The state doesn't tell you how to celebrate Christmas or Ramadan, and it shouldn't tell you how to get married." **BT**

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# Teaming with Oprah

*Pastor Rob Bell keeps pushing evangelical envelope*

Rob Bell was once the evangelical It Boy, the hipster pastor with the thick-rimmed glasses and the skinny jeans whose best-selling theology was captured in books with names such as *Velvet Elvis* and *Sex God*.

**B**y 2006, the *Chicago Sun-Times* wondered aloud whether the Michigan mega-church pastor could be the next Billy Graham.

And then he went to hell.

In 2011, his book *Love Wins* pushed the evangelical envelope on the nature of heaven, hell and salvation. Many dismissed him as a modern-day heretic, unwilling to embrace traditional evangelical beliefs about the hereafter.

While evangelicalism has always wrestled with the pull of its fundamentalist roots and a desire for a modern-day openness within certain boundaries, for many Bell had gone too far.

“Farewell, Rob Bell,” retired mega-church pastor John Piper famously tweeted.

Now, the man who built a church of an estimated 10,000 people isn’t even attending an organized church. Instead, he surfs the waves near Hollywood and has teamed up with the goddess of pop theology, Oprah Winfrey.

Exchanging his evangelical bona fides for the blessing of Oprah may yet prove to be his most unforgivable sin, at least in some circles. Which is not to say that Bell cares very much what anyone says these days.

“I never spent a minute wondering whether I’m in or out.”

Does he still consider himself an evangelical?

“If we mean Jesus’ message of God’s revolutionary love for every person, and we can surrender and give our life to acts of loving kindness, then man, sign me up,” said Bell, 44.

After the initial battle over *Love Wins* died down, Bell seemed to disappear from the public eye. He left his Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids and headed out to California to work on TV projects.

*The Rob Bell Show* premiered recently on the Oprah Winfrey Network, a one-hour show that features Bell and is co-produced by him. He also recently toured the country with Winfrey



on a “Life You Want Weekend.”

In many ways, some elements of typical evangelicalism are a good fit for Oprah’s lineup of public confession and personal transformation, said Kathryn Lofton, author of *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*. The difference, however, is that The Church of Oprah incorporates as many religious concepts as possible, while evangelicalism commits to exclusivity.

“I think an interesting way to think about Bell and Oprah here is to observe how easily she incorporates him into her pantheon of spiritual advisers. She remains, as ever, the determining corporate deity,” said Lofton, a professor of religious studies at Yale.

“One way of looking at this is less a merger of two equal powers than it is the acquisition by one large corporation of another small business.”

To be sure, Bell still holds his evangelical credentials, with degrees from Wheaton College and Fuller Theological Seminary. For anyone looking for any hints to his theological shift, however, his new book, *The Zimzum of Love: A New Way of Understanding Marriage*, is likely to disappoint.

He came out in favor of same-sex marriage in 2013, and few evangelicals seemed surprised. If he could question the existence of hell, they said, why wouldn’t he shift on his views about sexuality?

Bell says he would conduct a same-sex ceremony, and he encourages churches to welcome

gay members and allow them to be ordained.

“This is a justice issue,” Bell said. “We believe people should not be denied the right to have someone to journey with.”

*Books & Culture*, a journal published by *Christianity Today*, mocked Bell’s latest work, inventing a fake publishing executive to push the man behind the *Gospel of Zimzum*.

“He won’t talk about the cross, or sin, or the idea that marriage represents Jesus and his bride or God and Israel. So he’s not a Bible Christian, but *really* a Christian, then. Our new kind of Christian. Our evangelical,” the piece said.

Bell co-authored *Zimzum* with his wife, Kristen, and he said “she’s generally three steps ahead of me” in his evolution.

Now resettled near Los Angeles, the couple no longer belongs to a traditional church. “We have a little tribe of friends,” Bell said. “We have a group that we are journeying with. There’s no building. We’re churching all the time. It’s more of a verb for us.”

He’s still a fan of churches — depending on the context.

“Churches can be places that help people grow and help people connect with others and help people connect with the great issues of our day,” Bell said. “They can also be toxic, black holes of despair. My thinking is, it depends on where you are in your life. One of the most extraordinary things I’ve done since I left Mars Hill is be with people and engage with people who would never step foot in a church.” **BT**

# BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Celebration, chagrin and defiance alternatively greet the dawning of the new year.

For free black Baptists who until recently were slaves, the first day of the year is a time of great celebration. North and South alike, black Baptist churches, having held watchnight vigils the night before in commemoration of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, worship, pray and praise God. Many cities, including Vicksburg and Memphis, feature community parades.

In Savannah, the newest liberated city, black clergy, many of whom are Baptist, form the Savannah Education Association that will in the weeks and months ahead create schools for blacks, taught by blacks.

Also in Savannah, on Jan. 12, Union General William T. Sherman meets with 20 of the city's black ministers. The appointed spokesman for the ministers is 67-year-old former Baptist pastor Garrison Frazier, a slave until eight years prior. Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton pose questions to Frazier. As transcribed, a few of the questions and answers are:

*Second. State what you understand by slavery, and the freedom that was to be given by the President's proclamation.*

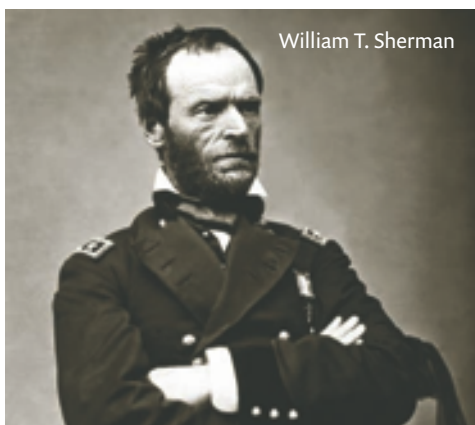
*Answer. Slavery is receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent. The freedom, as I understand it, promised by the proclamation is taking us from under the yoke of bondage and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor and take care of ourselves and assist the Government in maintaining our freedom.*

*Third. State in what manner you think you can take care of yourselves, and how can you best assist the Government in maintaining your freedom.*

*Answer. The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn in and till it by our labor — that is, by the labor of the women, and children, and old men — and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare; and to assist the Government the young men should*

150 YEARS AGO

January 1865



William T. Sherman

*enlist in the service of the Government, and serve in such manner as they may be wanted. (The rebels told us that they piled them up and made batteries of them, and sold them to Cuba, but we don't believe that.) We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own.*

*Fourth. State in what manner you would rather live, whether scattered among the whites or in colonies by yourselves?*

*Answer. I would prefer to live by ourselves, for there is a prejudice against us in the South that will take years to get over, but I do not know that I can answer for my brethren. [All but one express agreement with Frazier.]*

Four days after the interview with Frazier, Sherman orders that each freed family be given 40 acres of tillable land along the South Carolina coast.

Enslaved Baptists, their numbers declining each passing day, hear the good news and are ever more confident that their own freedom is nigh.

White Baptists of the North, certain that God intends freedom for all, celebrate with black Baptists.

White Baptists of the South, however, have mixed feelings. A growing number are ready to welcome a United States victory over the Confederacy. Others yet harbor deep-seated anger against the North, perhaps none more

so than the Georgia residents who only weeks ago witnessed Sherman's brutal march through the state. Many remain defiant, insisting that slavery is God's will for the black race.

Samuel Boykin, editor of the Georgia Baptist *Christian Index*, expresses the sentiments of many. "The war which afflicts us has a manifest connection with slavery ... the relation between the master and the slave has the divine sanction," Boykin warns those who may be wavering. Whereas 1864 was "one long year of disaster and distress to the Confederacy," better days lie ahead if the people of God humble themselves, submit to providence, and honor God's Confederate nation and his holy name. "Have faith in your God and your cause: the one is kind and benignant — the other worthy of all effort, all sacrifice, all suffering." Fight "for all that is right, holy and just; have faith in the nobility of your cause."

A writer for the South Carolina *Confederate Baptist* insists the war is going well, evidenced by army revivals in the South and an increase of evil in the North. The future bodes well for the white people of the Confederacy, to whom will be "entrusted the custody of pure religion as well as constitutional liberty." Of the abolitionist North, "God has judged them. The prophecy of their doom is it not written in their own acts."

The editor of the Virginia Baptist *Religious Herald* also voices confidence in the Confederacy. "If a feeling of despondency with regard to the issue of the struggle for Southern independence has gone abroad among our people, we do not share it. There is no sufficient reason for this gloom that we can see."

Perhaps the eyes of many white Baptists of the South are willingly closed to the realities at hand. On Jan. 15, Fort Fisher in North Carolina near Wilmington falls to the Union. Four days later, Sherman begins moving north into South Carolina. And on Jan. 31, the U.S. House passes the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment (the Senate already having done so) abolishing slavery, opening the way for the amendment to be sent to the states for ratification. **BT**

—Bruce Gourley is executive director of the Baptist History & Heritage Society. For a daily log of "This Day in Civil War History," see [civilwarbaptists.com](http://civilwarbaptists.com).



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## In the Know

**C. Welton Gaddy** retired in December as president of the Interfaith Alliance. For 16 years, he commuted between Washington, D.C., and Monroe, La., most weeks. He will continue as pastor of Northminister Church, a Baptist congregation in Monroe.

**Jennifer Hawks** is staff counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. She is a graduate of Mississippi College, University of Mississippi School of Law and Baylor University's Truett Seminary. Previously she was director of advocacy and outreach for the Family Abuse Center in Waco, Texas.

**Roger Paynter** has retired as pastor of First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas, where he had served since 1996.

**Erling C. Valerius** died Nov. 18 in Columbiana, Ala., at age 86. He was a Baptist missionary to Brazil for 30 years.

**Malcolm O. Tolbert** died on Thanksgiving Day 2014 in Baton Rouge, La. Regarded by many as one of Baptists' finest New Testament scholars, he had a long and varied ministry as a pastor, missionary and professor.

After serving in the Army Air Corps, he graduated from Louisiana College and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary before answering a call to mission service in Brazil. Later he returned to the seminary to complete his doctorate after which he joined the faculty to teach courses in Greek, New Testament and theology.



In 1977 he became pastor of First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., where he served until joining the faculty of Southeastern Baptist Seminary. He taught there for 10 years before retiring in 1989.

His excellent writings, gentle spirit and insightful thinking attracted many. He was honored in a memorial service Dec. 13 at Broadmoor Baptist Church in Baton Rouge. **BT**

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Inspired Creativity

By Leroy Seat

# Remembering Isaac Backus and the importance of religious liberty

The New England Puritan Isaac Backus was born in 1724 and died in 1806. As an outstanding advocate of religious freedom and the separation of church and state, he is well worth remembering and honoring 208 years later.

Backus was the most influential Baptist in British North America after Roger Williams (1603-83), founder of the first Baptist church in the “new world” in 1638.

Backus became a Christian as a teenager in 1741. Five years later he became a preacher, and at the age of 24 was ordained as a Congregationalist minister.

In 1748, however, he was baptized by immersion and became a Baptist.

In 1756, Backus started a Baptist church in Middleborough, Mass., where he served as pastor until his death 50 years later.

Backus joined with others in 1764 to found the first Baptist institution of higher learning in the colonies, the school now known as Brown University. It was the third college in New England and the first Ivy League school to accept students from all religious affiliations.

As a Baptist pastor, Backus became involved in the lengthy battle for separation of church and state in Massachusetts, opposing the “ecclesiastical tax” that had been imposed upon all citizens of that state to support the

Congregational churches.

Even those who opposed the beliefs of the Congregational churches were required to pay the tax, and those who refused to do so had their personal property seized. Many people were even imprisoned because of failure to pay the tax, including several members of Backus’s own family.

Backus’s strong advocacy for freedom of religion is best articulated in his published sermon of 1773, “An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty, Against the Oppressions of the Present Day.”

Religious liberty is always a problem for minority groups — such as the Baptists in New England during Backus’s lifetime and religious groups in the U.S. now, such as American Muslims.

Thus, being an advocate of religious liberty today means supporting the freedom of Muslims and all other minority groups. That liberty includes freedom from the heavy-handedness of the religious majority.

Those in the majority usually don’t easily give up their position of privilege. Massachusetts didn’t amend the state constitution to give religious freedom to all people until 1833, some 27 years after Backus’s death.

At present, some religious conservatives,

or traditionalists like those in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Massachusetts, generally don’t like social change when that means giving up their privileged position. Thus, we hear clamor for upholding the religious convictions of the nation’s founders.

Without question, the Massachusetts Bay Colony formed in 1630 was based on Puritan religious convictions. In a sermon even before landing, John Winthrop, the colonists’ spiritual leader, proclaimed a vision of a Christian society that was to be an exceptional “city on the hill.”

Such a society, however, could not tolerate even the dissident Puritan minister Roger Williams, who was banished in 1636. Nor could it tolerate the outstanding, but unusual, Puritan religious leader Anne Hutchinson, who was also banished from Boston in 1636.

But it was the freedom of religion and separation of church and state established in Rhode Island by Williams and then bravely backed by Backus more than 135 years later that became a part of the U.S. Bill of Rights ratified in 1791.

I am grateful for Baptists like Backus and their emphasis on religious liberty for all. Let freedom ring for all religious groups in the U.S. today! **BT**

—Leroy Seat is a retired Baptist missionary to Japan who lives in Liberty, Mo. He blogs at [theviewfromthisseat.blogspot.com](http://theviewfromthisseat.blogspot.com), where this commentary first appeared.



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# Bible Study

Psalm 111

with Tony W. Cartledge

Feb. 1, 2015

## Inspiring Deeds

**D**o you know anyone who is perpetually cheerful, or who manages to make the best of every situation and be thankful to God even in difficult circumstances? Some people greet each morning with groans and moans, while others make a habit of thanking God for something before arising to meet the day.

Do you find the worship of God to be an energizing opportunity to express thanks, or do you see it as a grudging obligation?

The author of today's text was one of those cheerful and thankful people. If we pay attention to what he has to say, we might just become thankful, too.

### Praise God! Why? (v. 1)

Psalms of praise such as this one were designed for use in corporate worship, though some may have been recited in a school setting, too. Such psalms typically begin with a call to praise God, followed by a list of specific reasons why God is worthy of our praise.

This hymn is one of eight psalms that are written as acrostics. After the introductory word "hallelujah," each of the following 22 lines begins with a sequential letter of the Hebrew alphabet, from *alef* to *tau*. 📖

Why, we ask, would the writer choose this format? The most common suggestion is that the acrostic form is an aid to memorization. Anyone who knew the Hebrew alphabet and wanted to memorize the psalm would have a built-in key to the first letter of the next line. 📖

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



Psalm 111:1

"Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation."

It's also possible that the psalmist wanted to suggest comprehensiveness: that the psalm's truth stretched from "A to Z," as it were. Both motivations would have been particularly helpful if the psalm was used in an educational setting. We know that ancient Israel had a strong "wisdom tradition" that was probably passed on through formal schooling, though probably for elites only, and perhaps through informal training at home. 📖

Psalm 111 is primarily a hymn of praise, but it speaks of studying God's works (v. 2) and closes with a distinctive wisdom saying ("the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom," v. 12) that would have made it apropos for use in a school setting. 📖 The psalm could have been paired effectively with the following one: Psalm 112 is also an acrostic, and it shows how characteristics attributed to God in Psalm 111 should be fleshed out in a righteous person's life.

The psalm begins with a shout: "Hallelujah!" Hebrew doesn't use exclamation marks, but it's hard to imagine speaking the word without

one, unless you're singing along with Leonard Cohen's popular but depressing song by the same name.

When we say "hallelujah," we're speaking Hebrew. In translation, it means "Praise Yah!" with "Yah" being shorthand for Yahweh, the covenant name by which Israel learned to address God.

After the opening word of praise, the psalmist declares that he intends to thank God with a whole heart, and to do so "in the company of the upright, in the congregation" (v. 1). True gratitude is not limited to saying grace at the table out of a sense of obligation, but arises from a wholehearted appreciation for what God has done. Furthermore, expressing thanksgiving to God is not just a private affair, but something done best in the company of others.

This truth addresses an inherent fallacy in the popular desire to "be spiritual without being religious," a common excuse for not attending church or Bible study. As we join others in offering thanks to God, at least three things happen: We actively engage in relationship with God, we encourage others with




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the testimony of both our presence and praise, and we find inspiration in the shared faith of those who sing or speak words of praise along with us. When we find ourselves struggling with issues of faith, the benefits of community are especially important – and spiritual “Lone Rangers” miss out on that.


**Because of God’s works  
(vv. 2-6)**

If you were writing a poem designed to motivate thanksgiving in others, what aspects of God’s work would you bring to the fore? Would you speak of the beauty of creation, the turn of the seasons, or the blessing of nutritious food? Perhaps you would express thanks for good health, for the miracle of children, or for the grace shown to us through Christ.

The author of Psalm 111 spoke within his own cultural and religious context as he recounted God’s mighty works in Israel’s behalf, a perpetual source of delight to those who “study” them (the word literally means “to seek out,” v. 2). 

While other psalms praise God for creating the fertile earth, the crashing seas, and the soaring heavens (Pss. 9, 19, 104, and 139, for example), Psalm 111 focuses mainly on God’s acts of deliverance and care toward Israel.

The psalmist does not enumerate a catalog of God’s acts in delivering Israel from Egypt or other enemies, but praises the wonder of them: They are “full of honor and majesty,” wrought by a God whose righteousness never ends (v. 3). They are “wonderful” gifts from Yahweh, who is “gracious and merciful” (v. 4).

The language of these verses recalls the oft-repeated credo found in Exod. 34:6, where Yahweh declared to Moses the divine characteristics of being “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” 


God’s provision of food (v. 5) brings to mind Israel’s wilderness wandering, when God provided daily rations of manna both before and after

the covenant ceremonies at Sinai, where Israel pledged to live with God in a relationship that promised divine blessing for human obedience.

The promises first given to Abraham and incorporated into the covenant were fulfilled as God gave to Israel “the heritage of the nations” by routing other peoples before Israel as they entered and settled the land of promise (v. 6).

Christian believers no longer live under the covenant between Israel and Yahweh, but that does not mean we cannot gain inspiration from this psalm. We could offer thanks in a similar pattern, remembering the wonder of how Christ was born, of how his mighty works showed God’s power, and how his compassionate actions and pointed teaching revealed the depths of God’s mercy and grace. We also have stories of God in Christ providing food for multitudes and offering a new covenant relationship that makes us citizens of the Kingdom of God who can look forward to an eternal inheritance.

**Because of God’s covenant  
(vv. 7-10)**

In vv. 7-10, the psalmist turns from deliverance to covenant. As God’s works (vv. 2-6) are “faithful and just,” so the covenant precepts of God – the commands, teachings, or rules for living that God expects Israel to obey – are “trustworthy,” that is, reliable and for humanity’s good (v. 7). 

God’s commands are not random rules, but are designed for human well-being. Yahweh’s precepts “are established forever and ever,” the Psalmist says, to be performed faithfully by God’s people (v. 8, see “The Hardest Question” online for more on this).

Similar thoughts are reflected in v. 9, a reminder that God had delivered the Israelites and instituted an eternal covenant with them. Some scholars

think the phrase “commanded his covenant forever” should be interpreted as a divine instruction that the covenant should be observed or remembered forever in the form of annual festivals. At such times, the Hebrew people were to celebrate the saving acts of the one whose name is “holy and awesome.”

As the covenant commands given to Israel provided needed structure and order for both agrarian and urban life in ancient Canaan, so Jesus’ command that his followers love God and love one another furnishes guidance for life in our own rural, suburban, or city settings.

As mentioned above, the final verse echoes Israelite wisdom traditions. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” is a recurring theme in the wisdom literature, found in Job 28:28, Prov. 1:7, 9:10, and 15:33 (see also Isa. 11:2 and 33:6, as well as the apocryphal book of Sirach 1:18, 27; 19:20; 21:11).

The phrase “fear of the LORD” does not suggest that we are to prostrate ourselves before God in quivering fright, but that we exhibit a healthy sense of reverence and respect before the God whose name is “holy and awesome.” When we harbor a proper sense of respect for God who calls us in Christ to a higher way of life, we are well on the way to living wisely.

An important marker of wisdom in the life of the believer is the kind of grateful humility that manifests itself in thanksgiving to God. Thus, the psalm closes with a neat frame: It began with an exuberant call to praise Yahweh, and it closes by proclaiming that “His praise endures forever.”

Think again about your typical day. How often do you stop to take stock of your blessings – whether physical, relational, or spiritual – and to thank God for them? Think also about your week. Do you make time to praise God in the company of the faithful, lending your presence and your voice to the work of God in ways that build your own faith while encouraging others, too?

If you don’t like your answers, perhaps this psalm came along at just the right time. **BT**

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Mark 1:29-39

Feb. 8, 2015

## Missional Plans

**D**o you ever behave in compulsive ways? Do you feel an obsessive need to work long hours, eat food that you don't need, keep the house perfectly clean, or binge watch the latest hit show to come out on Netflix?

Jesus taught many important lessons during his brief time on earth, and one of them dealt with the value of balanced living. Today's text includes three connected stories that describe part of "a day in the life of Jesus." Taken together, these texts underscore the balanced life Jesus lived and that he desires for those who follow him.

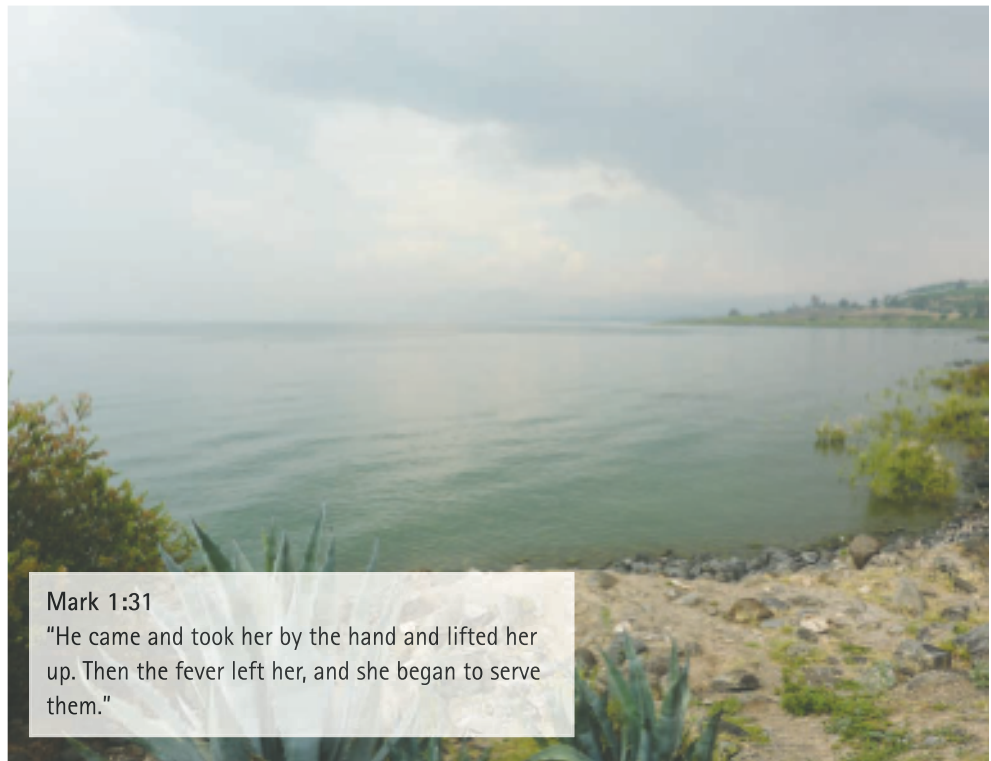
## Willing work (vv. 29-32)

The gospel of Mark crams a lot of information into a small space. Within the first chapter alone we find stories of Jesus' baptism by John (vv. 1-11), his temptation in the wilderness (vv. 12-13), and the beginning of his preaching ministry in Galilee (vv. 14-15). During a visit to Capernaum he called his first four disciples (vv. 16-20), taught in the synagogue (vv. 21-22), and performed miracles of healing (vv. 23-27).

As a natural result of this whirlwind of activity by one who taught with authority and healed with divine unction, "his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee" (v. 28).

Mark relates these stories with a breathless pace, often transitioning from one event to the next with the word *euthus*, which we translate as

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Mark 1:31

"He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them."

"immediately," or "at once" (vv. 12, 18, 20, 29, 30). We have the impression that the events beginning with Jesus' visit to the Capernaum synagogue and ending with a late night healing session at Peter's house occurred on the same Sabbath day (vv. 21-34), with the following story taking place early the next morning (vv. 35-39).

Simon Peter and his brother Andrew were the first two men Jesus called as disciples, followed by the brothers James and John (vv. 16-20). The four of them earned their living by netting fish from small boats they sailed across the Sea of Galilee. ↓

No doubt, the freshly minted disciples would have accompanied Jesus to the synagogue. There they heard Jesus teach "as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (v. 22). They would have watched as he healed a man everyone believed to be possessed by an unclean spirit (vv. 23-26). The disciples would have been as astounded as the others who saw Jesus saying and doing things beyond their comprehension. ↓

Despite his newfound fame, however, Jesus remained calm and went about his work. After leaving the hubbub of the synagogue, they walked the short distance required to reach Simon Peter's home. Perhaps they were seeking a bit of quiet, some rest, and certainly lunch – but on arriving they discovered that Peter's mother-in-law had been taken ill with a fever. ↓

The family quickly turned to Jesus, who "came and took her by the hand and lifted her up." The fever disappeared, we read, "and she began to serve them" (v. 31). Lunch at last!

We note from the story that despite his newfound celebrity, Jesus remained concerned for the needs of others.

Fevers are not uncommon, and Peter's mother-in-law's condition was probably not life threatening. Yet, Jesus took the time to heal her.

A more important lesson is found in the note that "she began to serve them." We are not to suppose that Jesus healed the woman for selfish reasons, just so she could wait on him and the disciples.



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But it is significant that Peter's mother-in-law, grateful for what Jesus had done, responded with service.

In the larger picture, very few of us will experience physical healing as a direct work of Jesus, but all of us who come to faith in Christ experience the spiritual healing of forgiveness and hope. Do we respond with service, as Peter's wife's mother did, or do we go about our business as if nothing had changed?

### Overtime work (vv. 33-34)

As word got out, the crowds rolled in, swamping Jesus with requests for healing from a variety of diseases. If we had been there and had suffered from a problem infection or loss of sight, we would probably have done the same: underserved people naturally seek help when it is available. Perhaps you have participated in a mission medical clinic in some poverty-stricken area, either locally or abroad. People will start lining up the night before to receive medical or dental treatment that they otherwise couldn't get.

Mark notes that people waited until sundown, when the Sabbath officially ended, to bear their sick friends to Jesus. Jews were not allowed to carry burdens on the Sabbath, and could walk only limited distances. 🇺🇸 As darkness fell, though, "they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons," so that "the whole city was gathered around the door" (vv. 32-33). Capernaum was more of a village than a city, but that could still mean hundreds of people gathered about, all seeking access to Jesus.

Jesus responded to the mass of human need with both patience and compassion. The text does not say that he healed everyone, but "he cured many who were sick with various diseases," and he "cast out many demons" (v. 34).

It was common in the ancient world for people to believe that certain maladies, especially mental illnesses, were caused by demons, conscious spirits that could enter a person's body and cause trouble. Mark and other gospel

writers shared this worldview, and Jesus worked on the level of the people, speaking the vocabulary that was familiar to them. Indeed, Jesus used their beliefs to his advantage. While they feared demons greatly, Jesus' ability to heal persons by "casting out demons" was a clear demonstration of his power and authority over evil. 🇺🇸

What threat constitutes your greatest fear? Do you believe Jesus has the ability to help you overcome it? And if you find new healing or hope through Christ, how will you respond?

As Jesus saw avenues for service in daily life, so we are called to "lifestyle service," always being open to that person who needs a helping hand, a comforting word, a challenging witness.

### Replenishing work (vv. 35-39)

We are called to serve Christ with gusto, but also with care. Without proper preparation, our service may be active but ineffective. Today's text reflects two habits that undergird effective service: time with God and time to rest.

After a long day of ministry and a short night of sleep, Jesus arose "a great while before day" and went out to pray in the quiet countryside (v. 35). Jesus knew the importance of taking a breather from the crowds and even from his disciples. Quiet time apart from the demands of others not only refreshes the spirit, but also opens a window for conversation with God. 🇺🇸

Does it seem surprising that Jesus – who we believe to be co-equal with the Father and the Spirit – should find it important to pray? During his life on earth, Jesus voluntarily took on the form of humankind, including our human limitations. He grew tired, weary, even cross at times. He felt a sense of distance from the Father. Even Jesus found strength and encouragement as he

prayed from the heart, expressing concerns and seeking guidance. 🇺🇸

The disciples had yet to understand this. They tracked Jesus down and tried to bring him back to Capernaum, where more sick people were undoubtedly waiting. "Everyone is searching for you," they said (v. 37) – but Jesus knew that he could not stay and become the resident healer of Capernaum or any other town. His mission was bigger than that. As much as Jesus felt compassion for those who suffered, he had to remain focused on the larger picture.

So, Jesus called the disciples to go with him into other towns through the region "so I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do" (v. 38). It was the message Jesus was preaching – that in him the Kingdom of God was at hand and that all could come into relationship with God – that was most important.

Miracles of healing, feeding, and other mighty works had their place as metaphors of the message, and they served to bring attention to Jesus so people would have the opportunity to hear his words of forgiveness and challenge, but Jesus did not become incarnate in order to gain fame as a miracle worker for a few short years.

Jesus came to proclaim the message of good news to all people, though some took offense at the open and forgiving spirit that led him to hang out with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other folk that the religious elite classed as "sinners" to be avoided.

So it was that the first four disciples grabbed their travel cloaks, said their goodbyes, and followed Jesus down the road to other towns and villages throughout Galilee as he went "proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons" (v. 39).

Jesus knew what his mission was, and he knew how to keep his batteries charged so that he could do the work he had come to do. Do you have a sense of how God wants you to live and serve in Christ's behalf? If not, following Jesus' example of spending quiet time in prayer would be a good place to start. **BT**

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Mark 9:2-8

Feb. 15, 2015

## Mountaintop Moments

If there have been any children around your house in the past 30 years, you are probably familiar with a series of toys called “Transformers.” The toys, along with cartoons and movies based on them, have remained popular because they are innately fascinating to children and frustrating to adults. Children seem to have little trouble twisting and turning the toys to transform them from a robot to a dinosaur or an airplane. Adults may struggle more in making the transformation.

Mark 9:2-8, like the parallel stories in Matthew 17 and Luke 9, describes the fascination and frustration of the disciples when they learned that Jesus was a living, breathing Transformer.

### A little back story (8:27-33)

There was a day when Jesus led his disciples north to the region near the city of Caesarea-Philippi, and they rested there near the foot of Mt. Hermon in a beautiful and fertile area. The city boasted a temple dedicated to the worship of the Roman Emperor, and on its outskirts was an area devoted to the nature-god “Pan.” Jesus had brought his disciples there to strengthen their faith and to help them learn who truly deserved their worship. Perhaps he also led them to that place of retreat in order to strengthen his own resolve for the final leg of his earthly journey.

The 12 disciples had been with Jesus for some time. They had heard him teach with authority, had seen him perform mighty works, had felt his

Mark 9:7

“Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’”



heart-warming love, and had puzzled over his parables. Jesus may have wondered if they would ever really understand, but when he asked them “Who do you say that I am?” Peter spoke up with the correct response: “You are the Christ” (8:27, 29).

Peter knew the answer, but he was like a six-year-old who can answer questions about the “plan of salvation” but who has no concept what salvation really means. He knew that Jesus was God’s own messiah, but he did not yet understand that Jesus had a different idea of what that meant. Like most Jews of their day, the disciples appear to have expected a military messiah who would restore a Jewish kingdom.

Jesus used that moment to explain that he expected to suffer and be executed before rising from the dead. Can you imagine what a shock that must have been to the disciples? To help the disciples understand, Jesus took the three who were closest and most influential – Peter, James, and John – and

led them higher up the mountain so they could go deeper in understanding.

### The transformation of Christ (9:2-8)

When they arrived at the place the teacher had in mind, Jesus underwent a mind-blowing transformation. Both Matthew and Mark describe the change with the Greek word *metamorphoō*, the root of our word “metamorphosis.” Mark says that Jesus’ clothing became radiantly and dazzling white in a way no earthly laundry could accomplish. Luke adds that “his face changed,” and Matthew says that “his face shone like the sun.”

It was as if Jesus, who had been disguised as a Galilean peasant, threw off his human form and reverted to a more heavenly, glorified appearance. Perhaps his clothes were shining so brightly because his body, like his face, was shining through.

Jesus was *transformed*. Somehow, some way, something miraculous

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happened. A window opened between heaven and earth, allowing eternity to penetrate our world and time, granting the disciples an amazing vision.

That vision included two surprise heroes of Jewish antiquity: Moses and Elijah suddenly appeared, as if they had “beamed down” from a heavenly starship in order to have a conversation with Jesus (v. 4).


Moses and Elijah serve as a symbolic presence in the story. Jewish traditions held that both of them would return to earth before the “Day of the Lord.” Moses represented the Law, and Elijah the Prophets, the twin traditions upholding Israel’s faith. Now they were standing before the disciples, the Law and the Prophets, upholding Jesus the messiah and giving way to him. When Moses and Elijah departed, Jesus was left alone: the Law and the Prophets found their fulfillment in the person of Christ.

All three synoptic Gospels say that Jesus and Moses and Elijah carried on a conversation for some time, but only Luke hints at the content of their discussion. He says they talked about what was yet to come for Jesus, about his “departure” to be accomplished at Jerusalem. Perhaps it is significant that Luke used the Greek word “*exodus*” to describe it.

In the first Exodus, God worked through Moses to set the people of Israel free from their slavery in Egypt. In Jesus, God would work through the suffering and death of Jesus to set all people spiritually free.

When it became apparent that the conversation was drawing to a close, and that Moses and Elijah would soon be departing, Peter finally found his tongue. As if with embarrassment, he offered to cut down limbs from the trees and build temporary shelters for Jesus and Moses and Elijah (v. 5).

It’s almost comical to think that after Moses and Elijah had blinked onto the scene in fiery, glorified bodies, they would have any use for a hillside lean-to. At least Mark was kind enough to add that Peter and the others didn’t

know what to say, “for they were terrified” (v. 6). 

In our text, Jesus did not actually respond to Peter’s request, for as he was speaking, a cloud descended with surprising suddenness. Perhaps that had something to do with the disciples being scared stiff. In the Old Testament, when Yahweh appeared, it was often in a cloud. A thick cloud had led the people of Israel in the wilderness and had settled over the tabernacle when it was consecrated as a place to meet God on earth. Now, a cloud had descended over Jesus, Moses, and Elijah – as well as Peter, James, and John. God was present. They could *feel* it. And they had to have been shaking in their sandals.

As if that were not enough, when the three disciples thought their senses couldn’t possibly get more overloaded, the voice of God sounded, and the three disciples fell to their faces as God’s words reverberated through the mist: “*This is my beloved Son: listen to him!*” (v. 7).

And then the voice was still, and the cloud departed, and all was back to normal (v. 8). When the bedazed and bedazzled disciples peeked out through their fingers, there was Jesus alone, sitting on the grass, waiting for them. 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, shockingly real.

Just as God’s voice had spoken at Jesus’ baptism, validating his call and his ministry, so now God’s voice had spoken again to impress the disciples with the truth that Jesus knew who he was and what he was doing, and that they had best give attention to his words.

### **The transforming power of Christ**

The awesome truth of this story is that Jesus’ transformation carries with it the promise of our own inner and ultimate transformation if we will listen to him

and follow him. It may be hard for us to believe this when we are surrounded by reminders of this world: our homes and offices, newspapers and briefcases, tax forms and monthly bills. It’s hard to see beyond present realities to eternal hopes.

In this life it is unlikely that we will see Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in the way that the three disciples saw them. But as that astonishing vision reached out to them across space and time, it continues to call us beyond the centuries. 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 transformed, to become new people who love and give and serve as he did.

This does not happen immediately for us, but it can happen. We can experience God’s saving grace in a moment, but transformation as disciples is a life-long process. Paul understood that, and challenged believers to a lifetime of transforming growth, as in these words to the Christians in Corinth: “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).

Just think about that: all of us ... being transformed ... into the same image of Christ ... from one degree of glory to another. It’s enough to leave us as speechless as three flabbergasted disciples.

Consider trying this experiment in prayer: Begin by getting comfortable and closing your eyes. Using the power of your own imagination, transport yourself to that mountain in the mist. Crouch down in the pine straw beside Peter, James, and John. Breathe deeply of the fresh, cool air. Look through the cloud and behold the shining radiance of Jesus’ face. Can you see him? Are you aware of what obstacles and temptations cloud your vision and make it difficult for you to draw close? Can you get them out of the way?

Listen, for God speaks. “This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to Him!” **BT**

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 25:1-10

Feb. 22, 2015

## Healthy Regret

**P**enitence. Contrition. Regret. Remorse. Sorrow. Self-reproach. Shame. Guilt. We don't like those words, do we? But we've all felt them, and for cause. We've disappointed God, disappointed others, and disappointed ourselves. We've made bad choices, taken wrong turns, and generally messed up.

We've sinned, to use a good biblical term. And, unless we're one of those very rare sociopaths who have no conscience, we've felt guilty. We've experienced shame.

And we don't like it. We want to be forgiven – forgiven by those persons we've wronged, and if we have any religious compunction about us, forgiven by God, as well.

That's what today's text is about: Psalm 25 is a prayer for forgiveness, offered in trust to a gracious God. That makes it an ideal text for the first Sunday in Lent, a season of self-reflection and penitence leading to the celebration of Easter. 📖 📖

### Hear me ... (vv. 1-3)

Like several other psalms, Psalm 25 is an acrostic poem, written so that each couplet begins with a sequential letter of the Hebrew alphabet. 📖 And, like many psalms, this one begins with the Hebrew expression *l'david*, which can mean "of David," "by David," or "to/for David." 📖

The psalmist seeks forgiveness, but offers no clue as to what sins he has committed. That works to the reader's



Psalm 25:7  
"Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD!"

advantage, for the unspoken nature of the psalmist's guilt makes it easier for us to apply his situation to our own lives – and all of us have sinned.

Have you ever "poured out your heart" to God? That's the sense of the psalmist's opening words, "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul." The psalmist's use of God's covenant name "Yahweh" (LORD) reflects the intimate, personal nature of the prayer. The word translated as "soul" is *nefesh*, a Hebrew word that describes one's essential being, the source of life and identity. To lay bare our *nefesh* before God is to go as deep as we can go.

The psalmist can present himself to Yahweh so freely and deeply because he trusts God to hear his prayer and respond with care. Perhaps you have had the experience of sharing deep thoughts or confessions with someone who either didn't understand or who told other people what you had revealed in confidence. Instead of feeling comforted, you felt embarrassed or ashamed. Untrustworthy friends may let us down, but God can be trusted to hear

and understand our innermost fears, thoughts, or confessions – even our doubts.

The psalmist appears to have sought some outward sign of divine favor that would silence the smug criticism of "enemies" who would find joy in his sorrow. The word for "put to shame" appears three times in vv. 2-3. The poet pleads that God would not bring shame to those who patiently trust ("wait") in God, but would humiliate those who are deceitful, or disloyal.

Do you think the psalmist had experienced hurt or embarrassment at the hands of someone he had trusted? Have you had that experience? More pointedly, have you ever been the person who betrayed another's trust and caused them pain? It's likely that we've all been on both sides of that divide. All of us could do with a good dose of divine guidance to help keep us on the right path.

### Guide me ... (vv. 4-5)

The psalmist prayed for God's guidance in no less than four different ways,

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asking Yahweh to “make me to know your ways,” to “teach me your paths,” to “lead me in your truth,” and, simply, to “teach me” (vv. 4-5a).

All four expressions acknowledge that the poet is not only willing but also anxious for God to teach him. “Your ways,” “your paths,” and “your truths” were favored terms among Israel’s teachers of wisdom. These terms could refer to any commandments and laws to be found in biblical teaching, but go beyond that.

One could learn the commandments and the rules of community living by reading or listening to a teacher, but the psalmist seeks more. He longs for God’s guidance as he deals with everyday situations or makes life decisions that aren’t covered by written laws.

We are constantly faced with choices: where to attend college, what job to pursue, who (or whether) we will marry, whether we want to have or adopt children. We make daily choices about how we will spend our time, our money, and our energy. Do we run through these choices without a thought beyond our personal preferences, or do we stop to ask God’s guidance? God may not care whether we have spaghetti or fish for dinner, but larger decisions or moral judgments call for deeper reflection. If we want our choices and our lives to honor God, and if we want to be known as upright and faithful people, we need to consider what God might have us do.

Those who teach that God has a specific plan mapped out for us overstate the case. Whether we work for company A or company B may not be of much divine consequence as long as we work faithfully and ethically. Whether we marry now or five years from now or never may not concern God, but how we behave clearly does.

The point is, if we don’t lay important decisions before God and remain open to whatever impressions God may lay upon our hearts or minds, we increase the chance of making a wrong turn.

This is not to suggest that we will

get immediate answers. The psalmist expressed his trust in Yahweh as “the God of my salvation,” for whom he was willing to “wait all day long” (v. 5b). As we read the psalm through the lens of the New Testament, we naturally think of God’s salvation as being an eternal pardon through Jesus Christ. The psalmist’s idea of “salvation,” however, would have involved deliverance from some difficult situation or person.

Both acts of deliverance involve a change of course. We can’t count on a heavenly voice or an angelic finger to point us in the right direction, but as our souls remain open to God’s leadership, we are more likely to sense what path would be most pleasing to God – and thus most appropriate for us.

**Forgive me ...  
(vv. 6-7)**

After humbly beseeching God to hear and to guide, the psalmist turns to a theme he will repeat in vv. 11 and 18: a plea for forgiveness. We do not know if he has any particular sin in mind. Indeed, his request that God not remember the sins and transgressions of his youth may suggest that he is no longer young, but looking back over his life and hoping God will overlook his sinful forays and remember his better days. 📖

The psalmist does not claim to deserve forgiveness: his plea is based on Yahweh’s constancy of mercy and steadfast love, which “have been from of old” (v. 6). This is covenant language, a clear echo of God’s self-description to Moses: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exod. 34:6-7).

Thus, the psalmist appeals to God’s faithfulness rather than his own worthiness: to bless him with grace rather than

with what he deserves. 📖

The poet’s request that Yahweh would not remember his youthful sins, but would “remember” him according to the divine nature of steadfast love and goodness, involves more than just hoping God will keep him in mind. In texts such as this, “to remember” is an internal act that has external consequences: God might remember someone because punishment is in order, or remember the obedient by bestowing blessings. The psalmist knows he has not earned God’s favor; thus he appeals to God’s mercy, love, and goodness.

**Believe me ...  
(vv. 8-10)**

The psalmist turns from prayer to testimony in vv. 8-10, no longer addressing God but whoever might read his poem or hear it recited in worship. Believing that God has heard his prayer, he declares to all that Yahweh is indeed “good and upright,” a God who willingly “instructs sinners in the way,” as he has asked (vv. 4-5).

Such guidance is offered to those who respectfully seek it, for “He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way” (v. 9). This reflects the poet’s own reverential approach as expressed in the previous verses.

The psalmist does not envision a revolving-door relationship of repetitive sin and forgiveness, as if our wrongdoing doesn’t matter so long as we can call upon God’s mercy. While he insists that “All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,” he also holds that such love and faithfulness are intended “for those who keep his covenant and his decrees” (v. 10). The more the psalmist learns about God’s ways, the more he trusts and the more faithful he becomes.

As the psalmist has come to believe these things about his relationship with God, he wants others to believe that they can also turn from their transgressions and experience undeserved but wondrous grace.

Some lessons are timeless. This is one of them. 📖

# The acrobatics of congregational leading

By Larry L. McSwain

The biggest entertainment event from my childhood was when my family attended the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. I was enthralled with the clowns, elephants, lions, horses and act after act of theatrics.

However, my favorite act was when the acrobats took center stage and engaged in death-defying routines of riding a bicycle on a high wire as the trapeze artists twirled through the air. I never forgot the euphoria of watching that performance.

Congregational leaders remind me of those acrobats. If you want a good picture of what it is like to be a leader in today's church, imagine yourself riding a bicycle on a thin wire a mile long with no net underneath to catch you if you fall, juggling three spinning plates while someone is trying to shake the wire so you will fall off.

What will you do to stay on the wire?

Webster defines acrobatics as "a spectacular, showy, or startling performance or demonstration involving great agility or complexity."

Leading congregations, whether as pastoral staff or lay leaders, increasingly involves "great agility or complexity." That can be exhilarating or frightening, depending on who you are.

Here are a few suggestions from the acrobats to make the challenge safer.

## Keep your balance.

Staying on the high wire of leadership is a matter of making adjustments to maintain balance. Acrobats often use a horizontal pole to help provide balance with small shifts in the weight of the pole from one side to another.

Likewise, in ministry one must balance maintenance with vision. Constant attention to responding to all of the expectations of those you serve unbalances the effectiveness of ministry into stale routine, harried responsiveness to all requests, and loss of passion for the calling.

Too much attention to vision generates change that exceeds the support of the people, and the weight of resistance will cause you to lose your balance and fall.

One must balance personal needs and values with the need to provide caring support to those we serve. Failure to be available and present in times of crisis and even routine anxiety for congregants can pull us out of balance.

Yet, we need to maintain our true selves and provide appropriate attention to our personal needs. It is a balancing act: too much weight given to either side and we can fall.

## Stay focused on the outcome.

Tightrope walkers must have intense concentration on every step of the walk. They practice routines, maintain intense concentration, and focus on the destination on the other side.

So it is in healthy churches. Leaders explore routinely the focus of their work through careful processes of evaluation, identifying new ministry outcomes needed in their setting, and giving focus to changes that will make a difference in achieving their mission.

Too many church leaders focus their outcomes on the same ones of a decade or two ago without understanding how important a changed context alters what is needed for ministry.

## Trust your team.

No acrobat works alone. It requires practice for perfection, preparation of equipment and routines, and careful timing of when to move on the wire and when to stay.

Multiple partners work together in a team to set up the rigging, build a net, think about every move, and cheer one another across the wire. So in ministry the choreography of dreaming and executing each experience of worship, each learning opportunity, every mission event is a team effort.

Solo pastors are at the greatest risk in trying to do all of the thinking, praying, dreaming and caring for the people. Gathering a team of persons to work together with the congregation is an essential ministry skill — volunteers, part-time staff and full-time staff.

\*\*\*

Karl Wallenda was perhaps the most accomplished acrobat of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was often quoted as saying, "Being on a tightrope is living; everything else is waiting."

Yet, at least four of his family members died from falls from the wire and others were seriously injured. He died at the age of 73 in a fall from 10 stories high in Puerto Rico because a team member failed to install properly the rigging for the wire he planned to walk.

One incompetent, uncooperative, inattentive or poorly trained team member and the acrobat cannot stay on the wire.

Ministry leaders do not walk high wires literally. But the same euphoria as a child at a circus can be ours when the multiple dimensions of ministry are engaged and the outcome is all that God intends in our setting. None of them happens without the acrobatics of ministry. **BT**

—Larry L. McSwain is a retired professor of leadership from Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology and a consultant with the Center for Healthy Churches.



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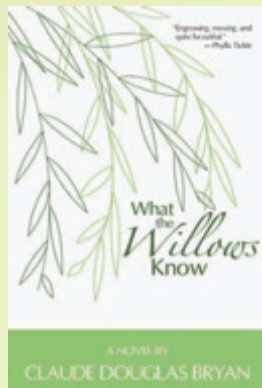
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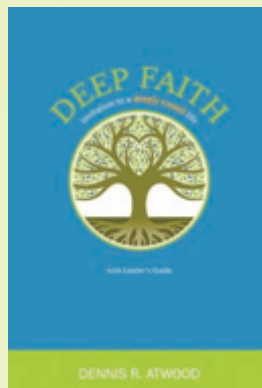


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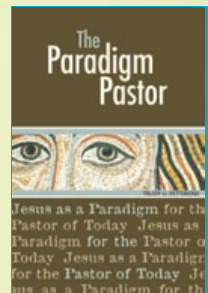


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# WHERE WAS Jesus?



Ancient olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane.

## Historical evidence versus holy hype

In 2014, approximately 3.5 million tourists descended upon the small nation of Israel. Visitors from the United States comprised the largest percentage, while the Israeli economy received an \$11.5 billion boost from tourism at large.

The top five cities tourists visit (according to 2013 Israeli government statistics) are:

1. Jerusalem (The holy city is visited by 75 percent of tourists.)
2. Tel Aviv (The major city of entry for those flying to Israel is traversed by 64 percent of tourists.)
3. Dead Sea area (Famous resorts and the purported healing powers of the Dead Sea lure 51 percent of tourists.)
4. Tiberias and the Sea of Galilee (Some 44 percent of tourists visit this sea-that-is-really-a-lake.)
5. Nazareth (About 35 percent visit this city that was the biblical childhood home of Jesus.)

### PILGRIMAGE

The top five most visited sites in Israel are all in Jerusalem: the Western Wall (68 percent of tourists), Jewish Quarter (64 percent), Church of the Holy Sepulchre (57 percent), Via Dolorosa (55 percent) and the Mount of Olives (52 percent).

These statistics suggest, correctly, that religious pilgrimages command a significant share of the tourism market. Some 54 percent of tourists are Christians and 28 percent are Jewish, while only a tiny percentage have no religious affiliation.

Religious pilgrimages proper comprise 22 percent of all visits to Israel, with sightseeing and travel (typically including visits to holy sites) the agenda of an additional 27 percent of visitors.

### FOLLOWING JESUS

Underlying these numbers is the enduring legacy of the man named Jesus whom Christians, currently numbering about two billion worldwide, revere as the Son of God. Some 2,000 years ago Jesus lived and walked in present-day Israel, and today tens of millions, perhaps hundreds of millions, of Christians have followed or hope to follow the footsteps of Jesus.

Although Jews consider Jesus at best a rabbi who was a good man but a failed messiah (he did not restore Israel to its former glory) and some 80 percent of Jews are secular (absent from synagogues but typically believing in God), the Israeli government (which owns some 90 percent of the nation's land) heavily markets the land of Jesus to Christians worldwide.

Licensed tour guides must successfully complete an intensive two-year university program that requires graduates to have an extensive knowledge of archaeology, history, religions, geography, flora, fauna, art and architecture of Israel. Many tour guides (currently there are approximately 2,000) specialize in Christian tours.

A typical Holy Land experience for Christian visitors takes the form of a tour group headed by an American pastor, transported on a large touring bus, accompanied by a knowledgeable and experienced Israeli tour guide (most likely a secular Jew) and focused on an itinerary of traditional holy sites commonly associated with the historical Jesus, many of which are in or near Jerusalem.

Whether the typical Christian tour group actually walks where Jesus walked, however, is another matter. More often than not, most of the prominent holy sites visited by such groups can muster only dubious claims to Jesus' historical presence.

### 'TRADITIONAL' SITES

Historical tradition blankets the top holy sites in Israel, tradition that harkens from post-New Testament times.

Christians in the second century, speculating as to the locations of significant moments in Jesus' life, began christening certain sites as holy. The establishment of holy sites continued through the Middle Ages.

The Jesus story begins with his birth, and there is a site for that. In 327 CE the emperor Constantine and his mother Helena built a basilica (later christened the Church of the Nativity) over a cave in Bethlehem that some Christians as early as the second century considered to be the birthplace of the Christ.

Many modern scholars dispute this claim, citing a lack of solid evidence. Nonetheless, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims wind their way through the soaring, mosaic-laden sixth century Greek Orthodox church that sits atop a series of underground passageways and rooms that does include a cave in which we know that Jerome (347-420) spent some 30 years translating the Latin Vulgate Bible.

As with his birth, the place of Jesus' death and burial is also unknown. Nonetheless, several sites since the time of Christ have served as the traditional locations of Jesus' crucifixion (the biblical Golgotha) and grave, none of which bear certificates of authenticity.

For much of Christian history, the fourth century Church of the Holy Sepulchre within Jerusalem's Old City was the designated site of Jesus' death and resurrection, as proclaimed by Constantine's mother.

Yet for the past century or so, tourists have also been routed to "Skull Hill," a cliff just outside the Old City of Jerusalem that features an indentation that resembles a skull (equated by many with the Matthew 27:33 reference to "a place of a skull") and the nearby "Garden Tomb," a burial cave that some eager guides assure visitors is the place where Jesus' body was laid to rest.



Evolving convictions aside, however, speculation surrounds any attempt to identify the locations of Jesus' final days.

## TRACING STEPS

In addition, while visitors to Israel can generally follow Jesus' wanderings of old, attempts to pinpoint the exact steps of Jesus during his ministry years are also problematic.

A case in point is the region of Galilee, an area that remains similar to ancient times and is quite accessible today. Here the landscape looks much as it would have 2,000 years ago, modern cities aside.

Basaltic rock, remnants of ancient volcanoes prior to the time of Christ and commonly serving as building materials in city structures, lies strewn about seemingly everywhere. Jesus undoubtedly saw these same rocks, and perhaps sat upon some of them.

The Sea of Galilee, more properly a lake some 13 miles long and seven miles wide, is as prominent in this region as it was in Jesus' day. Some of the villages in which Jesus spent time have been uncovered by archaeologists.

Most prominent of the ancient Galilean towns associated with Jesus is the fishing village of Capernaum. Frequently mentioned in the biblical Gospels and Jesus' center of activity during his Galilean ministry, the town site is now an archaeology park in which lie the ruins of the local synagogue (referenced in the Bible) and, quite possibly but not certainly, the home of Peter (see Matt. 8:14).

The shoreline is not now where it would have been 2,000 years ago, but here Jesus walked and taught and ministered.

## MAYBE, MAYBE NOT

On the other hand, the archaeological site of et-Tel (near where the Jordan River empties into the Sea of Galilee) may or may not be that of the biblical Bethsaida where Jesus healed a blind

man (Mark 8:22-25).

Likewise, the locations of the biblical Mount of Beatitudes (Matthew 5) and the feeding of the 5,000 (recorded in all four Gospels) — the sites of arguably Jesus' greatest teachings and greatest miracle, respectively — are murky. While each is now adorned by a church (Church of the Beatitudes and Church of the Multiplication), the specific locations are based on tradition alone.

Probably more authentic is Qasr el Yahud in the southern desert of Israel, believed to have been the site of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist (Matthew 3). Here on the Jordanian border a modern Eastern Orthodox church towers over the reedy, grassy banks of the slow-moving, muddy water of the Jordan, the remnant (thanks to modern agriculture and pollution) of what was once a much larger, clearer river that in biblical days coursed several hundred yards to the east.

Pilgrims descend into the water daily, some to be baptized, others to capture a few ounces of river water in a bottle, and still others to stand for a few moments on this holy site in proximity of where Jesus may have been baptized.

## OLD CITY

Also bearing authenticity is the Old City of Jerusalem, a mountain city some 20 miles distant and 4,000 feet higher than the humble banks of the Jordan in the southern desert. Here Jews of Jesus' day were encouraged to attend three festivals each year: Passover, Hannukah and Succoth.

Today the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islamic holy sites controlled by Muslims, sit upon the Temple Mount (the "Noble Sanctuary" to Muslims). While not allowed inside, visitors may, however, walk upon the steps leading to the Huldah Gate (the southern approach to the temple), touch the western retaining wall constructed by Herod, and stroll

upon the open-air courtyard on the Temple Mount.

Hereabouts Jesus walked and taught and, according to all four Gospels (Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19, John 2), confronted religious leaders who were shortchanging the people.

Within the Old City, one can walk the stations of the Via Dolorosa, or "way of sorrows," the path that Jesus supposedly trod while he physically carried his cross on the way to Golgotha. While many Christian pilgrims tread this route, the history of the Via Dolorosa can only be traced in fullness to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, albeit with some roots from centuries earlier.

By way of contrast, underneath the Old City one can find a small area of exposed pavement from the time of Jesus.

More authentic in larger Jerusalem is the probable location of the Garden of Gethsemane. Upon the Mount of Olives across the Kidron Valley from the Old City is a grove of olive trees, some reportedly up to 2,000 years of age.

Near the garden is the alleged rock where Jesus prayed in agony the night before his betrayal, although the true location of the biblical rock is far from certain. And as the case with many traditional holy spots in Israel, there is a church there — the Church of all Nations, an impressive early 20<sup>th</sup>-century edifice built upon the foundations of two previous churches long ago destroyed.

## LIVING FAITH

While far from exhaustive, this representative listing of holy sites reflects the historical fuzziness surrounding most Jesus-touted tourist sites in Israel. "Where was Jesus?" is a question that is often hard to answer with certainty.

Nonetheless, while visitors to the Holy Land will find few specific sites where there is near-certainty that the biblical Jesus walked or taught or ministered, the land itself carries forward the past, providing a witness to the earthly sojourn of the man Christians consider the Son of God.

When gazing upon the Sea of Galilee or taking a ride in one of the many tourist boats, one vividly experiences the area where Jesus walked and sailed.

Beneath two centuries of growth and expansion of Jerusalem's Old City, Jesus strode. And somewhere in the now-muddy waters of a diminished Jordan River near Qasr el Yahud, Jesus was baptized.

Knowledgeable Christian pilgrims to Israel — while recognizing the lack of historical certainty concerning Jesus' precise footsteps — yet find themselves marveling and pondering anew the wonder and mystery of the Son of God. **BT**



Frieda Byrd of Macon, Ga., at the Southern Steps that first-century Jews, including Jesus, would have used to approach to the Temple. Photos by John Pierce

# Bethlehem

A not-so-little town of great challenges

**B**ETHLEHEM, West Bank — It was an unlikely place for the Word to become flesh. And it seems even more so today.

Yet this once-obscure village — with just the right genealogical connections — found itself in the spotlight (or starlight) of biblical history two millennia ago.

Images conveyed by Gospel writers, storytellers and Christmas pageants are lasting: an inn with a “no vacancy” sign, a stable of animals surrounding a fluffed-straw food trough-turned-bassinet, and wide-eyed shepherds hustling into town from their fields to share in the greatest of news.

## NATIVITY

Today, Bethlehem is a bustling Palestinian city of about 25,000 with a majority Muslim population. The percentage of Christians here continues to fall despite being the birthplace of Jesus.

Christian pilgrims who still make their way here may be surprised by a place that hardly resembles “O Little Town of Bethlehem” — as penned by American clergyman Phillips Brooks in 1868 after a visit to the Holy Land.

However, there is the Manger Square Hotel, gift shops galore and plenty of sidewalk salesmen eager to offer olive wood Nativity figures at bargain prices.

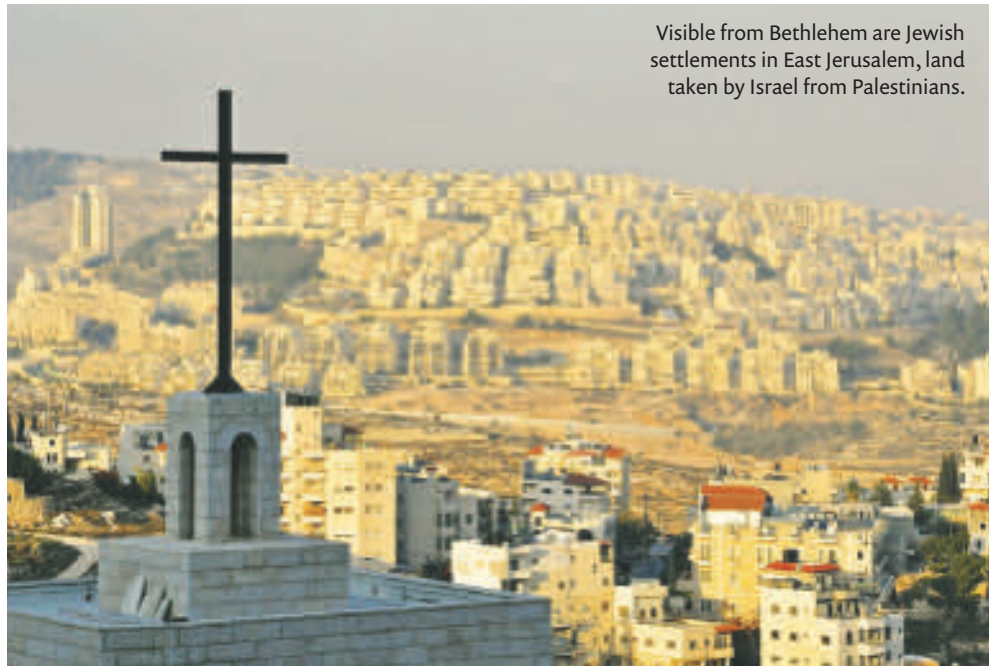
Commissioned in 327 by Helena, mother of Constantine, the Church of the Nativity is the focal point of Christianity in Bethlehem. Many additions and alterations have been made to the Byzantine basilica erected in 565.

The church — administered by Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Armenian Christians — sits above what has long been claimed as the grotto where the Christ child was born.

Christmas Eve draws thousands of visitors — though crowds vary with the political environment — who sing in the Manger Square plaza and then celebrate the birth of Christ during midnight services.

## WALLS

Political and economic challenges abound in and around Bethlehem. Palestinian Christians



Visible from Bethlehem are Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem, land taken by Israel from Palestinians.

feel squeezed by both the pressures of Islam and the heavy-handedness of the Israeli government.

A tall, stark wall that separates Palestinians from jobs and other opportunities in Israel is both a symbol and a reality of oppression.

“We feel almost like we are in prison,” said Alex Awad, a Baptist minister who along with his brother, Bishara, founded Bethlehem Bible College.

The Israeli government erected the wall to protect its citizens from terrorist activities. Yet the wall, said Awad, is often arbitrarily located with political intent.

“Israel is building the wall inside Palestinian territory rather than the actual border of the territory,” he said.

Some Palestinians have even had their property — including olive or fruit groves that provide their income — divided by the massive wall, he said. Christians in Bethlehem, he added, have lost significant land from the wall’s placement.

As a result, tensions continue to grow, he said. And Palestinian Christians often feel the need to flee the very land where so much of the biblical story was played out.

“Because of wars, tension, forced conversions and economic turmoil, many Christians have left the Holy Land,” said Awad.

## BIBLE COLLEGE

Awad himself left his homeland many years ago to live in the U.S., where he and his wife, Brenda, were teachers in Georgia. There he also served as pastor of a Southern Baptist congregation.

One day his brother called to share a dream — a calling, he believed — to start a Bible college in Bethlehem. As principal of a Christian school there, Bishara had watched students who leave for theological training not return. He wanted to stop the ministerial brain drain.

Alex said he and Brenda “resigned everything” and moved to Bethlehem to help start the Bethlehem Bible College, which opened in 1979. They assembled leaders from various evangelical groups to ask for help. A Nazarene pastor in Jerusalem made the first gift.

“Twenty dollars,” said Alex with an appreciative smile.

Awad said he was unable to find mission support for the work from his own Baptist denomination but was able to find sponsorship from the United Methodist Church.

“We started the Bible college with blessings from God ...,” said Awad.

Volunteers carried much of the early load, he said. But now the college has mostly local-based teachers.



After “moving like nomads” in the formative years, the college found empty buildings belonging to another Christian organization. They were given use of the facilities for five years — free of rent.

After an additional year — a “grace period,” said Awad — the college purchased the campus through “a series of miracles” for \$1.8 million.

## EXPANSION

“We focus on Bible education,” said Awad, who teaches homiletics.

The college, which has smaller branches in Nazareth and Gaza, graduates between 15 and 40 Palestinian Christian students each year “to be a blessing in the Holy Land,” he said. Their backgrounds are “Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Baptist, Lutheran, Pentecostal, whatever.”

However, much more than a typical Bible college curriculum is offered and many more ministries are carried out through the school’s initiatives.

“We do a lot of tour-guiding,” he said. “We even teach tour-guiding.”

The Shepherd Society, which Awad directs, is the effective charitable arm of the college that was formed in 1996 to assist struggling persons in the West Bank with all kinds of health and economic needs. Community ministries include opening the library to the public, teaching literacy and English as second language classes, and job creation efforts.

“Muslims and Christians come to this college to study English together,” said Awad.

The college benefits greatly from volunteers who come to help carry out its educational and service missions, he said. They help in the library, garden, bookstore, offices and other places of need.

“God has been good to us,” said Awad of the many supportive persons who assist Bethlehem Bible College with funding and volunteer hours.

## CHALLENGES

Awad, who serves as dean of students as well, is also pastor of East Jerusalem Baptist Church.

He admits that it is “very tough” to operate a Bible college and its related ministries in the current political climate. And he fears for the future of the Palestinian church — which is struggling to survive.

“We don’t want the church to die in its birthplace,” he said. “That’s why we have a Bible college in Bethlehem.”

Awad often writes and speaks about the Palestinian church in an effort to clear up much confusion — especially among evangelical, American Christians who tend to offer wholesale support for the modern State of Israel.

Approximately 50,000 Christians now live among the 3.9 million Muslims in the Palestinian territories, he said. About 2,000 of those Christians are in the Gaza Strip.

Israel, he added, has about 154,000 Arab Christians who are Israeli citizens. More than two-thirds of the Palestinians in the world live elsewhere — in diaspora, he said.

There are also 10,000-15,000 Messianic Jews in Israel, he said.

The dwindling population of Christians in the Holy Land faces additional challenges of denominational divides.

“We have a lot of denominations but few Christians,” said Awad. “We need less denominationalism and more Christians.”

## CLARIFICATIONS

In good professorial style, Awad offers clear, concise information for a group of visiting Baptist Christians from the U.S. He gives helpful definitions to thwart common misconceptions.

“A Palestinian is an Arab who lives in the Holy Land,” he said. They are “a mixed group” that descended from those who invaded the land over thousands of years.

And, no, he said, Palestinians are not Philistines.

An Arab, he noted, is anyone who speaks Arabic and identifies with Arab culture. Therefore, an Arab state is any place where the people speak Arabic.

A Jew, he added, is anyone born of a Jewish mother or who converts to the Jewish faith. (Different Jewish groups have different rules for conversion, however.)

The ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, said Awad, causes much harm in what many call the Holy Land. And Christians often suffer from both sides of the struggle.

“We’re sandwiched in between Israeli pressure and Islamic pressure.”

Christians have long been in the Holy Land, he said, noting that Christians were there 500 years before Mohammed was born.

Awad said his family — longtime Greek Orthodox Christians — lived in West Jerusalem until pushed out in 1948 at the end of the first Arab-Israeli War.

“For us Palestinians, 1948 was a disastrous year,” he said. Nearly 800,000 people became refugees.

His own family suffered the death of his father — killed when caught in crossfire between British and Jordanian forces — leaving his mother with seven children to raise alone amid political oppression.

“We are really hungry for peace — especially Palestinian Christians,” he said.

Continued on page 32



Alex Awad of Bethlehem Bible College speaks with a visiting group of *Baptists Today* readers.

## EVANGELICAL OFFENSE

Awad said the birth of Zionism provided advocates with a way to use the Bible for a secular political purpose to Israel's advantage. "Guilt feelings over the Holocaust," he added, kept European nations from expressing concerns over how Israel's policies would impact Palestinians.

And a United Nations resolution saying that Palestinians should be allowed to return to their homes or be compensated for the loss was never fulfilled. Awad said he and his siblings are grateful, however, for a Christian mother "who helped us through the most difficult period of our lives."

Political clashes between Palestinians and Israelis continue with great complexities, said Awad. "The West Bank is the biggest problem in the world."

He calls Jewish settlements in the West Bank "the biggest obstacle to peace." These settlers, he said, want to be Israeli citizens, serve in the Israeli Army and pay Israeli taxes but live in the West Bank."

Bethlehem, part of the West Bank, has seen Jewish settlements creep closer. Condominiums of Jewish settlers now dominate Shepherd's Fields, the traditional site where angels brought tidings of Christ's birth.

In East Jerusalem, land for new settlements

is claimed as "annexed" when actually taken from Palestinians.

Divine claims of the land by Israel — supported by many evangelical Christians from the U.S. — mask much of the resulting oppression, he said.

"How can you argue with a person who steals your land and then says God gave it to me?"

"Yes, I'm personally offended," said Awad, when asked about his fellow Christians in America who ignore the oppression of Palestinians and urge blanket support for the Israeli government based on some scriptural claims.

"They [Christian Zionists] are putting eschatology ahead of justice, righteousness and peace," he said

Despite the many challenges, Awad believes peace — though very challenging — is possible.

## POSSIBILITIES

Awad confesses that peace requires more than one side in the conflict to act responsibly and fairly.

"Israelis have real security needs that no rational person could dismiss," he wrote in an article titled "Security Fence or Barrier to Peace?" (AlexAwad.org). "These needs for security must be met before a lasting peace can take hold."

However, he added, "... There is another party that is hurting for lack of security. Many here wonder why the United States and some Western nations are totally oblivious to the security needs of Palestinians."

Awad calls for a lasting peace that is rooted in both justice and security. It will require less demonizing and more respect.

Fellow Christians, he noted, can help bring about peace by overcoming misconceptions about Arabs and overturning theological constructs that confuse a modern Israeli state with the biblical people of Israel.

He calls for a better biblical understanding of the "nation" of God as having no ethnic or geographical boundaries and that the people of God are identified by their faithfulness and Christ-like behavior.

He points to Colossians 3:12 as speaking to this matter well: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

To those ends, Awad and others continue their ministries of education, cooperation and compassion in Bethlehem — believing it to be a challenge, a calling and a unique blessing.

"We are blessed to be a Bible college in the place where the Word of God was born," he said. **BT**

## Want to better understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Read this book

A review by John Pierce

While clearing off the desk in my home study recently, I uncovered several review copies of books including *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Tough Questions, Direct Answers* by Dale Hanson Bourke (2013, InterVarsity Press).

Having just returned from Israel and the West Bank with a group of 48 *Baptists Today* readers, the book didn't leave my hands until I'd read it completely. My only wish is that I'd read it before the trip and recommended it to others.

It lives up to its subtitle by giving clear, concise and accurate answers to the hard and often confusing questions related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is a most helpful resource for anyone seeking an intelligent, balanced understanding of the multiple issues at play.

Fundamentalist preachers and those who blindly follow them often toss around theologically faulty claims that equate unquestioned support for the Israeli government with the will of God. Any criticism of modern Israel is

marked as an offense to God.

Media often tosses around terms that are familiar to many listeners but not fully understood: Middle East, West Bank, Palestinian Territories, Zionist, Green Line, Jewish state, settlements, separation barrier, Price Tag movement, Law of Return vs. right of return, administrative detention, etc.

There are often misconceptions that all Arabs are Muslims and that Jews in Israel are all in one accord. (Many Arabs are Christians, and some are Jewish. And the various Jewish groups are often at odds, especially with the Ultra-Orthodox.)

To grasp some understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires at least an awareness of the long history of warring in what is often still called the Holy Land —

as well as a grasp of the complexities that make peace so elusive.

Simply dividing the conflict into good guys vs. bad guys only fuels the fire — and American Christians are some of the greatest flame fanners.

Those who post in social media about (the modern state of) Israel being "the apple of God's eye" and demonize anyone who opposes injustices carried out by the government (including many loyal Israelis) would benefit well from reading this book. It also would help for them to at least listen to some Palestinian Christians.

However, anyone interested in better understanding the conflict in that part of the world — that impacts much of the world — should read this book.

Bourke is careful to provide solid information here rather than attempt to persuade readers to join a particular fight. As she concludes, "We need to listen more. Yes, we need to advocate, but out of knowledge, not emotion." **BT**





# Are Jews better off outside Israel?

Author Alan Wolfe reconsiders the Diaspora

Jews exclaim “Next Year in Jerusalem!” at the conclusion of the Passover seder, an acknowledgment that Israel is their spiritual home. But since the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem in 586 B.C., most Jews have lived outside of Israel.

Today, Diaspora Jews, as they are called, account for 8 million of the approximately 13 million Jews worldwide; the remaining 5 million live in Israel.

Alan Wolfe, director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, ponders this split in his newly-released book *At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora Is Good for the Jews*.

In the Diaspora, writes Wolfe, Jewish life can more easily embrace universalism — applying Jewish values to make the world a better place, for Jews and non-Jews alike. In contrast, “Jewish particularism” describes the defensive, inward posture of Jews in Israel.

“As it increasingly becomes clear that the Diaspora is not a disaster and that the security offered by statehood has proven to be precarious, the lost universalism that has been so much a part of Jewish tradition may well be prepared for a comeback, this time on firmer soil,” Wolfe writes in his introduction.

Some readers and critics have responded with a collective “duh” to Wolfe’s assertion that Diaspora is good for the Jews. And they take issue with his “particular” vs. “universal” approach to Judaism.

Yes, the Jews of the Diaspora for most of history lived in danger. Centuries ago, the Jewish population of Europe was forced into ghettos and killed in pogroms. Only two generations ago, the Holocaust wiped out most of Europe’s Jews, convincing the U.N. that the survivors could not live safely in the Diaspora and should be granted a state of their own.

But today most Diaspora Jews live in North America, where they feel safe and free and take pride in their contributions to the societies that have accepted them.

“Even the staunchest American Zionists do not claim that Jews cannot live secure, authentic, fulfilling lives in the United States,” wrote Peter Beinart in his review of Wolfe’s book in *The New York Times*. “To the contrary, America’s most prominent Zionists — people

like Alan M. Dershowitz, Abraham H. Foxman and William Kristol — also tend to be passionate believers in America’s hospitality to the Jews.”

Speaking at a book talk at Washington’s Brookings Institution in November, Wolfe agreed that the terms “particularist” and “universalist” are undefinable, overlapping and, in general, “hopeless.”

But he added that he still finds them useful: “There really are two basic different kinds of Judaism that have persevered throughout Jewish history since the Book of Deuteronomy was written.”

One type of Jew sees the dispersal of Jews around the world as God’s punishment. The other sees the Diaspora as a positive thing, “because a relatively enlightened religion associated with Judaism can be spread to the world as a whole, and not just confined to the Jewish people.”

The Holocaust and the creation of Israel in 1948 turned the tide toward the particularist vision, but it’s time to turn the tide again, Wolfe argued, and this will benefit Jews and

non-Jews alike, both inside and outside Israel.

Yehuda Kurtzer, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, which studies issues facing Israel and the Jews worldwide, found much to praise when called upon to critique the book at the Brookings discussion. He admired Wolfe for standing up to those who consider Jewish life outside Israel less authentic, and for calling out Diaspora Jews who use their devotion to Israel as a shortcut to developing a more full and meaningful Jewish identity.

But Kurtzer said it was simplistic to suggest that Zionism is particular and parochial and the Diaspora is universal and moral, and he argued that for all Jews, looking deeply into Judaism and its moral teachings is the key to embracing others — the universalism for which Wolfe seems to long.

He pointed to the Bible, which starts with God creating not a Jew, but a person, and later charges Abraham and Jewish people to be an example to others.

“This moral challenge,” Kurtzer said, “runs through particularism and not around it.” **BT**

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*Editor's note: Steve Pressley, associate pastor of First Baptist Church of Greensboro, N.C., recently completed a three-month sabbatical leave, his second, at Tantur Ecumenical Institute for Theological Studies, on Hebron Road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.*

# Narratives

## Voices from both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide

Jamal Khader, rector of a Catholic seminary in Beit Jala, next door to Bethlehem, grew impatient when a group of visiting American bishops met at Tantur and announced that they found the political situation in the Holy Land to be both discouraging and “complicated.”

Because he is an Arab living in the West Bank, Fr. Khader believes the situation there is not complicated, but straightforward. People suffer daily under an oppressive Israeli occupation of land that rightfully belongs to the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, David, an Orthodox rabbi from the U.S., commutes several times a year between his homes in Ohio and Efrat, a Jewish “settlement” just south of Bethlehem. Matters aren't so complicated for him, either.

An Israeli presence in the West Bank is

warranted because of security concerns. Besides, his settlement rests on land that was already in Jewish hands prior to the 1948 War of Independence and the partitioning of the country by the United Nations.

Narratives are what you call the divergent viewpoints that you encounter in today's Israel and in what some believe should become a new state of Palestine. You hear them everywhere.

From classroom professors to cabbies, from politicians to purveyors of oranges and olive wood, everyone has his or her narrative. Most do not mind repeating their stories endlessly. And to those with narratives, very little about the situation seems so complicated.

But maybe it is, nonetheless. Fr. Pat, a priest from Alabama, said in class one day, “It's pretty clear who the victims are around here — they're the Palestinians.”

Pat had been in the country on sabbatical for a couple of months. He had dined daily in a glass-walled room that overlooks the unsightly “security barrier” (Arabs call it the “separation wall”) that divides Bethlehem from Jerusalem,

and the entire West Bank and Gaza from Israel proper.

Pat had listened to Palestinian taxi drivers rehearse their narratives. He had observed the inconvenience of beleaguered workers with fragile permits, who must negotiate the military checkpoints every day to reach better-paying jobs in Israel.

But then came the surprising rejoinder from our lecturer: “Well, no, it's not so easy. In fact, pretty much everybody around here is a victim.”

Murray Watson, a Canadian Ph.D. who directs French Biblical Programs for the Ecce Homo Center along the Old City's Via Dolorosa, recalled his undergraduate study years in Jerusalem. It was then that he became aware of the dangerous neighborhood that today's Israel inhabits, a region where hostile Arab states lie in every direction.

“Israelis are understandably guarded and fearful,” he said.

Referencing the Second Intifada (an Arab word usually defined as “uprising,” which really means “to shake off”) of 2000-2005, the young professor remembered the spate of bombings carried out by Palestinians at pizza parlors, Jewish weddings and especially on crowded city buses. “In a real sense, Israelis are victims, too.”

Many now fear a third Intifada. In an article in the online *Jerusalem Post*, published two days after the Nov. 18 murder of four rabbis and a policeman in a synagogue in the western part of the city, an Israeli named Ofer expressed his apprehension:

“I'm not feeling good about yesterday because when I walk outside I now look in every direction — in front, behind, to my sides.... I feel fear. I think [the violence] will stop at some point, but it's very difficult to stop. And even if it does, it will start again.”

In a policy renewed from 2005, the Israeli government responds with “a heavy hand” when Palestinians carry out the variety of “lone wolf” attacks on civilians such as the “kitchen knife”



Steve Pressley of Greensboro, N.C., standing before the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, spent three months studying the complex religious issues of the Holy Land.



assaults on rabbis and the “run-over intifada” incidents where cars have plowed into crowds of people waiting to ride the light-rail system. Multiple fatalities have occurred, including the death of a 3-month-old baby in a stroller.

Police have usually shot and killed assailants on the spot, and once their identities are known, the army has been ordered to enter East Jerusalem and destroy their homes.

The policy, which is controversial, is known as “collective punishment.” Whether it deters future assaults from the ranks of a clan-oriented Arab culture depends on whom you ask.

The motivation for the fury that many young Palestinian men feel — and sometimes act upon — is hard to pinpoint. Sometimes it is attributed to a sense of hopelessness, owing to high unemployment, widespread poverty and the perception that the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, along with continued apartment construction in mostly Arab East Jerusalem, is to blame.

Often it relates to an incident that is interpreted in radically different ways by the opposing sides of the conflict, as when an Arab bus driver was found hanged inside his vehicle. An ostensibly impartial autopsy ruled it a suicide, but the man’s family and friends were not persuaded that the Israelis weren’t responsible.

More recently the flashpoint has been the attempt by some elements of the Jewish religious community to enter the Temple Mount compound and perform prayer rituals similar to those that are carried out at the Western Wall below.

Last November a well-known activist-rabbi, who had argued for the right of Jews to do such praying, was shot four times when he emerged from the Menachem Begin Cultural Center near Mt. Zion. Jerusalem police pursued the gunman and killed him in a reported shootout at his home.

Meanwhile, the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered Israeli Jews, who — along with Christians — have the right to visit the Temple Mount, nevertheless to maintain a 1994 “status quo” treaty agreement to avoid inciting Muslims by praying there.

Still, what the prime minister views as incitement from the other direction came swiftly. From Jordan’s King Abdullah II, who under his treaty with Israel is responsible for



A Muslim man prays in Al-Aqsa Mosque on what Jews consider to be Temple Mount. Photo by Steve Pressley.

maintaining the al Haram al Sharif (“Holy Sanctuary,” as Muslims know the Temple Mount), and from Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas came swift condemnation and implied threats to retaliate if the status quo is abrogated.

Abbas — whom Netanyahu calls by his informal name Abu Mazen — was particularly acerbic, employing language of “a declaration of war,” calling for “days of rage” and summoning Palestinians to rise to the defense of their sacred sites.

Through an agreement between my study institute and the controlling Muslim Waqf, our group visited the Temple Mount on the very morning of the synagogue slayings in West Jerusalem. We even toured the interiors of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

Apart from occasional cheers of “Allahu Akhbar” (“God is great”) from groups of 20 to 30 men or women huddled in various places, there was no sign of unrest.

Even the military police, who have treaty responsibility for maintaining order on the Mount, admitted our group to the “Temple Platform” without asking to see identification — only peering inside handbags and backpacks.

Despite widespread awareness of the synagogue slayings, a relative calm somehow continued. Meanwhile the Arab community watched in anger as the homes of the Palestinian murderers were demolished, while the fear and misgiving of Jewish Israelis across the city rose

to the highest point since the recent war in Gaza and the threat of tunnels and rockets.

One might be tempted to say the situation is indeed not complicated, for the solution is simple. From the one side, Israel just needs to stop doing those things that its government claims are necessary for its defense, because they disregard the rights of Palestinians.

From the other side, the Palestinians just need to come to terms with the reality and the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish nation, and determine to stop resisting and to get along.

But how to reconcile these conflicting perceptions of problems and solutions is far from simple. The bishops were right: It is indeed complicated.

When they met at Tantur, the bishops called for the conventional “fix” — a two-state solution. But how do you bring about two states, wondered Fr. Khader, when you look at today’s map and realize that the entire West Bank — owing to impressive Israeli “settlements” that are unlikely to go away — looks like “a piece of cheesecake” (he meant “Swiss cheese”)?

No, for the bishops and other people of faith, whatever the side, any answer appears to be beyond human fathoming. It may be that the answer can come only from the God to whom all parties claim to pray.

For, said one member of the Har Nof synagogue that buried four of its rabbis, “We are in God’s hands.” **BT**

*‘Narratives are what you call the divergent viewpoints that you encounter in today’s Israel and in what some believe should become a new state of Palestine. You hear them everywhere.’*

# Modern Israel

## Politics, peoples and prophecies

Quick! Name the most holy place in the world, and name the most tension-filled place in the world.

Your response may very well be Israel, where Jerusalem, the self-proclaimed capital of the nation, is crowned with a temple area that is one of the holiest sites of all three major world religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And it just so happens that the temple site is arguably the most contested acreage in the world (as many Israeli tour guides are quick to note).

### BEGINNINGS

Why do religion and conflict collide in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Israel, and particularly in Jerusalem? Any legitimate answer begins and ends somewhere in the entanglement of centuries of geographical, religious, cultural and political history.

The beginning is nothing less than a land positioned at the geographical crossroads of ancient peoples and civilizations. What would become known as Megiddo and the surrounding Jezreel valleys sat astride the only viable land route between Africa and Eurasia, the literal place where early humans, some 1.8 million years ago, migrated out of Africa and into the larger Western world.

Nearby the earliest organized religions emerged during the first agricultural revolution some 12,000 years ago. And a short distance away the oldest city in the world (according to some experts), Jericho, was established some 10,000 years ago.

The land of Israel, in short, is a time capsule of ancient human history itself, a story of beginnings.

This beginnings narrative of humans, however, has in some ways never ended. In and throughout the biblical Old Testament, Megiddo remained a crossroads of humanity, a place where trade and travel routes intersected and a place that ancient nation states strove mightily to control.

Excavations have revealed that at least 25 civilizations, over thousands of years,



Dome of the Rock photo by John Pierce

controlled the hill above Megiddo and the Jezreel valleys — including the Israelites under kings David and Solomon.

So critical is this piece of land (upon which the last city perished about 500 BCE) that some 30 wars in the past 3,500 years have been fought in and around Megiddo, the latest being the Six Days War of 1967. Against the backdrop of such seemingly continuous violence, it comes as no surprise that the biblical book of Revelation (16:16) points to Megiddo as the place where earth's final battle — Armageddon — will take place, bringing to full circle the beginning and the end.

### CONTESTED LAND

Ancient Megiddo had long been contested land when Jerusalem, less than 100 miles distant, arose to a greater prominence.

When David was chosen king of biblical Israel, his overriding task was that of unifying a divided Hebrew kingdom. His choice of Jebus — a nondescript neutral town accessed by a side road and perched on a 10-15 acre hillside — as Israel's capital was designed to unify the Israelites. The city became known as Jerusalem.

David's son Solomon built the First Temple about 957 BCE, solidifying Jerusalem as both the religious and political center of Israel. Throughout the following millennium Jerusalem retained an exalted status, albeit with exilic disruptions during the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities.

Following the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman Empire, including the destruction of the Second Temple, in 70 CE, Jerusalem remained under foreign control for almost two millennia.

Only when Israel was restored as a nation in 1948 did the Jews once again obtain control of their holy city. As a testament to the nation's historical identity with Jerusalem, today's Israel considers Jerusalem, its signal holy city, as its political capital.

Modern Israel, accordingly, can broadly be understood as a nation whose identity is deeply rooted in a 3,000-year narrative of religion and politics intersecting in Jerusalem. The city proper today, while far larger than the City of David's original acreage and awash in modern conveniences and technology, retains an Old Testament heartbeat that permeates much of Israel at large.



## AMALGAMATION

Although the Temple Mount is the holiest of places for Jews (ironically, too holy for many contemporary Jews to visit, lest they inadvertently step on the site where the Holy of Holies was located), the religious views embodied in the historical temples permeate the modern nation of Israel.

While Israel is technically a democracy in which 80 percent of Jews are secular, theocratic Old Testament religious laws and customs remain in place, often legally enforced.

An amalgamation of national, regional and local religious laws, by-laws, regulations and rules exist throughout Israel, effectively limiting commerce and enforcing Old Testament religious customs on the part of business customers, clients and owners.

In general, supermarkets are barred from selling pork and shellfish (Old Testament prohibitions, today referred to as “kashrut” in Hebrew, or “kosher”), elevators are programmed to function differently on Sabbath (“Shabbat”), and restaurants cannot serve both milk and meat at the same meal (Exod. 23:19).

Of the latter, meat is not allowed for breakfast, and dairy is prohibited for dinner, requiring the use of separate plates for each meal. Sabbath laws in particular intrude into the life of all Israelis, religious or not.

Not all Israelis, however, are Jews. The literal sons of Abraham along with those who self-identify with one or the other, Jews and Arabs reside together as citizens of Israel. One in four Israeli citizens are Arabs. Observing the same Old Testament dietary laws, often working together, sometimes living alongside of but rarely intermarrying, Jews and Arabs alike call the land of Israel their home.

Nonetheless, the divisions between the two peoples are readily apparent. Towns tend to be either Jewish or Arabic, residential construction is distinctive (Jewish houses having peaked roofs, Arabic residences featuring flat roofs so that husbands may expand their homes upward to accommodate their future sons’ families), and mosques are as common as synagogues.

## PALESTINIANS

Amid the functional and religious-centric, if bifurcated, harmony, live hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, former citizens and descendants of the nation of Palestine who existed in the land hundreds of years prior to the formation of modern Israel.

Conquered by Israel in 1948, the Palestinians live in walled communities within

the nation of Israel. Confined to Gaza and the West Bank (including the biblical city of Bethlehem), the Arabs and Christians who comprise the Palestinian population exist at the mercy of Israel, often eking out a hardscrabble living and disallowed from venturing beyond the walls within which they are confined by restrictive regulations, fences and force.

The “Palestinian question,” as it is sometimes phrased, boils at the center of contemporary Israeli politics. Palestinians, having few rights and forced to live under Israeli law, live in constant discontent in apartheid conditions.

Uprisings sporadically take place, sometimes in the form of terrorist acts. The Israeli government typically responds with further oppressive measures, reinforcing the cycle of violence. Even as many Jews claim to seek peace in Israel, at the same time the government shows no intention of granting freedom of movement to Palestinians.

## TENSIONS

In part due to the religious and ethnic tensions endemic to Israel, Jewish youths are required to serve in the military for two to three years. Their uniformed presence, replete with AK-47s, is pervasive, including at many street corners, parks, commercial districts and tourist attractions.

The ever-present soldiers seek to keep the peace between Jewish and Arab Israelis, while ensuring that Palestinians stay behind designated walled perimeters.

The Jewish and Palestinian conflict, in turn, roils international politics. The United Nations routinely condemns Israel over human rights violations, as do many Islamic nations (although some view Hamas, a militant faction of Palestinians, as less desirable than Israel).

Churning this volatile political cocktail is the legacy of the Holocaust. Played by Israel as a trump card for protecting its land and people against all who oppose them, the timeless and haunting memory of Hitler’s campaign to exterminate the Jewish race serves to muddle the otherwise harshness of Israel’s own oppressive actions against the people who formerly resided upon land now occupied by Israelis.

Adding yet further agitation to the political impasse are biblical prophecy-centric fundamentalist American Christians who are convinced that the end of the world, now near, will be ushered in with the construction of a new Jewish temple in Jerusalem and capped off with a final earthly battle at Megiddo (Armageddon).

Many Jewish tour guides point to the Muslim-controlled Dome of the Rock on the site of the former Jewish temples as the site of the next world war, should the delicate balance of religious interests thereupon be upset. Some American fundamentalist-dispensationalists who want to see the end times set in motion provide funds and support to ultra-Orthodox Jews who advocate the building of a third temple, despite Jesus’ insistence that his resurrection constituted a rebuilding of the temple.

## COMPETING PROPHECIES

Ever practical, Israeli government and Jewish commercial interests welcome the many millions of dollars that American evangelicals channel into Israel (via tourism and funds aimed at building a new temple), along with the political influence that Christian conservatives wield within national American politics, while privately scoffing at their theology and quietly noting that a new temple will never be built.

For their part, fundamentalist Christians seem largely unaware of the deep-seated antipathy that most Israeli Jews have toward them, while ignoring the fact that many Palestinians are Christians — much to the simmering anger of Palestinian Christians.

On the other hand, many Israeli Jews embrace their faith’s own biblical prophecies of God one day redeeming the world through the Jewish people. For many Jews, God will make Israel and the world right when Jews love humanity enough and become truly faithful to Torah laws.

At such a time the land of Israel will greatly prosper and peace will reign, first in Jerusalem and then in the larger world. How Israeli persecution of Palestinians fits into loving humanity and faithfulness to God is a bit fuzzy.

Competing fundamentalist Christian and Jewish prophecies, as such, feed a larger narrative of early religious texts intertwined with oppression.

So complex, often misunderstood and frequently exploited is the intersection of politics, peoples and prophecies in Israel that the nation is unlike any other on earth. In this land of ancient pathways, aged religious traditions and contemporary divisions, hope is halting and peace is spoken of wistfully against the backdrop of routine violence.

Modern Israel, on the one hand prosperous and multicultural, seems nonetheless unable to escape the divisive legacy of its conflicted beginnings. **BT**

Wadi Qelt



“Differences make us uncomfortable. We often fear those who are unlike us, and we fear change... Jesus represented change. Jesus was bullied. He was just too different, and they tried to force him to conform. But he wouldn’t.”

*Drayton Sanders, M.D., of Dalton, Ga., in devotional time at the Lithostrotos, beneath the Via Dolorosa*

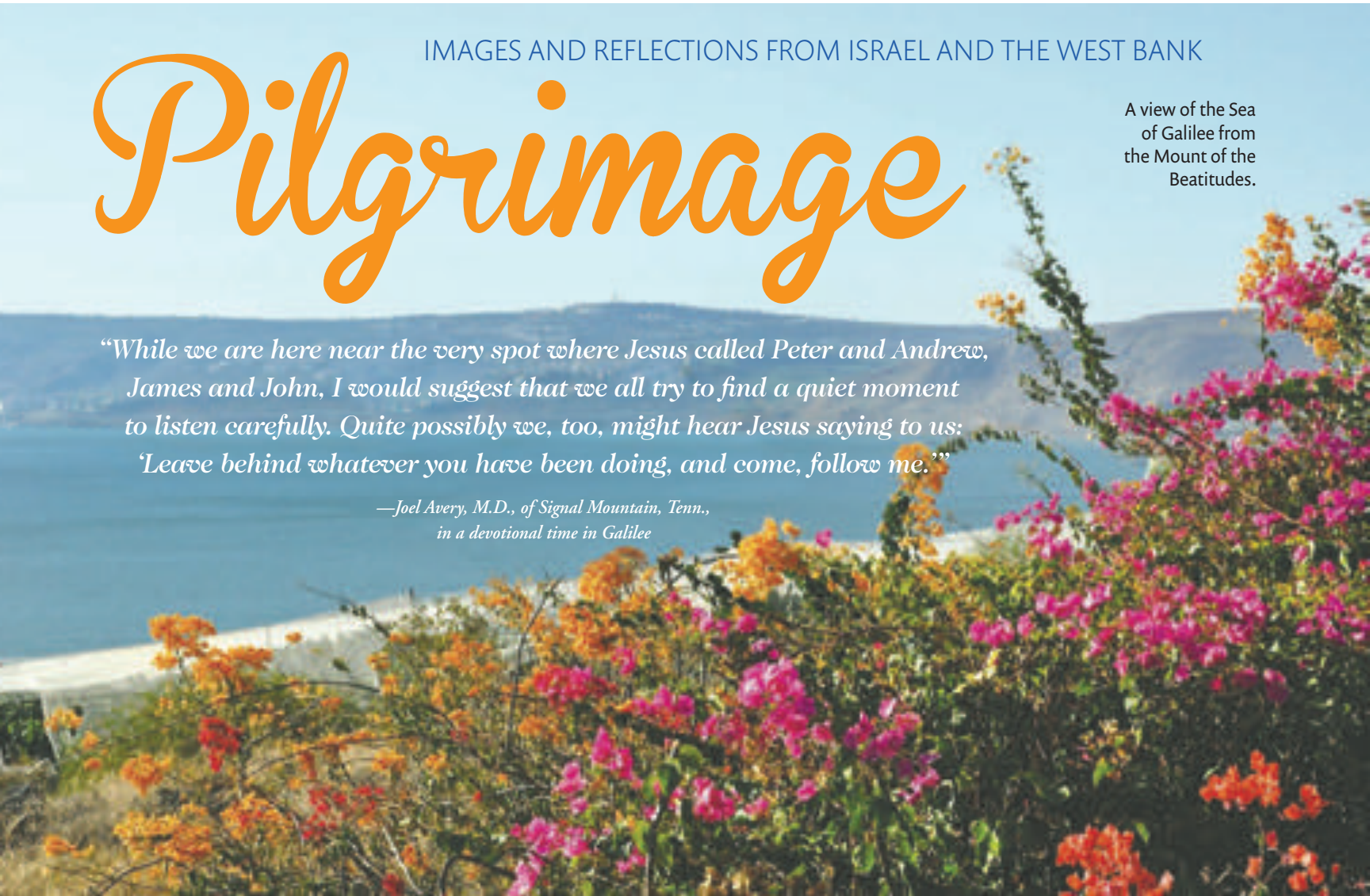
IMAGES AND REFLECTIONS FROM ISRAEL AND THE WEST BANK

# Pilgrimage

A view of the Sea of Galilee from the Mount of the Beatitudes.

“While we are here near the very spot where Jesus called Peter and Andrew, James and John, I would suggest that we all try to find a quiet moment to listen carefully. Quite possibly we, too, might hear Jesus saying to us: ‘Leave behind whatever you have been doing, and come, follow me.’”

—Joel Avery, M.D., of Signal Mountain, Tenn., in a devotional time in Galilee



“The tour opened up many thoughts and gave a sense of wonder to the places we visited... I do regret you could not guarantee that I would be able to uncover a piece of pottery in our archeological dig. [My wife] Jan found one, but I didn’t!”

—Les Hill of Lexington, Ky., retired missionary to the Philippines, on the archeological dig at Tel Maresha



Jerusalem



Peter’s Primary



“Protestant pilgrims inevitably incorporate times of worship into their Holy Land experience but do so most meaningfully in the open air: on the traditional Mount of Beatitudes, beside the Sea of Galilee, or just uphill from the Garden Tomb. For the most part, it is the land that Protestants come to see.

They have imagined the craggy cliffs and steep valleys of southern Judah, the rolling hills and rolling Sea of Galilee. They want to see, smell and touch the land of their shared biblical memory. They want to walk where Jesus walked, to weep where Jesus wept, to sleep in some proximity to where Jesus slept.”

—Tony W. Cartledge, from his article “Walk about Jerusalem: Protestant Pilgrims and the Holy Land” in *Archaeology, Bible, Politics and the Media* (Eisenbrauns, 2012)

Ancient aqueduct at Caesarea Maritima



Shabbat in the Old City



*“All I can say is that Jesus, the man, is more of a reality to me, and ’neath the old olive trees has implanted a new vision of how he suffered for me and all the world.”*

—Lavelle Rollins of Little Rock, Ark.

Cave 4 at Qumran



“I didn’t understand the degree of that insult before coming here.”

—Susan Graham of Fredericksburg, Va., noting the abundance of rock in Israel when referencing John the Baptist’s charge (“I tell you, God can raise up children for Abraham even from these stones” Luke 3:8) in a devotional time at the Jordan River

“I grew up being told that God tells us what to do. Now everybody wants to tell God what to do. That’s the problem.”

—Jewish guide Doron Heiliger on continuing religious conflicts

“This journey for me was not so much ‘walking today where Jesus walked’ as it was of understanding the setting in which Jesus lived. This land colored the metaphors he used, the stories he told, and the miracles he performed. I will read scripture with better understanding now. I can visualize the scope of ‘command these stones to become bread.’ I can better understand all the references to water and the importance of ‘living water.’ I can now see, in my mind’s eye, ‘the valley of the shadow.’ The Jericho Road and its dangers are a reality to me now, and I now know that an oasis is far more than a water hole and a palm tree! I learned to love this amazing land with its stark contrasts between Galilee and desert, between the high places of Jerusalem and the depth of the Dead Sea.”

—Mary Etta Sanders of Dalton, Ga.

By Brett Younger

## Movies in English with subtitles in Spanish

*Películas en Inglés con subtítulos en Español*

Carol and I have gone to see seven movies in the last five months — seven times our normal rate of movie-going — for several reasons:

1. The movie theater with 12 screens is two blocks from our home in Santiago.
2. The theater has 2-for-1 days.
3. We do not mind seeing movies after they have been out for a couple of months.
4. Cable TV in Chile is almost completely Spanish, and the accents on BBC News get old faster than you would think.
5. The movies are in English with subtitles in Spanish.

Actually, the first four reasons above do not matter much. It is all about #5. The movies are in English, so the tables are turned.

We have been living in a country where 99 percent of the population speaks Spanish. I am solidly in the 1 percent.

After I had worked on my Spanish for a few weeks, we were at an outdoor market pretending to know something about the fish at which we were looking. I clearly asked, “*Cuanto cuesta?*” (which means, “How much?”) and got the response, “What part of the States are you from?” I was not wearing an American flag pin, a USA T-shirt or a backwards baseball cap. What’s the problem?

After two months I mustered up the courage to go to a Subway Sandwich Shop. I answered every question, but came home with a sandwich that was not at all like what I wanted.

A few weeks ago I felt like I was making progress. I was having a fine conversation in Spanish with the church caretaker about the weather and our families only to be interrupted by the church administrator saying, “You do know she’s asking you to move your car.”

But when we are at the movies, I’m Einstein. I understand everything the actors are saying. I laugh two seconds before anyone else. A couple of times I have been the only one laughing — which indicates poor work by the translator. (Sometimes the crowd laughs and I don’t know why, but this is rare.)

I am the one who knows that the subtitles tone down the swear words. Matthew McConaughey did not say “*Cielos!*” “Heavens!” when his spaceship crashed in *Interstellar*. If the film is not that good (*Jersey Boys*), I focus on the subtitles and learn a little Spanish.

If the theater would provide a translator, I could share my knowledge as a U.S. citizen. I could explain that *Interstellar* is accurate. Our space program is close to sending spaceships through worm holes to other galaxies. All of our grandmothers look like Jane Fonda in *This Is Where I Leave You*. Our teenagers are as smart as the ones in *Fault in Our Stars*. Our marriages are pretty much like the one in *Gone Girl*. Men in the United States often leave women like Keira Knightly

for no good reason, similar to *Begin Again*.

Most of my attempts at being bilingual have not gone well. I hiked in the Andes with seven-year-old Armando to have him help me with my Spanish, but he insisted on sharing his knowledge of Spiderman. I performed a wedding in English before a congregation in which two-thirds of the crowd spoke no English. Carol and I then shared a table at the reception with three couples who do not speak English and had already listened to me for too long. You don’t really believe that only 9 percent of the world speaks English until you can’t tell the repairman that you didn’t pour water on the carpet and the leak must be coming from somewhere.

Not knowing the language has been good for me. I have learned to treasure the moments beyond language. Carol and I went to a classical concert and tried to follow the conductor’s introduction. I believe he said, “Our solo violinist is really good. She played with her first rabbit when she was six years old. She and her four brothers played duets. She obtained her driver’s license from the Julliard School in New York.”

I was lost until the orchestra began to play. They played Mozart with a sadness that made you want to cry without knowing why.

They played Bach with anger and hope.

They played Vivaldi with joy deeper than any description of joy — as though Vivaldi had just seen the Peanuts characters dance for the first time. The music helped us experience something bigger and better than what can be described.

Sometimes the church speaks a language that many do not understand. We need to offer moments beyond language, and point to God who defies explanation. We have to open our hearts to a hope beyond words. **BT**

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





## Simple questions made harder by being Baptist

By John Pierce

Our daughter had an ethics class assignment on euthanasia. The teacher instructed students to interview two persons on the subject: a medical professional and someone with theological training. That first appeared to be a shortcut provided by having both resources within our home.

The assignment also called for students to tell how their own faith traditions or denominational groups come down on assisted suicide and related issues. It was one of those times when it's harder to be a Baptist — or at least to explain Baptists who are still rooted in their history.

I expounded (in more words than needed) that Christians in general hold to an ethic that life belongs to God alone — and that there is strong biblical evidence of suffering being an important aspect of spirituality. Then I added the word that every note-taking student dreads: “BUT...”

Advancements in medical technology that can extend life have complicated the issue, I said. Therefore, good, thoughtful Christian people have disagreements regarding assisted suicide.

Then I added my own concern about such serious and personal decisions being made apart from the actual, individual experiences

that many families must face. Kindly, my daughter redirected me to the matter at hand: the position held by her own faith tradition/denomination.

That would be an easier answer were we not Baptists — at least our kind of Baptists, I explained. For example, I noted, the Roman Catholic Church has a clear position: it strongly opposes physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia.

I thought of turning to an in-depth 2013 Pew Research Project on religious groups' views on end-of-life issues. But it was time to pull the plug on my lecture, or at least sharpen its focus.

My daughter helped by asking (again): “But what about Baptists?”

Before I could answer, she added that “We're not Southern Baptists” — and that she wanted to know especially about the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship with which our church affiliates.

Baptists (traditionally, though not always in practice) are not hierarchal, I noted. Church law is not imposed by bishops, councils or anyone else.

I suggested she make that point in her own words — and then note how Southern Baptists (even though our congregation is not part of that denominational group) have addressed the

subject. I pointed her to two resolutions (1992 and 1996) in which messengers to the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention expressed their opposition to euthanasia and assisted suicide.

SBC resolutions, I explained, record the majority opinion of the persons voting at that time and place — but are not imposed (at least in theory) on congregations or individuals.

Because fundamentalist leaders of the SBC over the past few decades often try to impose their doctrinal and ethical positions on all others, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship chose a different approach. CBF “does not issue ‘official’ positions on ... social issues out of respect for congregational and individual autonomy ...”

It's not that Fellowship Baptists don't think such issues are important, I said. It's that they think the rightful place for reaching final conclusions about such issues is within congregations or individuals.

“Sooo ...,” I said in finally reaching the answer to her question, “our kind of Baptists will discuss and debate the subject but leave the final decisions up to individual churches and Christians.”

I'm sure she wishes the teacher had simply asked her to interview a medical professional on the subject. **BT**

## Will we ever be postwar?

By Tony W. Cartledge

A weekend at First Baptist Church of Manchester, Ga., provided an opportunity to revisit Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Little White House in Warm Springs. FDR was working on a speech promoting the formation of the United Nations and sitting for a portrait when he died there.

Roosevelt came to office in the midst of the Depression, inheriting a total train wreck of an economy, but managed to turn things around through creative “New Deal” programs that used government spending to put people back to work and rebuild a solid economy in which everyone could participate.

Though born into wealth and power, Roosevelt had a deep concern for the hard and miserable life faced by the poor. His initiatives brought electricity at affordable rates to farm families, built new roads and established the Social Security Administration.

While programs such as these endure and continue to make life better for Americans, perhaps Roosevelt's greater gift was his ability to instill hope and allay fear. His first inaugural address set the stage with his memorable statement that “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Roosevelt tirelessly promoted values that were crystalized in his famous “Four Freedoms” speech, delivered to Congress in

1941, in which he insisted that Americans should cherish, promote and preserve the essential human values of freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from poverty and freedom from fear.

Near the end of his life, Roosevelt reflected on life in a postwar world. Conquering enemies is not enough, he wrote, but Americans would need to “cultivate the science of human relationships — the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together, in the same world, at peace.”

In our day when American political agendas are more concerned with demonizing opponents than helping the nation, Roosevelt's words seem both prophetic and eternally true. It's no good to go around pounding enemies in other lands if we can't live in peace with each other. **BT**

# Nurturing Faith: *Texts and Themes for 2015*

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

\*Order the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies within *Baptists Today* at 1-877-752-5658 or [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net).

## Season of Epiphany

**January 6-February 15**  
**One Step More**

**Jan. 6 – Matt. 2:1-12**

*“Meaningful Gifts”*

What wise folk do when knowledge is not enough

**Jan. 13 – Acts 19:1-7**

*“Powerful Hands”*

What the Spirit does when water is not enough

**Jan. 20 – 1 Samuel 3:1-20**

*“Listening Ears”*

What followers do when eyes are not enough

**Jan. 27 – Jonah 3:1-10**

*“Surprising Acts”*

What penitents do when words are not enough

**Feb. 1 – Psalm 111**

*“Inspiring Deeds”*

What believers do when awe is not enough

**Feb. 8 – Mark 1:29-39**

*“Missional Plans”*

What Jesus did when our efforts were not enough

**Feb. 15 – Mark 9:2-8**

*“Mountaintop Moments”*

What to do when human perception is not enough

## Season of Lent

**February 22-March 29**  
**Heavy Days**

**Feb. 22 – Psalm 25:1-10**

*“Healthy Regret”*

Penitent tears are a good start for the season of Lent

**Mar. 1 – Mark 8:31-38**

*“Self Denial”*

Matching two words that don't like each other

**Mar. 8 – John 2:13-22**

*“Righteous Anger”*

Jesus had a temper, and was not afraid to use it.

**Mar. 15 – John 3:14-21**

*“Light Living”*

Darkness may be familiar, but life is in the light.

**Mar. 22 – John 12:20-33**

*“Dead Wheat”*

Some things have to die before they can live.

**Mar. 29 – Mark 14:32-42**

*“Hard Praying”*

Sometimes it's easier not to know what's next.

## Season of Easter

**Apr. 5 – 1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

*“Of First Importance”*

Paul knew that everything hangs on the resurrection.

**April 12-May 17**

**The Book of Love**

**Apr. 12 – 1 John 1:2-2:2**

*“Walking in the Sunshine”*

John speaks of truth, light and the Christian way.

**Apr. 19 – 1 John 3:1-7**

*“Children of God”*

God knows, children can turn out good or bad.

**Apr. 26 – 1 John 3:16-24**

*“Real Love”*

Jesus' kind of love involves much more than words.

**May 3 – 1 John 4:7-21**

*“Deep Love”*

Knowing deep love means knowing God, too.

**May 10 – 1 John 5:1-6**

*“Water and Blood”*

Can believers really conquer the world?

**May 17 – 1 John 5:7-13**

*“Testimony”*

These could be the original “wonderful words of life.”

## Season of Pentecost

**May 24-July 5**

**Spiritual Matters, OT Style**

**May 24 – Ezekiel 37:1-14**

*“Can These Bones Live?”*

With God, our driest days are not beyond hope.

**May 31 – Isaiah 6:1-13**

*“You Want Me To Do What?”*

Did God really want Isaiah to encourage bad judgment?

**June 7 – Genesis 3:1-19**

*“The Inevitable Apple”*

Can we really put the blame on Adam and Eve?

**June 14 – Ezekiel 17:1-24**

*“Cedar Mountain High”*

Could fallen humanity really climb a holy mountain?

**June 21 – Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32**

*“Gratitude Squared”*

Being lost and found calls for a special kind of thanks.

**June 28 – Lamentations 3:22-33**

*“Goodness – and Grief”*

Troubled people need a God who won't give up.

**July 5 – Ezekiel 2:1-3:11**

*“Eat My Words!”*

God's command puts a sweet twist on a common saying.

**July 12-July 26**

**Mind-Stretching Matters**

**July 12 – Ephesians 1:1-14**

*“An Amazing Inheritance”*

Paul leaks a mysterious secret, and it boggles the mind.

**July 19 – Ephesians 2:1-22**

*“A Sacred Trio”*

Grace, faith and reconciliation: what's not to like?

**July 26 – Ephesians 3:14-21**

*“It's All Beyond Me”*

God's riches are above understanding – but not beyond imagining.

**August 2-August 23**

**The Trouble with Kings**

**Aug. 2 – 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a**

*“You're the Man!”*

Nathan sets a trap for a royal miscreant, and bags his prey.

**Aug. 9 – 2 Samuel 18:1-33**

*“Paying the Price”*

Sin happens, trouble follows, and no one is immune.

**Aug. 16 – 1 Kings 2:1-3:15**

*“Redeeming a Shaky Start”*

Solomon's prayer for wisdom was badly needed.

**Aug. 23 – 1 Kings 8:1-61**

*“Prayers for Now and Later”*

A dedication prayer designed for people who weren't there

**August 30-September 27**

**Serious Church**

**Aug. 30 – James 1:17-27**

*“Real Religion”*

“Religion” doesn't sound so unsavory when it's done right.

**Sept. 6 – James 2:1-26**

*“True Faith”*

Faith understands that mercy triumphs over judgment.

**Sept. 13 – James 3:1-12**

*“Pure Speech”*

James unleashes a tongue-lashing about tongue-taming.

**Sept. 20 – James 3:13-4:10**

*“Highborn Wisdom”*

Wise believers understand that selfishness is a dead end.

**Sept. 27 – James 5:13-20**

*“Fervent Prayer”*

The true power of prayer goes deeper than the surface.



**October 4-October 25**  
**Following Jesus on Highway 10**

**Oct. 4 – Mark 10:1-16**

*“Hard Words and a Soft Heart”*

Jesus speaks about marriage, adultery and children.

**Oct. 11 – Mark 10:17-31**

*“Of Treasures and Troubles”*

Wealth and discipleship can make for a difficult combination.

**Oct. 18 – Mark 10:32-45**

*“First and Last”*

When cherished notions are turned upside down and inside out

**Oct. 25 – Mark 10:46-52**

*“What Do We Really Want?”*

Jesus’ question to a blind man sparks helpful introspection.

**November 1-November 22**

**A Time for Gratitude**

**Nov. 1 – Ruth 1:1-2:23**

*“You’re All I Have”*

The book of Ruth is really about Naomi, who should be grateful.

**Nov. 8 – Ruth 3:1-4:21**

*“An Odd Road to a Happy Ending”*

Naomi’s scheme was risky, but Ruth made it work.

**Nov. 15 – 1 Samuel 1:1-28**

*“Transformational Tears”*

A painful prayer, a baby boy, a promise kept

**Nov. 22 – 2 Samuel 23:1-7**

*“Thanks for the Promises”*

Not really David’s last words, but maybe the last happy ones

**Season of Advent**

**November 29-December 20**

**Hope Waits**

**Nov. 29 – 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13**

*“A Time for Anticipation”*

A reunion with friends is a foretaste of future things.

**Dec. 6 – Luke 1:68-79**

*“A Time for Praise”*

When a mute man speaks, it’s good to listen.

**Dec. 13 – Zephaniah 3:14-20**

*“A Time for Joy”*

Patience pays: long waits do come to an end.

**Dec. 20 – Micah 5:2-5a**

*“A Time for Peace”*

Big things can come from small towns.

**Season of Christmas**

**Dec. 27 – 1 Samuel 2:18-26**

*“A Time for Growth”*

Good growth can happen, even in bad company.



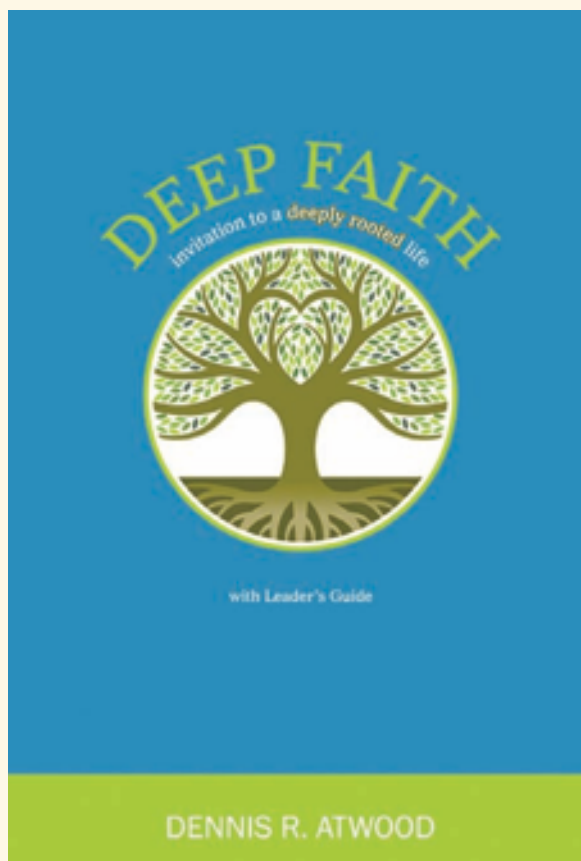
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Central Baptist Church, Daytona Beach, Fla.  
Central Baptist Church, Richmond, Va.  
Christ Church, Cairo, Ga.  
Church for the Highlands, Shreveport, La.  
Church in the Meadows, Lakeland, Fla.  
CityGate Ministries, Ft. Myers, Fla.  
College Park Baptist Church, Orlando, Fla.  
Covenant Baptist Church, Gastonia, N.C.  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church, Louisville, Ky.  
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