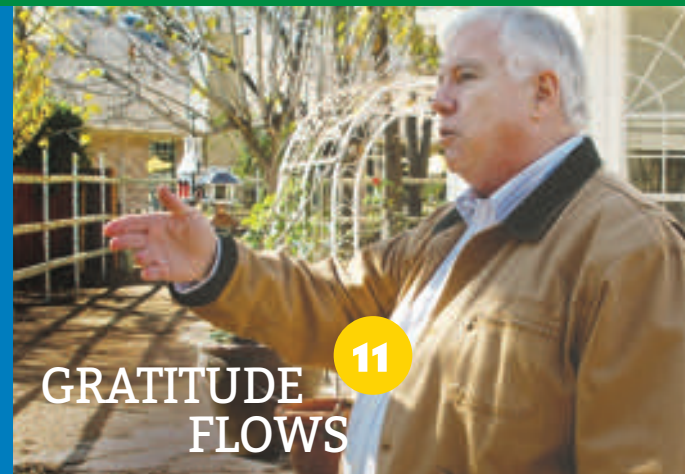




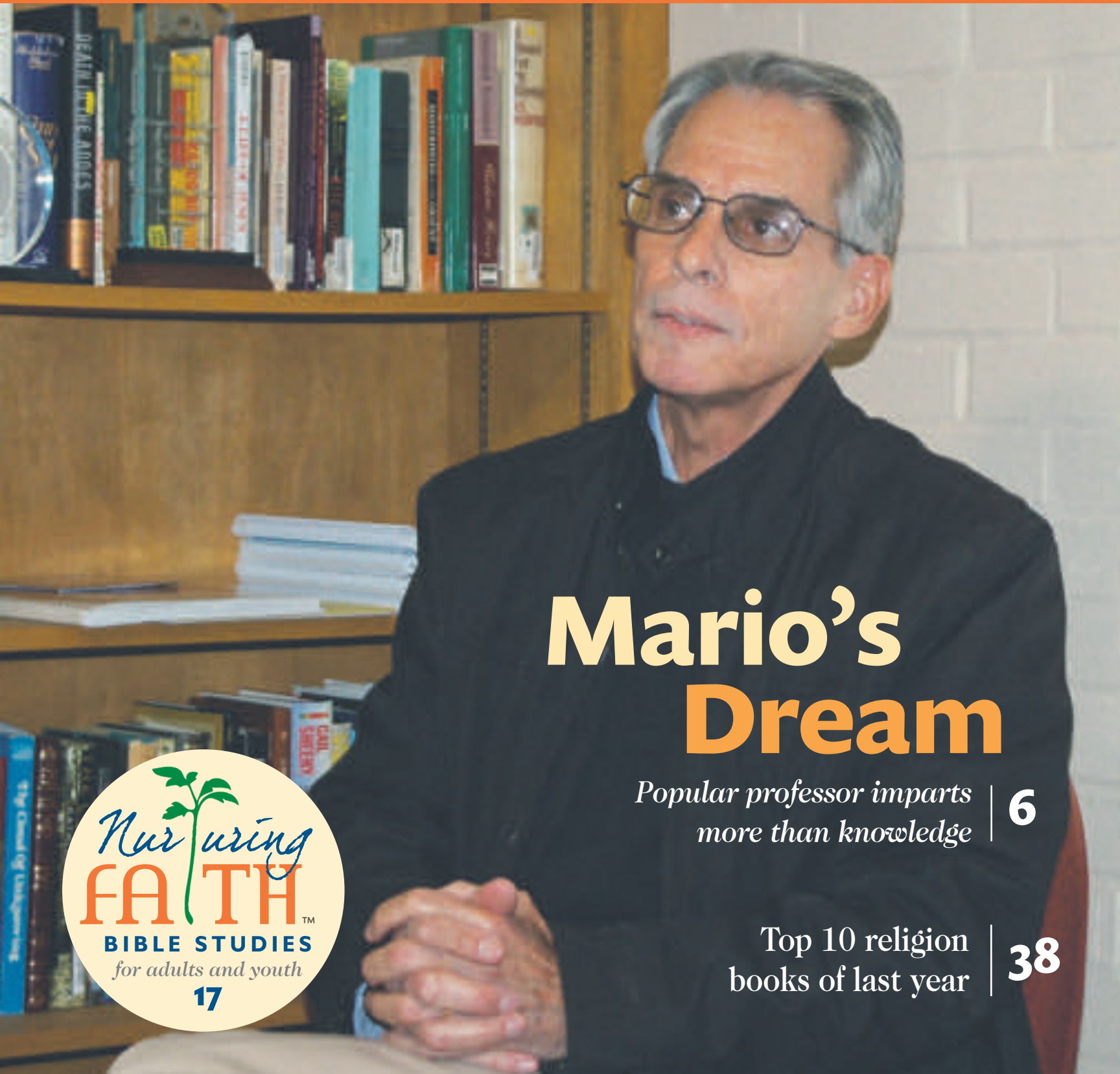
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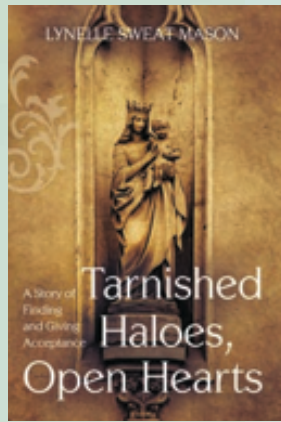
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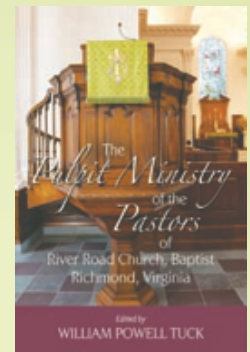
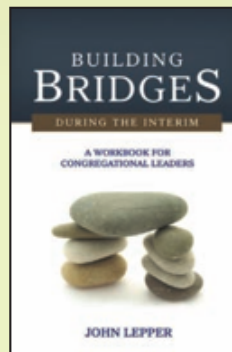
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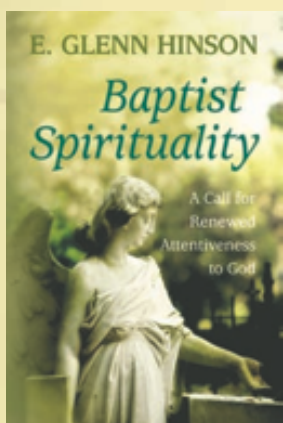
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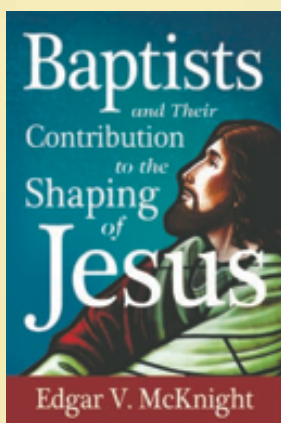
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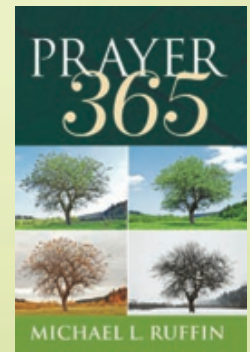
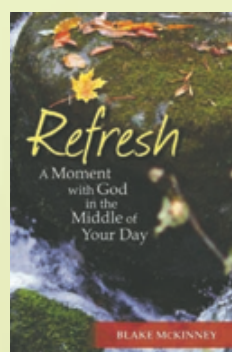
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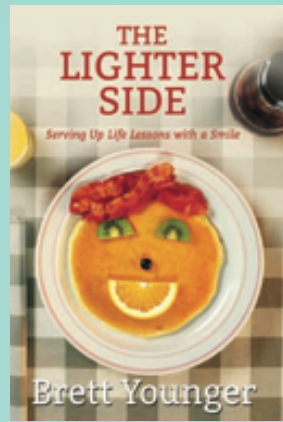
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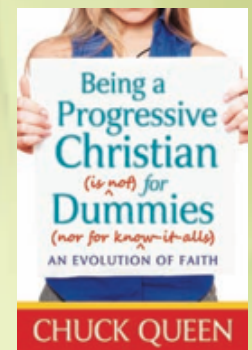
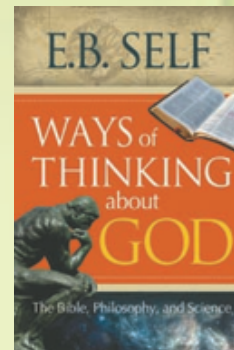
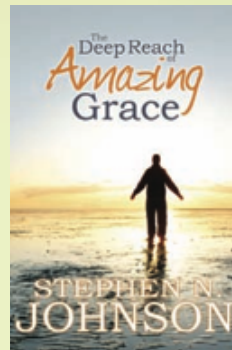
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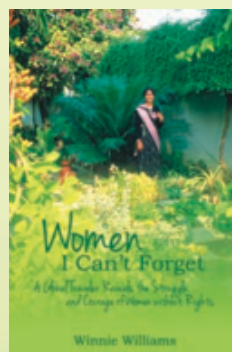
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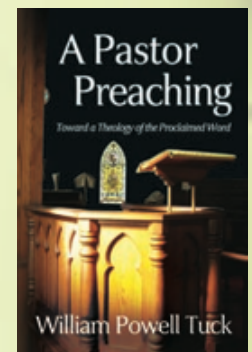
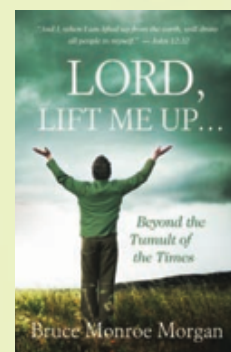
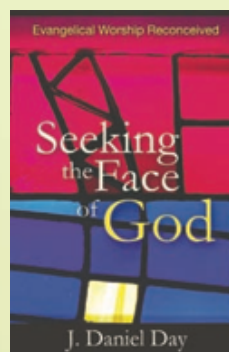
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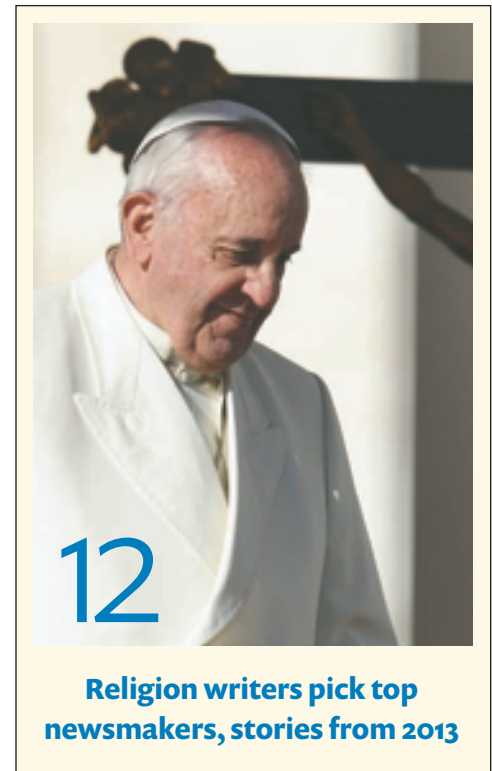
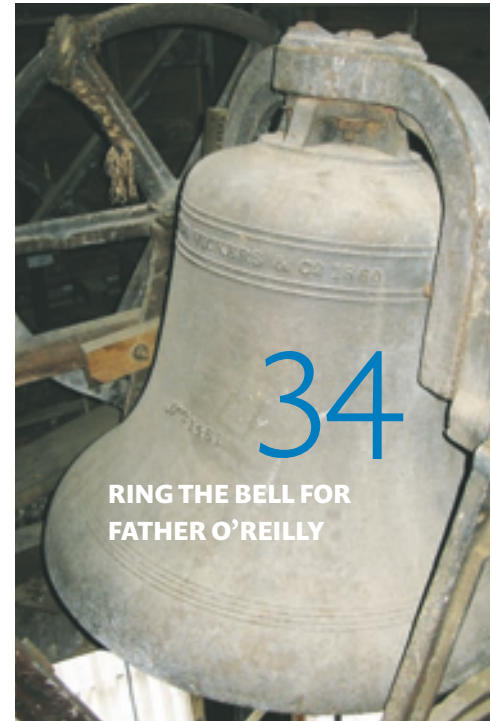
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Mario's Dream

Popular professor imparts more than just knowledge

SAN ANTONIO, Texas — Born the seventh of 17 children, Mario Ramos was raised in a very strict, prominent family in Laredo, Texas, where his father was president of the railroad company. His birth order had a unique disadvantage when the parochial school he and his numerous siblings attended issued report cards.

“We would line up in birth order to present our grades to my father,” said Mario, who always followed his slightly older but high achieving brother.

“He’d let me have it,” said Mario of his father’s reaction to the lower grades than what his brother had achieved.

“My parents were deeply afraid of how we would turn out,” said Mario, who described their parenting approach as fear-based, authoritarian, raging and overbearing.

To avoid further humiliation, Mario said he worked very hard to raise his grades and, when he did so, awaited affirmation from his father. It never came.

“I got the same song, ... It just crushed me,” he said of his father’s harsh response. “I was never good enough.”

Vividly, Mario recalled how his father signed the improved report card and threw it to the ground. When Mario bent over to pick it up, a tear stained his father’s fresh signature.

VOWS

As an adult, Mario made the painful discovery that he was using similar behavior to relate to the first of his own three sons.

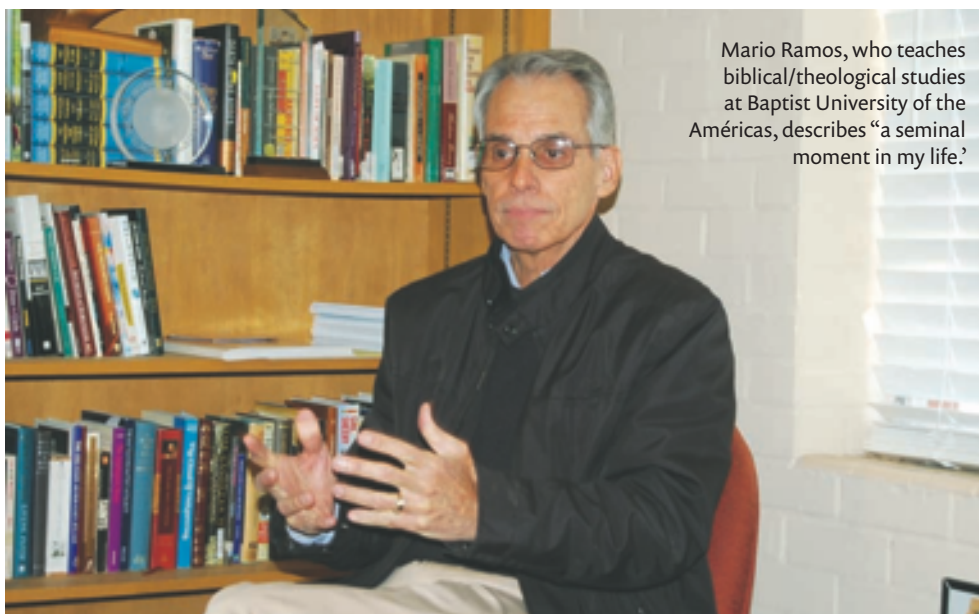
“I was overreacting, and that bothered me,” he said. “So I went to see a Christian psychologist.”

Mario became aware of his need to forgive his father in order to free himself. He took a course in Faithwalking, a movement launched by Jim Herrington of Mission Houston.

It helped Mario uncover the vows he had unknowingly made as a result of his upbringing. He described the Faithwalking experience as spiritually and psychological based, using the Bowen Family Systems Theory.

“It helps people understand who they are,” he said.

Through the process, Mario said he



Mario Ramos, who teaches biblical/theological studies at Baptist University of the Americas, describes “a seminal moment in my life.”

discovered two vows that guided his life. One, he said, was “to be a coward” whenever relating to persons in positions of authority.

“I was a yes-man,” he said. “It transferred to all authority figures. I did whatever it took to please them.”

The second newly recognized vow, he said, was: “I became a bully to those weaker than me.”

Persons under Mario’s authority were treated in the ways he had been humiliated by his father.

“Those were my vows,” he said. “I operated that way 24/7 without realizing it.”

The Faithwalking experience, said Mario, showed him that “In Christ, I don’t have to be a bully” — nor need to have his value affirmed by those in authority.

His behavioral change was so positive and dramatic that his wife of 38 years decided to take the class.

DREAM

After completing the Faithwalking course and finding freedom from the patterns that had unknowingly guided his life for so long, Mario had a most dramatic experience through a dream.

Vividly, he was back once again in the family’s kitchen where as a young boy he had waited in line with his siblings to present his inferior report card to his demanding father.

“I was full of apprehension,” he recalled from the dream. “So I lowered my head and handed him my report card.”

“But when I looked up, it’s not my dad but Jesus.”

Mario then watched Jesus throw the report card over his shoulder — and open his arms widely.

Then Jesus says: “Come here, Mario. I love you.”

“That was a seminal moment in my life.”

FORMATION

The dramatic changes in Mario’s life were something he desired for others — especially the students he teaches at Baptist University of the Americas in San Antonio.

Some BUA graduates, he learned, had “crashed” a few years after leaving the campus. Mario wondered if something could be done to keep that from happening.

So he approached the dean and faculty about incorporating Faithwalking into the educational experience. Started as a pilot project, Faithwalking is now in its third year as part of the curriculum at BUA.

Mario and others at the unique school in San Antonio, Texas, are thrilled with the results.

“Students can come here believing they are not good enough,” said faculty colleague Craig Bird who teaches English, missions and

communication courses. He describes the two-semester Faithwalking experience of spiritual formation as “reality Christianity.”

“It changes these kids,” said Bird, who served for many years in international missions. “It grounds their faith.”

NEW CALLING

Mario’s struggle to please his father impacted his early understandings of God’s love and purpose for his life. As a young man he attended a Catholic seminary for a while with plans to become a priest.

The call to a life of celibacy, however, was not something Mario could embrace. So he left the seminary loaded with guilt and the feeling that he was “going to hell.”

Then one of his older brothers had a spiritual experience in college and told Mario: “It’s all about relationships.”

Like his brother, Mario had a personal experience with Christ. His newfound faith led him to become a Baptist and then to sense a call to ministry.

With great uneasiness, he told his father that he was enrolling at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Perhaps because Mario had married a Methodist woman, his father’s reaction was not as harsh as he anticipated.

“To his credit, he said he wanted me to follow my convictions,” Mario recalled. “But he said, ‘I’m not going to bless you.’”

THE BLESSING

Eleven years after telling his father of his spiritual experience and call to ministry, the blessing finally came.

The family had gathered at a restaurant in Laredo for a big birthday party for the prominent patriarch. All 17 children and their spouses were present — with everyone formally dressed.

As the meal was about to be served, the unexpected blessing was given.

“He rang the crystal,” Mario recalled, “and said, ‘Since we have a minister in the family, I’m going to ask Mario to do the prayer.’”

It had been a long time coming. But to Mario, this was the unexpected but well received blessing from his father.

With a laugh, Mario recalled an earlier newspaper article about his family. The railroad president’s grown children were listed along with their vocations. Mario was called “a social worker” rather than a Baptist minister.

But on this night, it was different.

“After the prayer, I raised my head and all of the girls were crying.” **BT**

Baptist University of the Americas’ cross-cultural mission meets needs, fuels the future

SAN ANTONIO — Enthusiasm exudes from President René Maciel when he speaks of the mission and the future of Baptist University of the Americas.

“We’re excited about all of it,” said Maciel. “It will be a change year for us in 2014.”

The mission is to provide a quality cross-cultural educational experience with an emphasis on Christian ministry for students who might otherwise never attend college.

The future plans call for adding degree programs and building a modern campus on 80 acres across the highway where the latest student housing now stands. The current 12-acre campus is under a sales contract.

“Everybody wants our graduates,” said Craig Bird who teaches English, missions and communication classes. “They are theologically trained, bilingual and cross-cultural.”

As American society well beyond South Texas diversifies, the demand for graduates with such skills and experience grows.

“We probably get as many requests now from Anglo churches [as Hispanic churches],” said President Maciel. “They say, ‘Our community is changing and we need one of your graduates.’”

Far to the east, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina provides scholarship funds for Hispanics from the Tar Heel state to prepare for ministry at BUA. One of the growing roles for BUA leaders and graduates, said Maciel, is to help Anglo churches to understand the value of cross-cultural relationships.

Bird, who teaches cross-cultural communications, said BUA’s best thing and hardest thing are the same thing: bumping up against different cultures daily.

“It’s everywhere from literature to music,” said Bird. “And our graduates come out with the ability to navigate among cultures.”

BUA has experienced many changes over the years, and more are on the horizon. Earlier the school offered a two-year Bible curriculum in Spanish for a small number of students. But past president Albert Reyes, now president of Buckner International, led the school to add degrees, shift to teaching in English and receive accreditation — leading to a growing student body.

“We have to continue to look for

opportunities to grow the school,” said Maciel, the current president, “while keeping it affordable for students.”

BUA serves a mostly underserved population, Maciel said. He praised Texas Baptists and others who support the school faithfully.

“Many of these students don’t have the credentials or finances to attend other schools, or don’t connect culturally in other schools,” he explained. “You have the culture here that helps the students feel comfortable, but they have a cross-cultural education.”

BUA graduates are second only to Baylor in making up the student body of Baylor’s Truett Seminary, said Maciel. Other ministerial students are doing graduate theological training at Logsdon Seminary, Dallas Baptist University and elsewhere.

BUA graduate Sergio Martinez serves as community minister at Shiloh Terrace Baptist Church in east Dallas, said Maciel, where “he’s connected that church to the changing neighborhood.”

Maciel hopes this year will mark the completed sale of the current campus, the smooth relocation to an excellent temporary setting, and the raising of needed funds to build the campus of the future.

“We’ve got to continue to grow — to train many more cross-cultural ministers,” he said. “A new campus will help us recruit students and teach them.” **BT**



President René Maciel

quotation remarks

“As a follower of Jesus, I am called to work for justice and reconciliation, and to be an advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves.”

—U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf, a Republican from Northern Virginia, who will end his long service at the end of his term (RNS)

“I believe that if you touch history, history touches you.”

—Rabbi Shaul Shimon Deutsch, director of the cash-strapped Torah Animal World in Brooklyn, N.Y., which exhibits 350 stuffed animals representing at least one of every species mentioned in the first five books of the Bible (RNS)

“Ten years ago, everyone was talking about the ‘emergent church.’ And five years ago, people were talking about the ‘missional church.’ And now ‘new Calvinism.’ I don’t want to say the new Calvinism is a fad, but I’m wondering if this is one of those things American evangelicals want to talk about for five years, and then they’ll go on living their lives and planting their churches. Or is this something we’ll see 10 or 20 years from now?”

—Brad Vermurlen, a Notre Dame graduate student writing a dissertation on the new Calvinists, quoted in a New York Times article titled “Evangelicals Find Themselves in the Midst of a Calvinist Revival”

“To move students beyond a Red Bull experience, we must relentlessly remind them that the Christian faith is one centered on the person of Jesus. Developing and maintaining a relationship with God requires engagement with scripture and the stories of Christ found there.”

—Jen Bradbury, director of youth ministry at Faith Lutheran Church in Glen Ellyn, Ill., blogging at ChristianCentury.org

“What will they do next? Maybe we will have Jaffa Cakes and Coca-Cola instead of bread and wine at Holy Communion.”

—Giles Fraser, a young reformer in the Church of England, responding negatively to the idea of doing away with vestments to attract more young people (Daily Mail/RNS)

“The big conference model (aimed at pastors) is coming to an end ... In for 2014 are small, local, peer group conversations. Book discussions over lunch, peer-to-peer support and contextual problem-solving will grow in importance in 2014.”

—Chuck Warnock, pastor of Chatham Baptist Church in Chatham, Va., making predictions at EthicsDaily.com

“The gospel is an economic and political reality, so by definition the church is both economic and political. But economics and politics are to be understood in light of the gospel, not the other way round. The kingdom of God is the comprehensive framework.”

—Howard Snyder, former professor of history and theology at Asbury Seminary, blogging at howardsnyder.seedbed.com

“We avoid a number because we don’t have a way to accurately state ‘this many people were killed for their faith in Jesus Christ.’ Sometimes it’s more (ethnic or national) identity than a Christian witness, and in some cases it’s not known at all.”

—Todd Nettleton, director of media development for Voice of the Martyrs, on why exact statistics on persecution are not possible (ABP)

“There are many ‘spirits’ calling for our minds and hearts. Some are well funded and cleverly disguised campaigns to gain public support for private benefit, and some are packaged in pious wrapping. Some are carefully framed to appeal to our fears and prejudices, while others pull our vision beyond the reflections of ourselves to what might be if we were to take seriously the call of covenant partnership. Discernment will determine which spirit we trust. If we remember to ‘test the spirits’ with its careful use, 2014 just might be a different kind of year.”

—Colin Harris, professor emeritus of religious studies at Mercer University (EthicsDaily.com)

“When you bring kids up front in a worship service, it’s a bit like opening your sanctuary to a band of foraging raccoons. You never know exactly what’s going to happen ... Time with children is one of those peculiar things in the church, something fraught with liturgical peril for those who like services nice and neat and orderly. But it can also be totally amazing.”

—David Williams, pastor of Poolesville Presbyterian Church in Maryland, blogging at ChristianCentury.org

Words that chill

Remarkably, the gross mistreatment of people is sometimes disguised as doing them a favor. Such behavior — toward individuals and groups of persons — has deep historical roots from which lessons are not easily learned.

It is amazing how often sheer discrimination, oppression and worse get excused as Christian charity, even evangelism. Political power is misused — and then justified as something divinely endorsed.

Recently, while getting some exercise along the Tennessee Riverwalk, I came across a small, easy-to-ignore historical marker far from the usual tourist traffic. The words chilled me much more than the cold wind and falling temperatures.

President Andrew Jackson, in a message to the U.S. Congress in 1830 regarding “Indian Removal,” had this to say:

“It gives me **pleasure** to announce to Congress that the **benevolent** policy of the Government, steadily pursued for nearly thirty years, in relation to the removal of the Indians beyond the white settlements is approaching a **happy** consummation. ... The consequences of a speedy removal will be important to the United States, to individual States, and to the

Indians themselves. ... It will separate the Indians from immediate contact with settlements of whites; **free them** from the power of the States; enable them to pursue **happiness** in their own way and under their own rude institutions; will retard the progress of decay, which is lessening their numbers, and perhaps cause them gradually, under the protection of the Government and through the influence of



good counsels, to cast off their savage habits and become an interesting, civilized, and **Christian** community.”

Nearly every sentence is strikingly offensive — especially coming from the leader of a nation founded on

the ideals of individual rights and described by many as rooted in Judeo-Christian principles.

The bold (which I added) of some words highlights but a few of the more remarkable uses of language to suggest that taking homes and land from Native people and putting them on a death trek was for their own happiness and benefit — and even an effort to make them Christian.

Tragically, injustices in the name of Jesus are not as isolated as some might suggest.

Whether abuses of Native American or African slaves or other acts of discrimination and oppression that have followed, “making Christians” is much uglier and more destructive than being Christ-like in how one relates to others.



It is easy to look back and wonder how those who claimed faith and freedom could act and speak in such ways. However, it’s more painful but helpful to continually examine the ways we misrepresent the one we claim to follow and are less than fully loving.

The chilling words of Jesus can make a difference — when they are honestly heard and heeded rather than twisted for our own convenience or used to condemn others instead of revealing our own failure to live accordingly. **BT**

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with the 2014 Judson-Rice Award

**The Award Dinner will be held on Thursday, April 24,
at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga.**

Hold the date! Reservation and sponsorship information will be available soon in *Baptists Today* and at baptiststoday.org.

A Pennsylvania native, McCall has long built bridges of understanding and cooperation. Currently, he fills the pulpit of historic Friendship Baptist Church in Atlanta. Significant leadership roles have included service as vice president of the Baptist World Alliance and national moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The Judson-Rice Award was created by Baptists Today in 2001 to celebrate the contributions of early Baptist leaders Adoniram Judson, Ann Hasseltine Judson and Luther Rice, and to recognize a current Baptist leader who has demonstrated significant leadership.

Let the lessons come alive!

NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCE: ISRAEL with DR. TONY CARTLEDGE
Nov. 3–13, 2014

Nurturing Faith Bible Studies writer Tony Cartledge, who holds a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies from Duke University, will lead Sunday school teachers and other interested persons on a personal tour of Israel Nov. 3–13, 2014.

Join Tony and other *Baptists Today* staff on this unique opportunity to see firsthand the places where biblical stories came to life and to gain insights into the culture and languages of this remarkable setting.

DESTINATIONS will include Megiddo and other ancient cities, the Sea of Galilee, Nazareth, Capernaum, the Mount of the Beatitudes, the Golan Heights, the Jordan River, Jericho, Qumran, Masada and the Dead Sea.

In Jerusalem, view the city from the Mount of Olives, walk down the Palm Sunday Road, visit the Garden of Gethsemane,

and follow the Via Dolorosa to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Then visit the City of David and slosh through Hezekiah’s Tunnel, pray at the Western Wall, and walk around the Temple Mount.

In Bethlehem, visit the Church of the Nativity and Shepherd’s Field — then venture through the Valley of Elah to Moreshah for a hands-on archaeological dig, bringing pottery and other finds to light for the first time in more than 2,000 years. Other highlights will include the Israel Museum and Israel’s Holocaust memorial.

COST: \$3,800 includes airfare (from select cities), lodging, breakfasts and dinners, and travel on a luxury motor coach for the entire trip. The group will be joined by one of Israel’s most experienced and sought-after guides, Doron Heiliger.

Reservations, itinerary and other travel details will be available in upcoming issues of *Baptists Today* and online at baptiststoday.org. For now, hold those dates!

NURTURING FAITH is an expanded ministry of *Baptists Today* — providing trusted resources for Christian learning and living including the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies, Nurturing Faith Books and the new Nurturing Faith Experiences.



Gratitude Flows

Compassionate responses follow Paynters' latest home damage

AUSTIN, Texas —When Roger Paynter's feet hit the floor in the early morning of Oct. 31, he didn't expect a wet landing. However, the standing water in his bedroom instantly took him back to the time a plumbing failure had occurred in an earlier home.

But this time the trouble was coming in from the outside — the result of what would be described as a 500-year flood. Sloshing his way to the front door, he discovered a swift flow of water, several feet deep, moving across what had always been his front yard.

Two new neighbors across the street, both young military veterans, said they had tried to alert Paynter to the rising water but couldn't rouse him with earlier knocks on the door. Learning of Roger's bum knee, the two men used the fireman's carry method to get him through the swirling water to dry land.

"They were the kindest, most compassionate people," he said. "They literally carried me out of here."

DAMAGE DONE

Neighboring fences were washed against the back of the home, actually keeping the damage to the Paynters' house from being more substantial.

"So many people had it worse," said Roger, pointing to a neighbor who sustained such damage that he simply left town.

Patio furniture and other outside items vanished. "My barbeque grill was three blocks away," said Roger of the unexpected force of nature caused by the quick rise of Onion Creek.

In the front yard he pointed to a mark about four feet up a tree trunk where the water stood when he made it to the front door. One neighbor had six feet of water in his home and had to kick out a window to escape.

Roger's home library, accumulated over many years, was one of the casualties. Many of the books were damaged or destroyed, and his file cabinet of sermons was waterlogged too.

GENEROUS HELP

The Paynters had no flood insurance since the mortgage company didn't require such. The out-of-pocket expenses would be high, but offset by



the generosity of many.

"The Texas Baptist Men were just unbelievable," said Roger, "not just for us but for the whole neighborhood."

The volunteers quickly removed the lower four feet of drywall and the insulation behind it that wicks the often-contaminated floodwater that can cause mold and other issues.

More volunteers — Baptists, Lutherans and otherwise — flooded into the community over the next several days. Volunteers from South Main Baptist Church in Pasadena, Texas, including retired engineers and electricians, made a big impact.

"They worked for about five days non-stop," Roger recalled.

Texas Baptists also sent a check to help with some expenses as they always do when one of their pastors experiences a crisis.

About 15 "good as gold" Baptist volunteers from Beaumont, Texas, were the first to arrive after the flood, said Roger. And he noted appreciatively that some 300 employees of H-E-B grocery stores busily hauled away the mounting debris in the community.

GRATITUDE

"So many people from the church came to help get the furniture and mud out of the house," said Suzii Paynter, executive coordinator of the Georgia-based Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, who was not in Austin, where her husband Roger serves as pastor of the First Baptist Church, at the time of the flooding.

A deacon cataloged the titles of books that



Roger and Suzii Paynter know home disasters too well. A rare, recent flood damaged their Austin home. Roger's waterlogged books were replaced by deacons at Austin's First Baptist Church where he is pastor.

had been destroyed. Then the deacons ordered new copies to present to their pastor. Someone even sent, anonymously, a package filled with Baylor University caps and other items for the alums.

While describing the experience as a "chaotic mess," Suzii said "people's responses have been so wonderful to us."

Standing amid the painters and other construction workers bringing their home back to working order, Roger reflected on the lessons learned when going through such times.

"In a situation like this you find out how compassionate people can be," he said. "It has been amazing."

'WHAT'S THE POINT?'

In 43 years of marriage the Paynters have had more than their fair share of damage to their homes. They recalled three house fires including one set by an arsonist at a previous home in Austin in 2010.

Then there was the time in Waco when a truck drove through a bay window — and they discovered an infestation of bees. Both on the same day.

"It gets you thinking, 'What is the point of all of this?'" said Suzii.

After seeing the damage, helping deal with some of the issues related to their home and the larger community, and experiencing the gracious responses from many, she sounded a lighter note. She told Roger he had a couple of good choices for the next Sunday: he could either preach on Noah or Job. **BT**

American Baptists release Burma documentary

VALLEY FORGE, Penn. — American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS) has released the documentary DVD, *A New Land, A New Hope: The Journey of Christians from Burma to the United States*, in conjunction with the 200th anniversary celebration of American Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson's 1813 arrival in Burma (now known as Myanmar).

ABHMS and the Burma Refugees Task Force produced the DVD to reflect the realities of life among Burma Diaspora communities in the United States.

Approximately 100,000 Burma refugees of Chin, Karen, Kachin, Karenni and other ethnic groups from the Thai-Burma border, Malaysia and India are settled in more than 130 urban, suburban and rural U.S. areas.

An estimated 40 percent of them in more than 100 congregations and fellowship organizations are affiliated with American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) regions.

A collaboration of ABHMS, ABCUSA's Office of the General Secretary, International Ministries, American Baptist Women's Ministries and local church pastors, the task force has been responding since 2007 to the influx of Burma refugees admitted by the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration via contract with various government, non-government and faith-based sponsoring agencies.

The task force obtains grants from various ABCUSA entities to support regions and churches that provide refugee-resettlement ministries. A delegation from ABHMS attended the Judson 200th anniversary celebration held last December in Yangon, Myanmar. The event was arranged by the Myanmar Baptist Convention.

A 25-minute version and an 11-minute version of the DVD have been created. Both can be viewed online at abhms.org. A \$10 donation that benefits refugee ministries is suggested for those who would like to order a copy of the DVD that includes both versions. To order, contact Diane Giova at diane.giova@abhms.org or 1-800-222-3872, 2450. **BT**

Religion writers agree: Pope Francis is no. 1 newsmaker

By Adelle M. Banks
Religion News Service

His *Time* magazine's Person of the Year, the most talked-about topic on Facebook and the most popular baby namesake in Italy. No surprise, Pope Francis is also the top religion story of 2013 and the Religion Newsmaker of the Year, according to a poll of Religion Newswriters members.

Francis beat out his predecessor, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who was the No. 2 story, and evangelist Billy Graham — who turned 95 and is reportedly ailing — for the newsmaker designation. Benedict made news when he became the first pope to resign in almost six centuries.

The rankings were based on results of online balloting among Religion Newswriters Association members.

Coming in third among the top religion stories was the Supreme Court's 5-4 decision permitting gay marriage in California and ending the ban on federal employee benefits for same-sex couples. Within months of the June decision, the total number of states permitting same-sex marriage rose to 16, including Illinois and Hawaii.

Fourth on the list were the Obama administration's concessions to faith-based groups and businesses that objected to the contraception mandate in the Affordable Care Act. While opponents have reaped mixed results in

lower courts, the Supreme Court has agreed to take Hobby Lobby's challenge.

And the fifth religion story of the year was the central role Islam has played in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. The Egyptian military ousted the Muslim Brotherhood-led government and cracked down on its supporters while Sunni Islamist fighters increased their role in Syria's opposition.

Here are the other stories that rounded out the Top 10:

6. The death of Nelson Mandela, icon of reconciliation and nonviolence, at the age of 95. He was remembered as a modern-day Moses who led his people out of racial bondage.

7. Religious-inspired attacks killed scores of people, with extremist Buddhist monks inciting attacks on Muslims in Myanmar and Muslim extremists targeting Christians in Egypt, Kenya and Pakistan.

8. More than one in five U.S. Jews now report having no religion, according to a landmark survey from the Pew Research Center.

9. The Boy Scouts of America, after much debate, voted to accept Scouts — but not scoutmasters — who are openly gay. Some evangelical leaders opposed the move while several Catholic leaders endorsed it.

10. Muslims joined other Americans in condemning a devastating bombing at the Boston Marathon by two young Muslim brothers. **BT**

'Snake Salvation' pastor won't be charged

By Bob Smietana
Religion News Service

A grand jury decided not to indict East Tennessee serpent-handling pastor Andrew Hamblin on charges of violating a state ban on possessing venomous snakes.

In November, state officials seized 53 serpents — including rattlesnakes, copperheads and exotic breeds — from the Tabernacle Church of God in LaFollette, Tenn., where Hamblin is pastor.



Andrew Hamblin

He and his church were featured in a National Geographic television series, *Snake Salvation*.

State law bans the possession of venomous snakes. Officials from the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency cited Hamblin with 53 counts of violating the ban.

Hamblin argued that the ban violates congregations' religious liberty. He was thrilled by the grand jury's decision.

"I'm ecstatic," he said in a phone interview. "All the headlines should read 'Snake handlers have religious rights in Tennessee.'"

Hamblin's defense was simple: The snakes weren't his. They belonged to the church, and Hamblin said the wildlife officials had no business raiding a church. **BT**

Survey: Views on evolution driven by religion more than education

By Sarah Pulliam Bailey
Religion News Service

As evolution remains a contentious issue for many public schools, a new survey suggests that views on the question are driven by Americans' religious affiliation more than their level of education.

Overall, six in 10 Americans say that humans have evolved over time, while one-third reject the idea of human evolution, according to a new analysis by the Pew Research Center. The one-third of Americans who reject human evolution has remained mostly unchanged since a 2009 Pew survey.

About one in four American adults say that "a supreme being guided the evolution of living things for the purpose of creating humans and other life in the form it exists today."

While education matters, the new analysis suggests that religion appears to have more influence than level of education on evolution. The 21-point difference between college graduates and high school graduates who

believe in evolution, for example, is less stark than the 49-point difference between mainline Protestants and evangelicals.

Evangelicals are four times as likely to reject human evolution as mainline Protestants, with 64 percent of evangelicals saying that "humans have existed in their present form since the beginning of time." Half of black Protestants say humans have not evolved, compared to 15 percent of white mainline Protestants who share the same opinion.

Those with more years of formal education are more likely than those with less education to say that humans and animals have evolved over time. Seventy-two percent of college graduates say humans have evolved over time, compared with 51 percent of high school graduates who say the same thing.

The gap between Republicans and Democrats on belief on human evolution has grown by 10 points since 2009, with 43 percent of Republicans and 67 percent of Democrats saying humans have evolved over time.

Even those who hold views on evolution

differ in how it may have happened. The belief that evolution occurred as a natural process (not necessarily one guided by God) is still a minority view. At 57 percent, only people who have no religious affiliation hold a majority view that says humans evolved due to natural processes.

Among those who express a belief in human evolution, just 32 percent of them take the view that evolution is "due to natural processes such as natural selection." For Protestants who say that humans have evolved over time, the group is divided over whether evolution is due to natural processes or whether it was guided by a supreme being (36 percent each).

Meanwhile, the Creation Museum in Kentucky that promotes a literal reading of the Bible that God created the earth in six days will begin offering free admission to children in 2014. Seeking a wider audience, the museum rolled out displays this year that contain no religious messages as total attendance since the museum's 2007 opening approached about 2 million. **BT**

Poll finds respect for clergy not what it used to be

By Lauren Markoe
Religion News Service

Clergy used to rank near the top in polls asking Americans to rate the honesty and ethics of people in various professions. This year, for the first time since Gallup began asking the question in 1977, fewer than half of those polled said clergy have "high" or "very high" moral standards.

But opinions on clergy differed markedly by party, with Republicans viewing them far more favorably than Democrats.

Overall, 47 percent of respondents to the survey gave clergy "high" or "very high" ratings, a sharp drop in confidence from the 67 percent of Americans who viewed them this way in 1985.

Among Republicans, 63 percent gave clergy one of the two top ratings for ethics, compared with 40 percent of Democrats.

In a piece accompanying the poll, Gallup Senior Editor Jeffrey M. Jones wrote that Republicans might think more highly of clergy, police and military officers "because those people work in traditional institutions in

American society, which Republicans may hold in greater esteem because of their generally conservative ideology."

"Greater religiosity among Republicans than among Democrats also factors in to Republicans' higher ratings of clergy," Jones added.

Young people aged 29-34 tend to rate professionals more highly than those 55 and older, but the pattern does not hold for clergy. Less than one in three young people (32 percent) give clergy high moral marks, compared with 50 percent of those 55 and older.

This may be because young people tend to be less religious than older people, Jones writes.

This year, clergy took a back seat to nurses, pharmacists, schoolteachers, medical doctors, military and police officers.

Nurses are the most trusted and have been nearly every year since Gallup added them to the poll in 1999, with 82 percent of people saying they rank high or very high on the ethical spectrum. Clergy came in seventh of the 22 professions ranked.

The overall trend for clergy has sloped

downward since 2001, with Gallup pollsters attributing the slide to scandals involving the sexual abuse of minors.

"The Catholic priest abuse stories from the early 2000s helped lead to a sharp drop in Americans' ratings of clergy, a decline from which the profession has yet to fully recover," Gallup Managing Editor Art Swift wrote about the poll.

But J.C. Austin of Auburn Theological Seminary suggests another reason that the clergy's reputation has suffered. Too often, he said, divisive clergy overshadow those working toward the common good.

"We saw that this year, in particular, around the marriage equality debates when voices of faith were represented as the opposition even though countless people of faith fought for marriage equality precisely because their faith compelled them to do so," he said.

Though clergy seem to be dropping in the nation's esteem, they are far from the bottom of the list. Reading from the bottom up, the poll ranks lobbyists, members of Congress, car sales people, state office holders and advertising practitioners as the least ethical. **BT**

Report finds eight countries on UN Human Rights Council restrict religious freedom

By Brian Pellot
Religion News Service

LONDON — Eight of the 47 countries that hold seats on the United Nations Human Rights Council imprisoned people in 2013 under laws that restrict religious freedom, according to a new report from Human Rights Without Frontiers International, a nonprofit advocacy organization based in Belgium.

The eight UNHRC member states on the group's second annual World Freedom of Religion or Belief Prisoners List, released Dec. 30, are Morocco, China and Saudi Arabia (whose new three-year terms just began) and current members India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Libya and South Korea.

Hundreds of believers and atheists were imprisoned in these and 16 other countries for exercising religious freedom or freedom of expression rights related to religious issues, according to the report. These rights include the freedom to change religions, share beliefs, object to military service on conscientious grounds, worship, assemble and associate freely.

Violations related to religious defamation and blasphemy are also included in the report. According to the report's findings from 2013:

In China, Protestants, Catholics, Buddhists, Muslims and Falun Gong adherents were arrested for proselytizing, holding illegal gatherings, providing religious education classes and publicizing their persecution.

In Morocco, a convert to Christianity was arrested and fined for "shaking the faith of a Muslim" by sharing his newfound beliefs.

In Saudi Arabia, 52 Ethiopian Christians



were arrested for participating in a private religious service.

In India, Protestants were arrested for holding private prayer meetings.

In Indonesia, a Pentecostal pastor was arrested for holding religious services without a valid permit, and an atheist was sentenced to 30 months in prison for starting an atheist Facebook page where he posted the words "God does not exist."

In Kazakhstan, an atheist was arrested for allegedly inciting religious hatred in his writings.

In Libya, foreign missionaries, dozens of Coptic Christians and a Protestant were arrested and allegedly tortured for proselytizing.

In South Korea, nearly 600 Jehovah's Witnesses were serving prison sentences for conscientious objection to mandatory military service.

The report designates China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea and South Korea as countries of particular concern for the highest number of religious freedom prisoners. The U.S. State Department's latest International Religious Freedom Report includes Saudi Arabia on its list of worst offenders.

"Human Rights Without Frontiers is

alarmed by the evolution of the UN Human Rights Council which accepts as members an increasing number of countries perpetrating egregious violations of human rights and, in particular, of religious freedom," the group said in a statement.

The UNHRC replaced the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in 2006, in part "to redress (the Commission's) shortcoming," which included granting membership to countries with poor human rights records. The resolution establishing the revamped UNHRC declares that member states "shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights."

But that's not happening, said Willy Fautre, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.

"Our best wish for the New Year is that these and the other member states of the Human Rights Council may give the good example to other nations of the world by releasing such prisoners of conscience and not depriving any other believer or atheist of their freedom in 2014," he said in a statement.

Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the U.N. General Assembly adopted in 1948, explicitly protect freedom of thought, conscience, religion, opinion and expression.

The U.N. General Assembly has the power to suspend the rights of UNHRC members that commit serious human rights violations. Libya became the first and only country to be suspended from the council in 2011 amid the Gaddafi regime's brutal suppression of protesters. Libya was readmitted to the council eight months later under new leadership. **BT**



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‘Certain boundaries’

Southern Baptist leaders moving Cedarville University further right

A private religious university in Ohio is undergoing a faculty shakeup, including an exodus of women faculty, after having been taken over by Southern Baptists.

Cedarville University, whose well-known alumni include ABC News correspondent Paula Faris, executive director of the NFL Players’ Association DeMaurice Fitzgerald Smith and California pastor and author David Jeremiah, had already been perceived as a more conservative campus in the realm of Christian colleges.

The school, 30 minutes east of Dayton, Ohio, promotes a creationist approach to science and requires daily chapel attendance and an academic minor in the Bible. In 2008, the school rescinded a speaking invitation to popular Christian author Shane Claiborne, causing controversy among alumni.

Last June, the school hired Thomas White, formerly vice president for student services and communications at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Texas, as its new president. Former president Bill Brown and vice president of student life Carl Ruby left earlier, sparking debate over the university’s future.

The campus of 3,400 students has also seen the departure of many faculty and staff, including half the teachers in its Bible department.

The 25-member board now includes only one woman. Added to the board is Southwestern President Paige Patterson, a staunch biblical literalist and one of the leaders of the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention.

The new president downplayed the changes. Addressing the departing faculty, White said that anytime you have a new leader, like a football coach, you get a new team.

“At Cedarville, there’s no major change happening, no major shift at the institution. We’ve been conservative since [our founding],” he said.

The recent departures include prominent



Cedarville University Center for Biblical and Theological Studies. Photo by Scott Huck, Cedarville University

women such as Bible professor Joy Fagan, associate vice president of student life Kirsten Gibbs and Briana DuPree, resident director and coordinator of diversity student programs. Fagan, who signed a confidentiality statement, said she’s limited in what she can say.

“I do not feel I am a good fit for the university going forward,” she said, declining to elaborate.

Fagan is the only woman listed on Cedarville’s Bible department website. DuPree, who is a pastor at a local church, declined to comment, as did Gibbs.

The changes have been felt all over campus, but especially among women said Ariana Cheng, a junior at the university.

“Women can teach but only within certain boundaries,” said Cheng, who is studying international studies. “Women feel like they can’t necessarily take a position of leadership without going against some rule.”

White said nothing has changed in the school’s official policy and Cedarville has women in every department.

“Our position is that we don’t train women to be in the office of pastor, elder or bishop,” White said.

A philosophy faculty member caused a stir last fall when writing an op-ed for the campus newspaper on “Why I Am Not Voting for Romney.” Philosophy and physics majors have been eliminated.

Founded in 1887 by the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, Cedarville became affiliated with General Association of Regular Baptist Churches. The latter group kicked Cedarville out because of its association with Southern Baptists.

In turn, Cedarville’s board hired Southern Baptists to enforce its conservative identity. Observers say that the two presidents put the university on two very different trajectories.

Under Brown, some say, it fit under a wide evangelical umbrella that engages the broader culture in ways similar to institutions such as Wheaton College (Illinois) or Taylor University (Indiana). Now, one alumnus said, Cedarville might be viewed as more akin to Moody Bible Institute in Chicago — a school that does not allow women to teach men theology.

Staff from Southwestern and Southern seminaries have replaced many of the Cedarville staff that left. White said nothing has changed in college policy on women teaching men.

The difference between the two administrations, said David Dockery, president of Union University in Tennessee, lies in the presidents’ theological perspectives. Brown would have put a greater emphasis on general revelation, finding truth outside of the Scriptures in God’s creation, in the natural world, Dockery said.

“Dr. White’s emphasis on the truthfulness and the sufficiency of the Bible causes people to ask a different kind of question,” he said. “It’s not so much the integration of faith and learning; it’s the integration of Scripture and discipline.”

White said no doctrinal statements have changed since his appointment. The college has had a position on the sufficiency of Scripture as a requirement for tenure since 2004.

Cedarville is considering two changes in its doctrinal statement, one that would explicitly state that life begins at conception and another that marriage is between a man and a woman, White said.

The college’s hiring policy says it “reserves the right to discriminate on the basis of religion, marital status or gender (with regard to certain positions).”

Last year the university said it is under review by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights in response to a complaint claiming the university is in violation of Title IX — a federal gender equity law that requires colleges to adjudicate sexual harassment and violence on campus. **BT**

The Lighter Side

By Brett Younger

Longing for home

When people ask where I am from I gladly answer “Mississippi,” because Mississippi is a nice place to be from.

Much of what Mississippi is known for are mixed blessings: red clay, kudzu, Southern belles, steel magnolias, sweet potatoes, okra, Ole Miss, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams and Brett Favre.

Mississippi is “Boycott Disney” bumper stickers, “Don’t Blame Me I Voted for Dole” bumper stickers, and radio stations that play “If Heaven Ain’t a Lot Like Dixie” a lot.

Mississippi is grocery stores with real names such as “Piggly Wiggly” and “Jitney Jungle,” gas stations where people ask, “Where you headed?” and then, “It won’t take you an hour now that they’ve finished the highway” — which was finished in 1992 — and Elvis — who went to high school with my ninth grade biology teacher. She never forgave herself for not paying attention to Elvis. More than once Mrs. Stowers wondered aloud if she could have been the queen of Graceland.

My parents live in Mantachie, Miss., 100 yards from where my grandparents lived for 60 years. In 1930 my grandfather and 10 neighbors cut down trees my great-grandfather had planted and built a three-bedroom house that housed many of my childhood memories.

I remember being terrified when Grandma caught three of us with Old Maid cards in the back bedroom, but that was nothing compared to the time she discovered my cousin Barry listening to “My Baby Does the Hanky Panky.” I honestly believe that my cousin didn’t know what hanky panky was or why Grandma would consider it wrong for him to play a 45 record praising hanky panky on grandmother’s phonograph.

The wind patterns were not considered when they built the barn east of the house. My grandfather was so good at milking, he could hit an open mouth from 15 feet. He tried to teach me to milk, but I was never good at it. I am not sure what that says about me as a person, but I have never completely overcome my disappointment.

My grandparents named several cows after their grandchildren — including one named “Brett.” One evening at dinner, Grandpa asked how my hamburger tasted and everyone at the table laughed. I did not finish my meal after it was explained that I was what was for dinner.

I am amused that the cousin who once hid my Christmas gifts behind the couch and used to be skinny as a rail is now more like a boxcar than a rail. My uncle looks like my grandfather. My cousin Jan’s daughter looks more like the cousin I remember than Jan does.

My home state has the nation’s highest percentage of Baptists. When I visit my parents’ church I am welcomed by an assortment of saints. Some hug me before asking who I am. When I answer, “I’m Clarice’s oldest boy,” I am hugged again.

Some of the conversations are in a foreign language I no longer understand: “Brett, we baled 3,000 bales last year — round bales, not the little ones. Guess how many acres that took?”

I am lost.

“Take a guess.”

I try to beg off: “I really don’t know.”

“Just take a guess.”

I stammer: “Thirty?”

“Thirty?”

I backtrack quickly, “Did I say 30? I meant to say 3,000. Three thousand?”

Mississippi is a good place to call home because when the prodigals return we hope that folks will recognize that we do not quite fit in. At the same time we want to feel like we never left.

We want to go home to the home with the welcome mat on the porch and the home that we know only by its absence, home where there are dirty dishes in the sink and home that we have never even visited, and home where the dog is not allowed on the couch and home where the deer and the antelope play.

We long for home sweet home, home where the country roads take you, and home where your homeboys hung long before you knew they were homeboys. We want to go where the home fires are burning, where the chickens come to roost, and where the angels are coming for to carry you.



Though it does not seem like it, the homesickness we feel is a gift of God. C.S. Lewis wrote: “The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing to find the place where all the beauty came from. At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Someday, God willing, we shall get in.”

Our search for home leads us to blessed people, holy places and sacred memories. We long for moments when we are with the people we love, when we glimpse home in the goodness of others, and when we close our eyes and feel God’s welcoming grace. **BT**

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Psalm 2

More Than Meets the Eye
March 2, 2014
(Transfiguration Sunday)

Psalm 32

Forgiveness
March 9, 2014

Psalm 121

Preservation
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Psalm 95

Worship
March 23, 2014

Psalm 23

Trust
March 30, 2014

Youth Lessons are on pages 22–23.



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Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 2

March 2, 2014

More Than Meets the Eye

We often find ourselves caught between the ideal and the real. We have an idea of what an ideal life would be like, or of what – ideally – we would like to do and be. Yet, we're also confronted by a daily reality that might be very different.

When election season rolls around, for example, we vote for candidates in hopes that they will uphold our social or economic or moral ideals. Sadly, the victors may go to Washington or their state legislatures, only to discover that their ideals – and ours – soon run aground on the rocky shore of partisan politics.

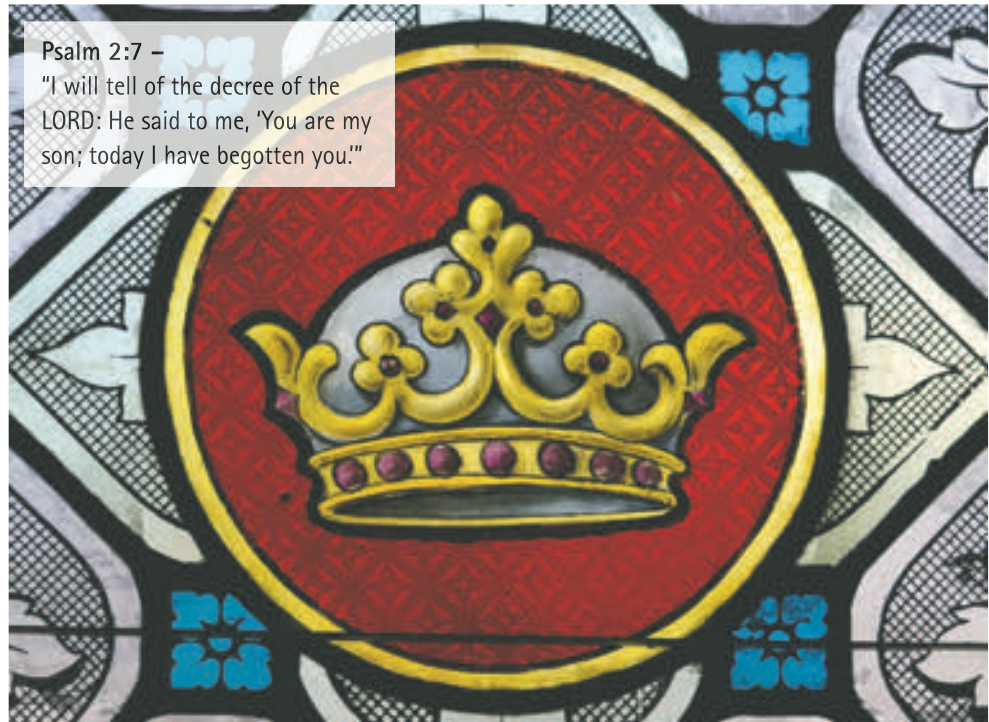
The real and the ideal are often quite different.

Psalm 2 – the first of seven psalms we'll be studying during the season leading up to Easter – describes the coronation of a new king over Israel. It speaks in ideal terms, as if all the surrounding nations should recognize both God and God's king as their leader, even though the real situation in life was usually quite different. ⬇️

At first, the text may seem totally unrelated to our situation, but if we stick with it, it will challenge us to examine our own relationship with God, and ask to what extent it is real, or if it remains an ideal.

The opposition plots (vv. 1-3)

Psalm 2 appears to have been written to celebrate the accession of a new king. It was intended for two audiences: foreign kings who were almost certainly not present, and representatives from the people of Israel, who were. ⬇️



In the ancient world, where newscasts were unknown and spy networks were limited, a new king was largely an unknown quantity. For any nations that had been obliged to pay tribute as vassals to a stronger kingdom, a transition in leadership was often seen as an opportunity to rebel against the new order and regain full independence.

Israel was rarely in a position to hold sway over surrounding nations, with the main exceptions being the early reigns of David and Solomon. The united monarchy divided after Solomon, splitting into the smaller kingdoms of Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south).

For most of their existence, Israel and Judah were more likely to be the vassals than the overlords, subject at various times to the superpowers of Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon, or even to smaller kingdoms such as neighboring Syria.

Even in times of relative weakness, however, the coronation of a new king would have been characterized by considerable pomp and propaganda as officials puffed the new king's power in hopes of impressing both domestic and

foreign audiences.

This was especially the case in the southern kingdom, where the line of David was maintained, and each king was thought to inherit the promises of a lasting kingdom that God had made to David. It is most likely, then, that Psalm 2 would have been preserved and used in Judah.

Psalm 2 may have originated as early as Solomon's accession, for the style and vocabulary of the Hebrew text appears to be quite old, perhaps as early as the 10th century BCE, when Solomon ruled. The psalm could have been used at any point in the monarchy's history, however: we need not try to associate it with a particular king.

Try to envision how the psalm might have been used in its original setting. The text begins with the worship leader (or possibly the new king) imagining what plots other nations might be hatching due to the transition, anticipating a time of weakness. ⬇️ Opposition to Israel's king, however, was also perceived as a challenge to Israel's God: when "the rulers take counsel

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together,” it is “against the LORD and his anointed” (v. 2b).

The rulers’ desire to “burst their bonds asunder and cast their cords from us” portrays them as leaders of vassal states who devise plans to revolt and regain their freedom from Israel before the new king could establish strong control over his military.

Remember, however, that to rebel against God’s people was to rebel against God, and that was serious business.

God responds (vv. 4-9)

The psalmist portrays God as responding to the antagonism of upstart kingdoms with divine sneers, jeers, and such fury that the nations would tremble in terror as God declared: “I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.”

The new king did not take the throne simply because he was next in line, the psalm insists, but because God had chosen him.

The new king agreed: with vv. 7-9, he dares to claim that God had personally spoken to him, effectively adopting him as a son through whom God would relate to Israel.

This notion may sound strange to us, but Israel’s theology of kingship could imagine a special covenant relationship between God and king, one so close that it could be described in filial terms.

Thus the king could claim that God had said “You are my son; today I have begotten you” (v. 7a). In a sense, the king was thought to be “born again” into a new relationship with God. This did not make the king himself divine, as the peoples of Egypt and Mesopotamia pretended their potentates to be. Rather, it made him a symbolic “son of God,” representing Israel as the children of God.

As the ceremony unfolded, it is likely that a written document (or decree) would have been fashioned and given to each king, emblematic of his legitimacy as the new ruler. When the king said “I will tell of the decree of the LORD,” he may have been referring to this.

The document would serve as a formal declaration of the king’s right to rule and as a renewal of the covenant between God and Israel. When young Jehoash was made king of Judah, for example, the high priest Jehoiada “put the crown on him, and gave him the covenant” (or “decree,” 2 Kgs. 11:12).

The Hebrews believed that God had established an eternal covenant with David and his descendants, promising to bless Israel’s kings as they proved obedient, but to punish them when they turned away (2 Sam. 7:8-17). That covenant, declared by the prophet Nathan, included the concept echoed in Ps. 2:7: “I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me” (2 Sam. 7:14a).

The Davidic covenant included a promise that God would plant Israel firmly in the land “so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies” (2 Sam. 7:10b-11).

This promise is reflected in vv. 8-9, in which the king claims that God has promised him power to defeat all enemies with “a rod of iron” – perhaps a reference to his scepter – breaking and smashing them like clay pots.

The images of violence may appear troubling, but they were part and parcel of the rhetoric of kingship, formal declarations of bravado designed to inspire confidence among the king’s subjects and to instill fear into his enemies.

Word of caution (vv. 10-12)

Psalm 2 closes with a warning to other rulers that they should honor Israel’s new king, and in so doing they would honor Israel’s God, Yahweh.

Whether we should regard the speaker in these verses as the king or the psalmist/narrator is unclear. The text is

uncertain and the passage is very difficult to translate, but the message seems plain enough: those who are wise will “serve the LORD with fear” and do obeisance to the king lest Yahweh grow angry and wreak destruction upon them.

In contrast, the psalm concludes, those who seek refuge in God – in part by honoring God’s chosen king – will find happiness and blessing.

Enough with kingship: at some point, we must ask ourselves “So what?” We don’t live in ancient Israel, and we don’t have a king, and don’t want one. What could this 3,000-year-old coronation hymn possibly say to us?

Let’s consider two things. First, we note that this psalm, though originally written to celebrate the accession of Hebrew monarchs, came to be seen by the early church as a messianic psalm. Israel’s rulers never lived up to their potential, and the editorial judgments rendered by the author of 2 Kings are routinely negative: only Josiah and Hezekiah followed Yahweh closely enough to escape charges of being evil kings.

God’s promise to the king in Psalm 2 was little more than an ideal hope in Israel’s past, but early Christians believed it had been finally fulfilled in Jesus, the only one of whom it could truly be said “You are my Son, today I have begotten you” (see Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5, 5:5).

Secondly, as residents of Israel and surrounding nations were urged to serve God by serving God’s appointed king, so we serve God best when we follow the teachings of Jesus, who spent much of his ministry proclaiming the kingdom of God.

Trusting Christ is a transformational event. As the kings of Israel were symbolically “begotten” as sons of God on the day of their accession, so Jesus challenged people to be “born again” by putting their trust in God and living as the children of God.

One doesn’t have to be anointed as king to be called to a transformed and faithful life. How’s that going for you? **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 32

March 9, 2014

Forgiveness

Forgiveness: it's amazing. Only those who have experienced it know the incredible feeling of sweet relief that comes from having a burden of guilt lifted and tossed away.

Marriages, friendships, and even workplaces suffer when hurt feelings or grudges fester and foam, but words of forgiveness can clear the slate and restore joyful relationships.

Today's text is about the kind of forgiveness we need even more: the forgiveness that comes from God. All of us have sinned. We know that. Daily we accumulate a laundry list of shortcomings ranging from hurtful words and harmful habits to serious breaches of morality or ethics.

Sometimes our failures may seem so run-of-the-mill that we don't notice them, while others may run so counter to our upbringing or personal expectations that they have a devastating impact on our sense of self worth.

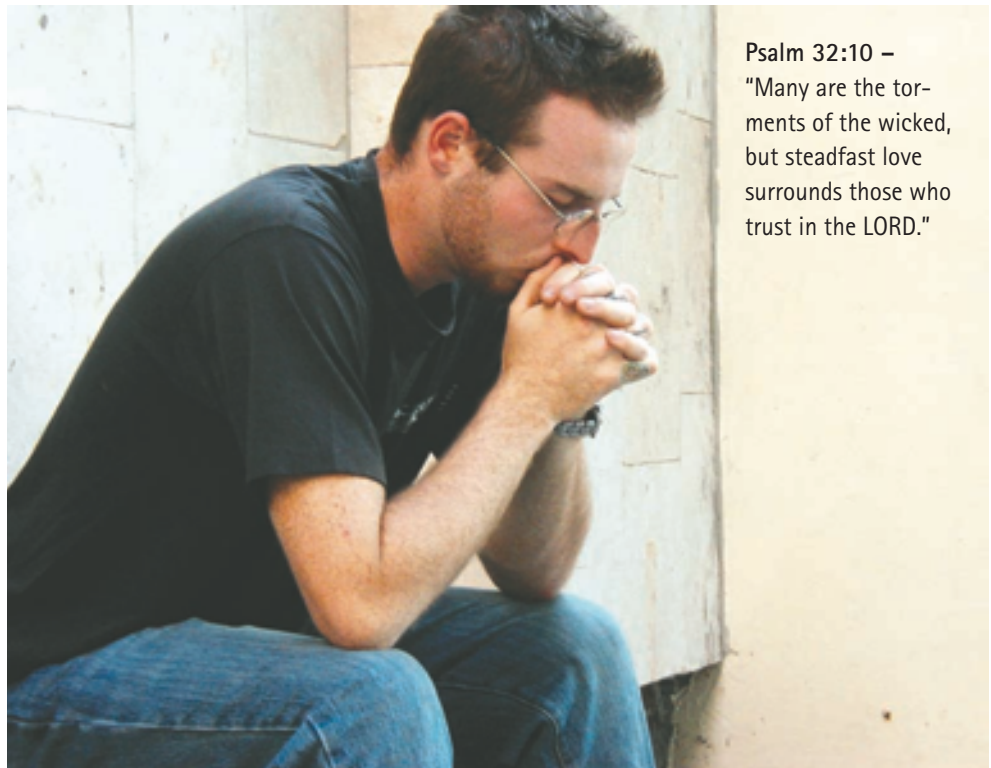
Whether sparked by a gradual distancing of our hearts from God or by a major violation of our own values, the weight of guilt can become oppressive. Bearing a heavy load of shame or self-reproach can lead to psychological and physical ailments.

Today's text reminds us of the freedom and joy that comes from experiencing divine forgiveness, and it's a reminder that all of us could use.


The voice of wisdom (vv. 1-2)


Psalm 32 is the first of 13 Psalms that are labeled as a "Maskil," a word that

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Psalm 32:10 –
"Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD."

defies a neat definition. It can't refer to a very specific type of psalm, because the 13 examples fall into different categories. A form of the word appears as an active verb in v. 8, meaning "I will instruct you" (or "Let me teach you"). Perhaps we could best think of "Maskil" as indicating "a meditation" or "an insightful psalm." 

The psalm contains elements of both wisdom (vv. 1-2, 9-10) and thanksgiving (vv. 3-8, 11). Thus, we will approach the text as a psalm of thanksgiving or testimony (vv. 3-7), framed by instructive or wisdom elements (vv. 1-2, 8-10). The concluding verse, which some scholars think may have been added at a later time, concludes with a joyous postscript. 

Hebrew poetry typically employs units of two or more lines, repeating or expanding upon the same thought. This psalm follows that pattern, beginning with a pair of matched beatitudes, each consisting of two parallel lines. Each of the four lines uses a different word to indicate rebellion against God: "transgression,"

"sin," "iniquity," and "deceit."


While one could argue for fine points of distinction between the Hebrew terms, there is no need. We know what it is to transgress against God, to sin against others, to harbor iniquity in our hearts, and to practice deceit in dealing with God, others, or ourselves. 

We know what it is to fall short, to do wrong, and to feel somehow overcome with evil. It's not a good feeling, so our tendency is to deny our failures, lower our standards, and pretend that all is well and good. In relating to other people, we may throw up barriers or multiply deceptions, actions that undermine healthy relationships.

Sooner or later, the darkness inside haunts us or our duplicity toward others catches up with us, and we feel the burden of our wrongdoing. We need forgiveness, and we know that we won't be truly happy until we find it. The opening two verses, in the style of Israel's wisdom teachers, affirm the peace and release of one whose sinful encumbrance has been lifted.

The voice of experience (vv. 3-7)

The psalmist had experienced such soulful deliverance, and relates a personal testimony of sin and forgiveness in vv. 3-5.

Some scholars believe a copyist's error left something missing from v. 3, because the expected structure of two couplets contains only three elements. It's quite possible, however, that the psalmist intended to begin with a triplet or related thoughts: (1) while he held silence and refused to confess his sin, (2) his sense of well-being imploded, (3) causing moans of distress throughout the day. 

Those who remain silent when confession is needed bottle up their sense of guilt and shame, and sooner or later it will manifest itself in distress, whether vocalized or not.

The psalmist described his own condition with the expression "my bones wore out." We know what it is to be emotionally worn down by inner turmoil. Medical studies and personal experience alike have shown a direct connection between stress – especially negative stress – and our physical or psychological health.

Carrying a perpetual burden of sin and guilt can do more than make us feel worn out. It can literally make us more susceptible to physical ailments and prone to health-defeating behaviors.

It's not surprising, then, that the psalmist saw a direct connection between his strength-sapping symptoms and the convicting hand of God that left him feeling like dry weather corn parched by intense summer heat (v. 4).


In time, the enervating toll of internal drought had its effect, prompting a spiritual wake-up call that led the psalmist to confess his failures and seek forgiveness. Note again the multiplicity of words to describe his wrongdoing: "Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin" (v. 5)

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The word translated as "forgave" is a common Hebrew term that means primarily "to take" or "to lift." Its idiomatic usage in this context envisions God lifting up and taking away the burden of one's sin and guilt, leaving the penitent free to stand tall and celebrate the sense of release and a renewed relationship with God.

We might expect the psalmist to launch into a paean of praise for the joy of forgiveness, but he has already connected happiness with absolution in vv. 1-2. Instead, v. 6 calls for all the faithful to turn to God in prayer (not necessarily a prayer of repentance), promising that "the rush of mighty waters" will not reach them in times of distress.

This intriguing turnabout in metaphors (from the desiccation of summer heat to the rush of mighty waters), the lack of connection to penitence, and the rather non-poetic nature of v. 6 have led some scholars to regard it as a later insertion, perhaps from a marginal comment that was later incorporated into the text. 

That might be the case, but if the occasion for prayer could be connected to the psychological strain of guilt described in vv. 3-4, the verse fits the context relatively well as a reminder that God is a refuge whether one is threatened by drought, flood, or a metaphorical equivalent.

With v. 7, the psalm takes another turn, directly addressing God as a "hiding place" in which the author is preserved from trouble (or distress) and surrounded "with glad cries of deliverance."


After discovering the misery that accompanied the silent attempt to hide his sin from God, the psalmist discovered the joyful freedom that comes from trusting God as a hiding place for his deepest failures and fears.

Do you find yourself hiding *from* God, or hiding *in* God?

The voice of instruction (vv. 8-11)

Verse 8 brings a bit of a conundrum. Some readers see it as God's response to the psalmist, promising further instruction, but it is more likely that the author, emboldened by personal experience, offers to coach the reader on a proper relationship with God, literally, "the way you should go."

And what is the advice? Don't be like a stubborn horse or mule who has to be turned with a bit and bridle to keep it on the proper course, he says (v. 9). Perhaps the psalmist has in mind the pain that accompanied his earlier period of stubborn silence, thinking of his suffering as the bit by which God had restrained his wandering and turned him back to the path of penitence.

The wicked suffer all manner of torments, he concludes, but those who trust in Yahweh find themselves surrounded by the steadfast love of God (v. 10). 

Those who experience the grace that comes through God's steadfast love are prepared to respond to the psalm's closing call to "Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart" (v. 11).

Think about your own experience. Have you ever known in your heart that things weren't right with God, but found yourself reluctant to do anything about it? You stood to sing joyful hymns, but you didn't feel any joy. You stumbled over the words to "Have thine own way" because you knew you were not following God's way. As a result, you experienced the spiritual dryness that the psalmist described in v. 4.

How did it turn out? Was there a time when the burden of guilt led you to turn away from your transgressions, iniquity, sin, or deceit (to use all of the psalmist's vocabulary for unfaithfulness) and pray for forgiveness? Did you sense the refreshing joy of forgiveness the psalmist talked about, so that you were able to worship more freely?

Or, do you still find yourself in the spiritual desert, knowing that the life-giving water of forgiveness is available, but still holding back? **BT**

Youth

March 2 — March 30, 2014

Youth Lessons by
David Cassidy
and online youth
teaching resources
(at nurturingfaith.net) by **Jeremy
Colliver** build off



of the Bible lessons by Tony Cartledge.

Youth lessons are made possible through the generous support of the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation.

The Dream

Psalm 2

We dream a lot. I'm not talking about the wild dreams we have while we sleep, but rather the dreams we have while sitting in class and staring into space. We dream about what we want, what would be our ideal life.

When we get lost in these dreams, we don't want to leave them since it means returning to reality. Perhaps the psalmist was writing about his dream life in Psalm 2.

The psalmist had reason to dream of the ideal because Psalm 2 was written as a new king was coming to power. The psalm was written for two groups of people: the people of Israel (who would hear it first-hand) and foreign leaders (who would hear it in reports of the coronation ceremony).

A transition in leadership was seen as a prime time to take advantage and attack a new ruler, so it was important that foreign leaders hear the message. The psalmist made it clear that aggression against the new king would be unwise because this was the land and people of God.

The king had not come to power on his own, but had been chosen by God. The king had a new relationship with God – “reborn” as a son of God. The people of Israel didn't see this as the king becoming divine, but rather as one who acted as God's representative on earth.

As we read this psalm today, we cannot help but read it in light of the life of Jesus. We understand it because we know Jesus is both the real and the ideal.

MARCH 2

Think About It:

Sometimes it is easier to live in a world where you only think about the ideal life and don't face what is really going on around you. How do you balance dreams and reality?

Make a Choice:

Our dreams can be selfish or they can reveal hope in a life lived for God. Which sort of dreams will you embrace?

Pray:

Thank God for the ability to envision a better world, and ask for the strength and wisdom to help make it a reality.

Happy Forgiveness

Psalm 32

“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven” appears in the first verse of Psalm 32. We can relate to the feeling of happiness that comes when someone else forgives us. But in spite of how good it feels to be forgiven, we may often find it hard to forgive others. Our trust has been broken, and our feelings may be bruised.

There are times when even thinking about the person who has hurt us sends shivers up our spine. These are the same feelings that make it hard to comprehend how God so freely forgives us when we repent, but that is exactly what the psalmist was writing about in Psalm 32.

Psalm 32 is a testimony to the forgiveness the psalmist received from God.

It begins much like many of the testimonies we hear today: with an admission of wrongdoing. Four times the psalmist mentions where he fell short, and in turn mentions the peace that comes with the release of these sins.

The psalmist also speaks to what it is like when sins aren't confessed and released: a sense of bottled-up guilt builds to the point of pain in need of relief. Guilt and regret can take a physical toll on our body, and the pain can be overwhelming. God's forgiveness allows the pain to be released and for us to start over and have a chance to do better.

Psalm 32 is really the testimony of a stubborn man freed by the forgiveness of a loving God. His story is told so that we might better understand this God who forgives.

MARCH 9

Think About It:

The psalmist doesn't give his testimony because it is a good story, but because he wants others to be freed from the pain that sin can cause. What might you be keeping bottled up that you need to release to God?

Make a Choice:

God gives us the choice to keep our sin and pain to ourselves or to let it go. Will you choose to hold on to your guilt or will you release it to God?

Pray:

God, we are grateful that your forgiveness frees us from guilt and regret so that we might be free to grow closer to you.

Help!

Psalm 121

You're stuck. You've tried everything — but you're still stuck. You have a helpless feeling because you don't know what else to do. You sigh and drop your shoulders. It's time to call for help!

The writer of Psalm 121 likely felt the same way. The first paragraph is a cry for help. The next line explains a feeling of helplessness that comes when we cannot see a solution or a path forward. The

problem is that you are the one trying to get out of the situation when you need help from God.

Psalm 121 tells of what happens when you start all of your statements with "God" instead of "you." "God, I'm stuck" is answered with "The Lord will keep your going out." "God, I am helpless" is answered with "Help comes from the Lord."

It is not a matter of "if" but "when" we cry out for help, and when we do, we know that God will help.

Think About It:

The psalmist knew that when he cried out for help that God would reply. What often holds us back from crying out for God's help?

Make a Choice:

Will you choose to keep trying yourself or will you seek God's help?

Pray:

God, give us the courage to ask for help when we need it.

Called Out

Psalm 95

Have you ever been part of something that was going so well you thought it couldn't get any better? Things are going your way, you are finding success, and then without warning, the bottom drops out and you are in free fall. It's shocking when things go wrong. This is the sort of feeling the psalmist is describing in Psalm 95.

In the first seven verses, the psalmist calls all to worship and to sing to the Lord. Joyful noises are made because God

is great. There is a reassurance that this magnificent God is ours and we are God's people.

Then the mood turns dark starting with the last part of verse 7: "O that today you would listen to his voice!" "Listen so your hearts aren't hardened ... your ancestors tested me ... I loathed that generation. They shall not enter my rest."

The warning is given, and the listeners have a choice: Will they choose to live in the promise of God, or will they harden their hearts like their ancestors?

Think About It:

God still seeks us and longs for our worship and obedience. How will you respond?

Make a Choice:

Sometimes we forget God is present with us. How will you remind yourself of God and offer worship this week?

Pray:

Offer a prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God, naming three persons or experiences for which you are most thankful.

Presence

Psalm 23

Who is the one person you know will be with you no matter what happens? This person has been with you in your times of greatest joy. This person was there before you even called for help and when you were scared or hurt. What is it about this person's presence that is so helpful? How does his or her ability to listen make a difference?

But there is another person who is

always with you, who knows of your darkest fears and comforts you when times turn tough. This "one" is the same for you and me and the writer of Psalm 23.

"The Lord is my shepherd." The Lord is there to offer care and guidance. This shepherd is the one whose presence brings peace in the stillness, whose lights guides our path, whose confidence shares our joy when things are going well, whose rod and staff are with us when life is at its worst. It is God who is with us through all of life.

Think About It:

God is present in your life. How comforting is it to know that God is always with you?

Make a Choice:

The Lord is your shepherd. How will you walk in God's path today?

Pray:

Give thanks to God for being beside you when you struggle and when you rejoice.

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 121

March 16, 2014

Preservation

All of us need help now and then. Our difficulty may be something as simple as opening a stubborn jar of jelly, as complex as a leaky roof, or as deep as an emotional crisis.

A stronger grip can handle the jar and a contractor can fix the roof, but what do we do when the whole world seems dark or our heart is in shreds? To whom do we turn?

We don't know what troubles, fears, or insecurities the author of Psalm 121 faced, but he or she was also looking for help.

The source of help (vv. 1-2)

Psalm 121 is called a "Song of Ascents," and may have been sung by pilgrims as they traveled to Jerusalem for one of the three annual festivals, or made the steep climb into the city itself. ↓

While our text came to be included in the collection of 15 psalms labeled as "Songs of Ascents" in Psalms 120-134, its origin could have been much earlier. The mention of David in the superscription might suggest that David wrote the psalm, but could just as easily mean that a psalm was dedicated to David.

Feeling a sense of need, the psalmist begins "I lift up my eyes to the hills: from where will my help come?" (v. 1). While a pilgrimage might have been an appropriate setting, the prayer could have been offered at any place, at any time.

The word for "hills" could also be translated as "mountains," but are these heights emblematic of inspiration or danger? Readers typically imagine the

Psalm 121:1 –
"I lift up my eyes to the hills –
from where will my help come?"



psalmist looking toward beautiful rolling hills or scenic mountains as a source of divine inspiration. Most mountains in Israel, however – especially those from Jerusalem and southward – are rugged and austere, fraught with danger for travelers.

Does the traveler feel fretful of the perils of his upcoming journey on a steep and hazardous road, or does she find in mountain majesty the assurance of divine aid for daily life?

Perhaps the distinction is not as important as the direction: the psalmist was looking up. Whether hills or mountains are in our line of sight or not, we often look heavenward, as the psalmist did, as we groan with sorrow or voice our prayer and wonder if there will be any help for us.

Looking up and offering a prayer implies a posture of hope, and posture alone can sometimes kick-start us on the path toward a better state of mind. This is especially true when we consciously look toward God, and that is precisely what the psalmist is doing, seeking help from "the LORD, who

made heaven and earth." ↓

We know, of course, that God is not directional. God is every bit as much beneath our feet as above our heads, but we seem to be hard-wired to think of God as being up, or out. When we look up to God, we get the physical benefits of an uplifting posture and the spiritual benefits of putting our trust and our hopes in God. ↓ ↓

When we worship together, singing praise in the face of troubles and trials, we feel less alone. We feel more hopeful. We feel stronger. We feel more confident that we can indeed make it another day, and another day, and another one after that. ↓

We believe there is a God, and that God is able to help.

The source of security (vv. 3-6)

We believe God is able to help, but how much practical help do we actually get? Can this psalm be believed?

On the surface, the text seems to promise that God will provide such perfect guidance and care that worshippers

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will suffer no harm or hardship in life, but we know from experience that this is manifestly not true. We all live in a world where bad things happen, and sometimes they happen to us.

Two observations can help us to appreciate the hopeful comfort of this psalm without either expecting too much of God or writing off the psalm as nothing more than wishful thinking.

The first thing is to note that the context of the psalm appears to be one of blessing or benediction. While the first two verses are written in the first person as the question and testimony of the worshiper, vv. 3-8 are written in the third person, as if someone else is responding to the question.

We might think of this psalm as a parting blessing shared by family or friends, but another likely scenario is to be found in worship, either at the beginning or the ending of a pilgrim festival. The congregation – or a representative worshiper – could chant or sing vv. 1-2, asking where one might find help while affirming that Yahweh is the creator of all things and thus the ultimate source of aid.

At that point a priest or chorus of temple singers might respond with vv. 3-8, offering words of blessing and benediction to those gathered. The verb forms in v. 3 can be read as either imperfect (“He will not let your foot be moved,” NRSV) or jussive (“May he not allow your foot to slip,” NET).

If we translate the verbs in v. 3 as jussives, the psalm takes on the character of a blessing or benediction, even if the remaining verbs are rendered as promises.

It seems best to recognize that the psalm has characteristics of both blessing and promise, with the power of the blessing lying in the belief that God can indeed provide the help we seek.

“May he not let your foot slip” is not just a wish for sure footing on mountain paths, though it may include that, but is also an idiom for standing firm in life. Few people relish uncertainty, feeling lost, alone, or at loose ends.

Those who trust Yahweh have a

“keeper” who never sleeps but constantly stands guard (v. 4). As a result, those who trust in Yahweh are never alone or unnoticed.

Take note of how often forms of the word “keep” appear in the psalm: vv. 3, 4, and 5 contain participles referring to “the one who keeps,” while vv. 7 and 8 contain three uses of the imperfect form of the verb: “The LORD will keep.”

The word translated “keep” is *shamar*, the same word used to describe a shepherd’s keeping of the sheep. It suggests watching over, guiding, protecting and being present with the flock.

Thus, “the LORD is your keeper” suggests a picture of one who keeps watch over the personified sheep of Israel or others who trust in Yahweh, one who stands ready at the right hand, where a favored counselor might be positioned.

Yahweh’s protection extends to shelter from both sun and moon. The dangers of too much sun are obvious. The ancients would not have understood the relationship between ultraviolet light and skin cancer, but they would have been familiar with the uncomfortable heat, desiccating effects, and blistering of skin that comes with too much sun.

But what about the moon? Modern people think nothing of walking beneath a full moon and may delight in it (unless they’re afraid of vampires), but many ancient peoples believed that too much exposure to moonlight could lead to disease or even madness: the term “moonstruck” originally had nothing to do with love.

The presence of Yahweh, according to the psalmist, would provide protection from the moon’s sinister rays, comforting pilgrims who might be camping out without a tent.

The source of life (vv. 7-8)

With vv. 7-8, the benediction shifts from physical dangers to spiritual ones.

“The LORD will keep you from all evil” (or “May the LORD keep you ...”) could be read in different ways. The word translated as “evil” could refer to personal wickedness, to the harmful results of wrongdoing, or to calamity in general.

We could use protection on all counts, hoping to avoid the temptation to choose evil in our own lives, as well as to escape harm that might come from others’ bad actions or from the dangerous vicissitudes of daily life.

A more positive way of affirming God’s care is found in the assurance that God “will keep your life.” Ancient Hebrew thought did not separate body and soul, as Greek philosophers did. The belief that God would keep one’s life included everything related to this life and to whatever lies beyond.

Many find special comfort in this verse. Even though we shouldn’t expect God to step in or send angels to protect us from all harm, we can be confident that God is present with us in all situations, even tragic ones.

The final verse summarizes all that has come before, a benedictory hope that “the LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore” (v. 8).

“Going out and coming in” serves as an idiom for all of life, whether traveling or at home, whether coming or going. The psalmist would not have understood the New Testament concept of heaven, but still trusted God to be both present and protective for as long as time shall last.

Modern readers may share the poet’s confident trust, and even more so in the light of the New Testament’s similar images of Christ as the Good Shepherd who watches his sheep and doesn’t allow any to become lost.

As the psalmist found strength in the multiplied assertions that God is a present “keeper” both day and night, both coming and going, so followers of Jesus may affirm with Paul that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7). **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 95

March 23, 2014

Worship

Perhaps you've had this experience: A worship service begins on a high note, with a scintillating introit, a powerful prayer, and meaningful hymns. The choir anthem engenders goose bumps and leaves the inspired congregation anxious for a word from God, but then the pastor embarks on a verbal rampage that chastises all present for their sins, and the air seems to go out of the room.

If you've been part of a service like that, you were not the first. Today's text records a psalm that also begins with a bang before lowering the boom. Verses 1-7c constitute a stirring three-part call to worship, followed by a stern sermon condemning those who fail to follow God faithfully (vv. 7d-11).^U

We don't like being called to account and challenged to change, but sometimes that is precisely what we need.

The king of all gods (vv. 1-5)

Psalm 95's jubilant opening serves as a metaphorical counterpart to Mary Poppins' happy advice that "a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down."^U

The call to worship includes three exhortations to "come" and worship (vv. 1, 2, 5), successively urging worshipers to move deeper into the temple complex. Though English translations obscure it, each call to "come" uses a different verb.

The first is an imperative of the verb *halak*, which basically means "to walk" (v. 1). The second is a cohortative form of *qadam*, meaning "to come before" or



Psalm 95:3 –
"For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods."

"to meet" (v. 2). The third "come" is an imperative form of the word *bo'*, which can mean "to go," "to come" or "to enter" (v. 6).

Whether poetic or intentional, the verbs suggest walking toward the sanctuary, coming into God's presence, and entering sacred space.

Perhaps we are to envision worshipers approaching the gates of the temple as a priest, temple singer, or other worship leader shouts "O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!" (NRSV).

The verbs suggest an exuberant, almost raucous service of singing and shouting praises to Yahweh, "the rock of our salvation." The word *tzur* usually refers to a large rock formation, usually associated with mountains, such as a prominent outcrop that might serve a defensive purpose.^U

The connection of "rock" and "deliverance" may recall Israel's covenant with God, made by the rocky slopes of Mt. Sinai, as well as God's provision of water from a rock during the wilderness wandering, which will be recalled later

in the psalm. Rock formations also connote thoughts of stability, security, or protection.

From a procession marked by loud and joyful singing, worshipers are called to "come into his presence with thanksgiving" and "make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise" (v. 2).

Why should one offer such ebullient praise? The psalmist tells us why: "For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods" (v. 3). God is large and in charge, the psalmist insists, the king of all other would-be gods.

It is Yahweh who's "got the whole world in his hands," in the words of a popular song from years ago. God not only holds the earth, from its deepest recesses to its loftiest heights, but is responsible for having created it to begin with, from expansive seas to fertile lands (vv. 4-5).^U

The shepherd of all people (vv. 6-7c)

A God who can create and sustain the earth that nurtures its inhabitants is surely worthy of praise, but there is more

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to be said: God not only made the earth, but the people who dwell on it. More pointedly, God created the special people called Israel.

We learn this from vv. 6-7c, which begins with the third invitation to “come,” and calls participants to “worship and bow down” before God: “let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!” (v. 6).

The word translated as “bow down” (NRSV) actually means to prostrate oneself. The setting calls for worshipers to fall face down before God, then shift to a kneeling position from which they would attend to the next stage of worship.

Modern believers who are inclined to complain that their church pews are uncomfortable would do well to consider what worship might be like if the sanctuary held no pews, and they were expected to line up and lie prostrate on the floor before rising to their knees for the next element of the service – a practice more common to mosques than to churches.

With v. 7, the imagery shifts to a more personal metaphor. Thinking of God as creator of the world and all who are in it should incite praise and worship, but God also relates to God’s people as a shepherd who cares for the flock.

“We are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand” brings God’s care full circle: as “the depths of the earth” are in God’s hand (v. 4), so are God’s people, like sheep in the hands of a capable shepherd. 📌

The trouble of all rebels (vv. 7d-11)

With the last line of v. 7, cozy thoughts of God as a loving shepherd disappear and worshipers suddenly find themselves on the defensive, as if the shepherd has launched into a heated sermon.

If we imagine that this psalm was used as the liturgy for a worship service, we might visualize a prophet or priest stepping forward to shift the focus of the service. Abruptly, the threefold call to come and worship gives way to a sharp plea: “O that today you would listen to his voice!” (NRSV).

In Hebrew, to truly listen to God’s voice is to obey. Thus, the NET translates it “Today, if only you would obey him!”

The preacher contrasts his plea for proper worship and obedience with Israel’s history of rebellion, giving special attention to the wilderness stories of thirst and complaint (Exod. 17:1-7, Num. 20:1-13). In both cases, a place was given the nickname “Meribah” (which means “contention” or “controversy”), and in Exod. 17:7 the name “Massah” (which means “testing”) was added. 📌

The notion of “testing” does not suggest a formal trial, as with Gideon’s fleece (Judg. 6:36-40), in which the people set conditions for God to prove something. Rather, when adversity arose, the people grumbled and groused, complaining that Moses had misled them and God had not taken care of them properly. Their constant caviling sparked a more informal but no less real testing of God’s patience.

We know what it is like to have balky children or obstreperous co-workers stretch our tolerance to the limit. If we’re honest, we’ll confess that we also, like Israel, have relied too much on divine indulgence and tried God’s patience through the years.

We can be grateful for the grace of God we’ve come to know in Christ. The psalmist, living within a covenant-based understanding of God’s relationship with Israel, saw harsh judgment in store for the hard-hearted.

Recalling Israel’s persistent rebellion in the wilderness, the psalmist spoke for God in declaring it to be so offensive that “For forty years I loathed that generation” because of their straying hearts and stubborn rejection of God’s teaching (v. 10a).

“Loathed” is a hard word that we don’t like to associate with God’s character: we’d rather speak of a loving God than a loathing one. The word does not suggest hatred of the people, however,

but revulsion toward their actions. God did not hate the Israelites, but was repulsed by their headstrong hearts and ungrateful attitudes. Thus, the NET translates “I was continually disgusted with that generation.”

“They do not regard my ways” (NRSV) could be translated more literally as, “they do not know my ways” (v. 10b). Presumably, one who knows God’s ways should follow them: the word “know” carries the connotation of personal experience. The charge that “they do not know my ways” is equivalent to “they do not obey my commands” (NET).

God’s response to the people’s recalcitrance in v. 11 echoes Moses’ sermon in Deut. 1:22-37, where he recalled that the people had claimed that God hated them and refused to trust God for victory in the Promised Land. As a result, Moses declared that God “was wrathful and swore: ‘Not one of these – not one of this evil generation – shall see the good land that I swore to give to your ancestors’” (Deut. 11:34-35).

By the time Psalm 95 was written, the earlier entry into the Promised Land had been extended to suggest a time of security and “rest” in Israel (e.g. 2 Sam. 7:10b-11 and 1 Chron. 23:25). As a result, the psalmist’s loose quotation declares “Therefore in my anger I swore, ‘They shall not enter my rest’” (v. 11).

What does this psalm suggest to Christian readers? Few of us expect or hope to live in the territory once promised to the Israelites, but we do long for peace in the present and rest in eternity – as we say in obituary language, “to enter into rest.”

An anonymous New Testament preacher drew heavily on this text in Hebrews 3-4, urging believers not to harden their hearts as Israel did, but to hear God’s voice and follow God’s way so they might enter God’s “Sabbath rest” – and to do it “today” (see especially Heb. 4:1-10). 📌

Moses, the psalmist, and the writer of Hebrews suggest a consistent message for us. Will we hear it, and follow? **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 23

March 30, 2014

Trust

If you could pick a hymn to be sung at your funeral, what would it be? Many of us would choose a song of trust and testimony that speaks of what we believe God has done for us. Perhaps no hymn is more beloved than “Amazing Grace.”

Psalm 23 is the “Amazing Grace” of the Psalter. It speaks of the psalmist’s trust and testimony, but it is also our story. Whether we find ourselves at rest beside the still water, following in the paths of righteousness, or struggling through valleys of deep shadow, this psalm has a word for us.

God as shepherd (vv. 1-4)

Israel’s background as a nomadic people makes it only natural that a Hebrew poet would picture God as a shepherd who cares for his sheep. Employing such a metaphor identifies with the sheep and implies a willingness to follow the shepherd’s leading.

In this relationship, the psalmist says, “I shall not want.” This is no promise that we will never want more than we have, but that we will not lack God’s care.

The psalmist knew that we all have work to do, for God does not rain manna from heaven when there is grain in the field. Yet, he also knew it was God who brought the sun and the rain to bear upon the grain. The Good Shepherd’s presence points us in ways that meet our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

But sheep need more than food and



Psalm 23:4 –
“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.”

water. Left to their own, sheep in the midst of a lush pasture might eat far more than is good for their health, even as humans may confuse meeting basic needs with acquiring luxuries.

Smart shepherds periodically direct the animals to lie down to chew their cud and promote complete digestion, because it’s good for their health.

It would be stretching it to suggest that God brings disease or tragedy to “make us lie down” and take stock of our lives, but God can use difficult times to help us reflect on and “digest” what has been happening in our lives, making us stronger and better people.

God not only provides food, water, and guidance, but also “restores my soul,” the psalmist said. The word for “restore” is an intensive form of the verb “to (re)turn,” and it means “to bring back.” The word translated as “soul” is the Hebrew *nephesh*, which speaks of one’s whole life, both physical and spiritual.

Sheep are among the world’s most stress-prone animals, often in need of

reassurance and encouragement. When a shepherd scratches the animal or calls it by name, the sheep’s sense of security and belonging increases. In such cases, the shepherd “refreshes the spirit” of the sheep.

In some cases, the shepherd must literally save the life of an animal, rescuing it from being lost, falling into danger, or rolling over and being “cast” so that it can’t get up.

Christians have no difficulty in thinking of ways in which God “restores our soul” or “brings back our life.” Christ, the good shepherd, saves us from those things that would “steal, and kill, and destroy” so that we “might have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

Sheep, left to their own devices, will inevitably wander – as humans also do. Isaiah once declared: “All of us, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (Isa. 53:6). Knowing the sheep need guidance, the shepherd leads them “in the right paths.”

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The Good Shepherd leads us properly “for his name’s sake,” because that reflects God’s nature. Humans cannot walk rightly in their own strength any more than sheep can always choose the correct pathway home. 📖

A notable shift takes place in v. 4. Instead of speaking about God as shepherd (“He leads me,” “He restores my soul”), the psalmist begins speaking to God: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me – your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

The author appears to know what a deep, dark valley looks like. This verse may be a personal testimony of bleak times he had known, and of the Good Shepherd’s comforting presence.

We must be careful not to divorce v. 4 entirely from the reference to following right paths in v. 3b, however. We may stray into a valley of deep darkness, but the right path may also involve shadowy or dangerous places. 📖

When Middle Eastern shepherds take their sheep to the summer grazing lands, they often go into the mountains, and there are no mountains without valleys, places that may be deep in shadow and frequented by wild animals or thieves. We also will walk in deep, dark valleys — all of us. 📖

Some interpreters make a great deal of the word “through,” as the psalmist said “Even though I walk through the darkest valley” (NRSV). The prepositional prefix used can indeed mean “through,” but it most commonly means “in” or “into.” There will be at least one valley we will walk into but not out. The psalmist is, after all, talking about “the valley of the shadow of death.” 📖

The important thing about this valley is not how deep or dark or dangerous it is. The significant thing is that in the midst of the dark valley, God is with us. “I fear no evil, for you are with me.” This is a strong, intensive phrase in Hebrew, reflecting God’s promises to the patriarchs. As Jacob undertook the dangerous journey to Haran, for example, Yahweh appeared to him and made this promise: “Know that I am with you

and will keep you wherever you go ...” (Gen. 28:15, cf. the promise to Isaac in Gen. 26:3).

There is great power in presence. The timorous sheep can feel safe, even in a dark and dangerous place, because the shepherd is near, and will not desert the flock. 📖

To describe his sense of security, the psalmist says “I will fear no evil.” The psalm does not promise that we will face no harm in this life, only that we need not fear it. The Lord who is present with us has ultimate power over all that is evil.

The shepherd analogy concludes with a reference to two potent sticks that shepherds typically carried. The “rod” was a club that could also be thrown to frighten away predators or to bring a straying sheep back into the safety of the group.

The “staff” calls to mind a tall walking stick the shepherd might lay against the side of a sheep to guide its direction, or use to scratch its stomach in a show of affection.

God’s rod and staff call to mind discipline, protection, and guidance. The beauty of nature, the love of friends, and the touch of the Spirit all speak of God’s presence.

God as host (vv. 5-6)

With v. 5, there is another dramatic shift. The author no longer speaks from the perspective of a sheep, but as a guest in God’s house, where Yahweh is no longer the ideal shepherd, but the perfect host. Preparing a table, anointing with oil, and filling the cup are all clear images of a joyful meal in which the psalmist finds himself an honored guest at the Lord’s table. 📖

The poet paints a remarkable picture. God has not only “set in order” a table before him, but has done so in the very presence of hostile opponents.

While the image is different, the verse carries forward the same themes found in the previous verses: God provides not only food and rest, but also protection.

The joy of this special fellowship is indicated by the reference to anointing with scented oil, a ceremony used for the anointing of kings or the welcoming of honored visitors. 📖 The final picture also echoes the theme. The psalmist’s joy, symbolized by an overflowing cup of wine, has filled him to the point of spiritual satiation.

Having reflected on God’s past provision and present fellowship, the psalmist turned toward the future, using an intriguing metaphor: the goodness and the steadfast love of God would “follow” him throughout his life.

This picture is comforting. Some interpreters like the impressive image of God going before the psalmist to the green pastures, walking beside him in the dark valley, and following behind him (in goodness and love) throughout life.

Another image is also appealing. The word translated “follow after me” derives from the verb that most commonly means “to pursue,” or “to chase.” God’s dependable goodness and steadfast love not only follow us into the future, but chase us into closer fellowship. 📖

Some writers interpret “house of the Lord” as a strict reference to the temple, suggesting that the psalmist intends to establish his permanent residence on Mt. Zion. This view misses the point. The poet is not only talking about a place, but also confidently expressing his hope of future fellowship with God, a fellowship based not on his own goodness but on the goodness and love of God.

This confidence in the future extends as far as the psalmist can imagine: forever (literally, “for the length of days”).

Psalms 23 begins and ends on a note of confident joy in the presence of God. This joy is not fleeting or temporary, like a butterfly that we see and delight in for a short time. The joy of God’s presence is always in pursuit of his people, and it lasts as long as time itself. **BT**

By R. Kirby Godsey

The people's pope vs. the corporate pope

Editor's note: Kirby Godsey's column, "Election of people's pope has significance for all Christians," appeared on page 38 of the May 2013 issue. This is a second column reflecting on the influence of Pope Francis.

The Roman Catholic Church stands among the world's largest multi-national corporations. The merchants of the Church are surely becoming uneasy, even alarmed, about the behavior of this new pope who clearly seems to side with the sinners who climb their way to sanctuaries in search of forgiveness rather than with the sanctified officiants who dispense forgiveness on God's behalf.

The merchants who collect the "first fruits" of the sinner's labors in order to make that sinner more worthy of God's mercy have to be boggled by Pope Francis who seems intent on feeding the poor and receiving young children and bestowing blessings on the unworthy even before they ask.

It is rather reminiscent of a zealot named Jesus who turned over the tables of the moneychangers and exclaimed to sinners, "Go, your sins are forgiven."

"Wait a minute," the merchants of the Church will want to say, "these folks have got to pay their dues first."

Rather like the Zealot, Pope Francis just keeps on choosing to forgive and ask questions later.



R. Kirby Godsey



Pope Francis passes a crucifix as he walks down steps during his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. Photo by Paul Haring, courtesy of Catholic News Service.

That ancient Zealot was not a natural friend to the corporate temple of his day that had become a distant relative of Judaism, and this new zealot is likely to find himself in more and more hot water with the Vatican's hierarchy. After all, they have to protect the traditions of this vast and rich corporate church even if it means continually having to reinterpret what the pope is saying and doing and sanitize his living out a radical grace with which the pope seems more at home.

The question is whether the Roman Church will be able to school the new pope in the proper rules of corporate church behavior. The rules include doctrine over devotion, repentance before forgiveness, giving before receiving, and bowing down before being lifted up.

Currently, the new pope seems to have it all wrong. He seems to be making the longings of the heart more important than the beliefs of the head. He seems to be extending God's

forgiveness as a way of empowering people to walk a better pathway.

He boldly receives little children in need of a hug instead of relishing the accolades of high office. He lifts people up before checking out whether they have bowed down. This behavior will never do.

This large corporate enterprise called the Roman Catholic Church has a problem on its hands. This new Pope Francis is behaving more like the people's pope than the pope of the corporation that elected him.

He is behaving more like that zealot we call Jesus than the high bishop who cloisters himself with mighty merchants of the corporation, preferring to engage the broken cries of ordinary people. Surely the Church will find a way to save itself from the simplicity of this gospel of loving without condition. **BT**

—R. Kirby Godsey is chancellor of Mercer University in Macon, Ga.

Soaring attendance at Vatican events since Pope Francis' election

By Eric J. Lyman
Religion News Service

ROME — Some 735,000 people attended Vatican events during each of the first nine months of Pope Francis' papacy, according to information released in January by the Holy See. It's the highest average recorded in recent years.

Attendance at Vatican events — which

includes Masses and other celebrations, but not tourism to St. Peter's Basilica or the Vatican Museums — usually surges during the first year of a new papacy or during special church celebrations.

But the 735,000 monthly attendance tally outpaced the average of around 500,000 visitors per month in 2005 after Pope Benedict XVI's election, or the average of 710,000 monthly visitors during the 2000 jubilee year.

The rising attendance at the Vatican shows no signs of abating: Attendance at Masses during the Christmas season set new records, the Italian press reported.

It may be due to the "Francis effect," which includes the soaring popularity in Italy for the name Francesco, the Italian version of the pontiff's name; increased tourism to Rome from the pope's native Argentina; and a rise in church attendance across Italy. **BT**

By David Cassady

It's in the grief basket

My father-in-law passed away on Dec. 4. While he had been ill for some time, we did not expect him to pass so soon.

Under the care of remarkable hospice and hospital staff, he died shortly after 7 a.m. The next few hours were filled with tears, hugs, phone calls, the kindness of our ministers and a bag of Egg McMuffins.

With our iPhone batteries failing, we returned home from the hospital early that afternoon. Sitting on our front porch was a large, wrapped basket.

The basket was part of the ministry of our church. A group of women who call themselves “Partners in Missions” (we just say “PIM”) assemble the grief baskets.

I'm told that they keep around six on hand. My wife, Rejeana, is part of PIM.

She stared at the porch and commented that she never considered we might one day be the recipient of one of the grief baskets she helped prepare.

I didn't pay any attention to the basket and had no clue what it contained. There were many things to do — it is amazing what has to be done ahead of a funeral.



The next day we were still reeling from the shock of the loss and realized we were going to have guests dropping by. People from church were bringing cakes, soups, sandwiches and other goodies, and relatives were traveling in ahead of the funeral.

Our house was selected as the family hub. So naturally I started a grocery list... “Honey, we're nearly out of toilet paper. I'll go to the store and get some.”

Rejeana was across the house and yelled, “No need — it's in the grief basket.”

Sure enough, there were several rolls of toilet paper (and they were good quality, not that thin stuff found in hotel bathrooms).

A couple of hours later I went to make a pot of coffee and noticed we were low on coffee and creamer.

“I'm still gonna have to make a store run — we need coffee and creamer,” I told Rejeana.

She just grinned and said, “Nope, it's in the grief basket.”

Sure enough, a bag of Starbucks Sumatra dark roast (yummy) and Coffee Mate creamer were in the basket, along with various sweeteners, paper plates, cups, plastic utensils and much more.

Over the next few days we received many guests, welcomed relatives, and shared tasty meals gifted to us by members of Highland Hills Baptist Church and Rejeana's coworkers at Wesleyan College.

If we found ourselves needing anything, a chorus of voices would proclaim, “It's in the grief basket!”

We all experience loss and grief at some point in our lives. There's little that can be said to help the pain. But with time, the comfort of family, church and friends — and a grief basket — we experience God's grace and care, and it is enough. **BT**

—David Cassady is president of the creative services firm Faithlab and a member of Highland Hills Baptist Church in Macon, Ga. This column first appeared as a blog at thefaitlab.info.

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Senior Pastor: First Baptist Church, Albemarle, N.C., is seeking a dynamic pastor with a missional mindset to partner with the congregation in its outreach mission and discipleship. We conduct primarily traditional worship services with some contemporary elements. FBC supports missions through the Stanly Baptist Association, Stanly Christian Ministry, the Baptist State and Southern Baptist conventions, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and the Woman's Missionary Union. We have a strong commitment to the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message. Our church ordains men and women as deacons, and both hold leadership positions. We average 150-175 in Sunday school and 200-225 in worship. We desire a pastor gifted in preaching, teaching and pastoral care, with a passion for reaching the lost and unchurched. The successful candidate should relate well to all age groups and have a seminary degree, with at least 5 years of successful pastoral experience preferred. Send letters of interest and résumés to PastorSearch@fbc-albemarle.org or to Pastor Search Committee, First Baptist Church, 202 N. 2nd St., Albemarle, NC 28001.

Senior Pastor: The First Baptist Church of Jasper, Ga., an active congregation located in a growing area about 50 miles north of Atlanta, is receiving résumés for senior pastor. This moderate church is aligned with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The congregation currently averages 200+ for Sunday worship, which is traditional in style. Interested persons should send a cover letter and résumé by March 15, 2014, to Chairperson, Pastor Search Committee, First Baptist Church, 198 E. Church St., Jasper, GA 30143

Senior Pastor: Crossroads Church, Sandy, Utah, is seeking a spiritual leader for its congregation and to faithfully live out our motto: "Love God, Love others and Serve the world." We are an independent Baptist church with a very involved congregation. Please visit our website, jesusandlife.com. Email résumés to infojesusandlife.com.

Pastor: Heritage Baptist Fellowship is a CBF church looking for a full-time pastor. We are located 45 miles north of Atlanta in Canton, Ga. Heritage is an inclusive congregation of 160

members with a strong presence in our community. We worship in a way that is Baptist by tradition and ecumenical in outlook. Interested candidates should submit résumés to Sharron Hunt at heritagesearch2013@comcast.net.

Minister of Music: First Baptist Church, Augusta, Ga., is seeking a qualified, spiritual and creative candidate for the full-time position of minister of music. First Baptist is a large faith community with a diverse and extensive music program. The minister of music is responsible for leading and directing all aspects of music within the church. This includes planning and leading worship services (traditional and contemporary), leadership for adult and children's choirs, instrumental music, selecting music content, organizing special music services, supervising music program staff, overseeing worship technology, and pastoral care. A seminary (or equivalent) degree is required. Experience in growing and maintaining an expansive music program is also preferred. Résumés will be accepted until April 1, and should be sent to dedemaddox@fbcaugusta.org or to Attention: Search Committee, First Baptist Church, P.O. Box 14489, Augusta, GA 30919.

Minister of Music and Worship: Wake Forest Baptist Church, a CBF-affiliated church in Wake Forest, N.C., is seeking a qualified, spiritual and passionate individual to serve as full-time minister of music and worship. Wake Forest Baptist Church is a dynamic multi-site congregation with a comprehensive music program. This position is responsible for direction of adult, youth, and children's choirs and provides direction for all handbell choirs and drama and art programs, along with worship and special music. This position assists the pastor, church staff, and volunteers in planning and conducting all traditional worship and special services, along with pastoral care. This position provides leadership for the Virginia Tull Music and Art Series, a ministry and outreach of the church. A bachelor's degree in a music discipline, a seminary degree, strong leadership and organizational skills are required. Résumés will be accepted until March 1, sent to wfbcpoision2014@gmail.com or to Search Committee, Wake Forest Baptist Church, 118 E. South Ave., Wake Forest, NC 27587. For detailed information regarding this position, please visit wakeforestbaptistchurch.org.

Associate Minister to Students: Greystone Baptist Church (greystonechurch.org), located in a diverse and growing area of North Raleigh, N.C., is prayerfully seeking a full-time associate minister to students for grade 6 through college. GBC is affiliated with the Raleigh Baptist Association, CBFNC, CBF National, and local ministries for mission opportunities for our 750+ members. Our church affirms men and women to serve in all roles within the church. We are seeking an outstanding relational minister, caring spiritual leader, and provocative teacher to lead a student ministry that will be the presence of Christ in the lives of our students and their families. This minister will engage parents and other adults to develop and sustain programs in missions, fellowship, and discipleship to build relationships and guide students along their personal faith journeys. Candidates should have earned a four-year degree from a college or university and a graduate degree from an accredited seminary or divinity school. Ordination and experience are preferred, as well as proficiency with social media and web-based technology. If you feel God is leading you to our church, please send a résumé by March 31 to Associate Minister to Students, 908 Tanworth Dr., Raleigh, NC 27615 or to GBCsearch2014@gmail.com.

In the Know

Clella Lee has joined the national Woman's Missionary Union staff as leadership consultant on the adult resource team. In this new role, she will create strategic plans for developing women in the area of leadership including an online leadership training program to further expand WMU's Christian Women's Leadership Center (CWLC). Lee previously served on the staff of Lafayette Baptist Church in Fayetteville, N.C., and at Campbell University Divinity School in Buies Creek, N.C. Her husband, Brian, serves as pastor of Shades Crest Baptist Church in Birmingham.

Earl Potts died on Christmas Day at age 93. He led Alabama Baptists from 1984 to 1990 when he retired. He was credited with helping turn back efforts by Baptist fundamentalists to cut funding to Samford University when the school voted to elect its own trustees. He wrote *By the Grace of God: Memoirs and Recollections of an Alabama Baptist*, and was co-founder of The Alabama Poverty Project.

Maria Stinnett is the associate pastor for children and communications at Third Baptist Church in St. Louis, Mo. **BT**



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What can we learn from America's cities?

By Bill Wilson

Imagine a community in steady decline. There are fewer and fewer people, and revenues are declining. Young families, especially, are missing.

There is a constant chorus of longing to return to the good old days of the past. A sense of dread about the future pervades, and hope seems in short supply. People become increasingly cynical and jaded about the future.

Without a compelling vision for the future, conflicts become normative, as people become self-protective and self-focused. Attempts to cast a fresh vision are met with indifference or outright resistance.

Leadership becomes opaque and keeps secrets about decisions and processes. A loosely organized group of those who have been alienated emerges as the installed leaders ostracize and demean those who disagree with them.

Public meetings dissolve into angry shouting matches that leave many with bruised feelings. Layoffs and bankruptcy often result.

Sound familiar?

What I have just described is a version of the decline and fall of several cities in the United States. In the last few years we have seen cities such as Birmingham, Detroit, Harrisburg (Penn.), and Stockton (Calif.) declare bankruptcy. Others (Cincinnati, San Diego, Honolulu, and Chicago) teeter on the edge.

Reading the detailed stories in each case is a demoralizing experience. While the causes and paths into failure are complex, the end results are a sad commentary on some of the great cities in our nation.

Interestingly, the scenario described above very closely mirrors a common story for some congregations of every stripe and flavor across America. Read through that description again and notice how much of that scenario relates directly to the conversations some congregational leaders are having.

Some project that as many as one in four

established congregations in America will not survive past 2030. The failure rate for new church plants is even higher.

Are there lessons for church leaders from the experiences of these cities?

There is learning for us in the failures, of course. However, I choose to focus my attention on a different group of cities. Think about some of the cities that have undergone massive and challenging shifts in industry, production, or population and emerged stronger and more vibrant.

Some that come to mind include Pittsburg, Penn., Greenville, S.C., and Raleigh N.C.

I recently heard someone make a quick comparison between the fate of Detroit and Pittsburgh. Both faced the collapse of the primary employment base (automobiles in Detroit and steel in Pittsburgh). We know the sad state of Detroit, but would do well to pay attention to the signs of emerging life in Pittsburgh.

Retooling and re-focusing became the normal operating procedure for the city. The population has stabilized, and the city was recently named one of the world's most livable cities.

Greenville faced a similar challenge when the textile industry collapsed in the last quarter of the 20th century. Investing in new foreign industries (BMW, Michelin, etc.), the local economy stabilized and vibrant renewal began in the downtown area.

Raleigh's Research Triangle has revolutionized the city and surrounding area as technology and innovation now define the city internationally.

What are lessons congregations might glean from the experiences of these and other cities? Here are a few:

- The future is going to be different than the past. The sooner we accept that and embrace it, the more likely we are to survive and thrive.
- Vision is essential. Leaders must be able to see beyond immediate needs and demands.
- Sacrifice is normative. Each success story is marked by the leadership and general population being willing to make sacrifices. Sometimes it was financial, sometimes it was convenience, and sometimes it was a willingness to forsake safety for the unknown.
- The future visioning process never ends. People describing and dreaming about what is yet to come mark every success story.
- Collaboration is more than a nice-sounding word. Truly valuing and working with others marks these successes.
- Homogeneous communities learn to embrace the idea that differences are a gift.

As interesting as it might be to think about lessons from American cities, our best lessons come from the God of the Bible and the kingdom described in the life of Jesus. When we find ourselves in a season of challenge, remember that each of the six lessons above is actually a principle from the pages of scripture.

God's people have always known that following Christ demands hope, vision, sacrifice, consistency, community and unity.

When facing an uncertain future, church leaders can look around for examples of others who have met challenges and turned them into opportunities for success. Then, in humble devotion to the God of possibilities, go and do likewise. **BT**

—Bill Wilson is director of The Center for Healthy Churches.



God's people have always known that following Christ demands hope, vision, sacrifice, consistency, community and unity.

Ring the bell for **Father O'Reilly**

Atlanta churches honor the priest who saved their meetinghouses

ATLANTA — Could a 33-year-old priest have won a showdown with Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman? Why did that same general unleash his cannons on the steeple of the Baptist church he would eventually pledge not to burn?

Did the Catholic body at the center of all this action not know for more than 100 years that its young hero had been entombed right beneath its floor?

Tales such as these — with a dash of Margaret Mitchell and *Gone With the Wind* thrown in — swirled on Sunday, Nov. 17, 2013 in downtown Atlanta.

REMEMBERING

Billed as the city's most historic church, the Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception hosted a Mass to begin a yearlong celebration. Worshippers packed the sanctuary of Father O'Reilly's former parish to remember.

Year 2014 marks 150 years since Father Thomas O'Reilly persuaded Sherman to spare his church and others nearby.

Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory, who led the recent Mass, recalled those pivotal events. And in his homily, he reminded worshippers that the Church has long held a sacred responsibility to serve and to speak.

The connection with Civil War events lives on in the ecumenical community that shares this remarkable story at their roots.

Today, the Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception stands on the same site it occupied then. The four other congregations whose buildings were spared are Second Baptist (now Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church), Trinity United Methodist, Central Presbyterian and the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Philip.

All are still active congregations in the city. Representatives from each church, along with various Irish and Catholic bodies, still gather each March to lay a wreath at a monument downtown that pays tribute to Father O'Reilly.



A century and a half ago, this bell from Atlanta's Second Baptist Church warned citizens of the invasion of Sherman's army. Photo by Charles Qualls.

BEYOND WAR

A century and a half ago, after Atlanta's occupation by Union forces had begun, O'Reilly communicated Sherman's well-known plans to his church leadership. These leaders assured O'Reilly that the army burning down the local parish would be viewed as something beyond an act of war.

Instead, the larger Catholic body would view any soldier's participation as an act against God, they said. This led O'Reilly to

seek consideration for saving their place of worship.

At first, the Union general brushed aside the priest's request and assured the young minister that his intent was to follow orders: Atlanta was to be burned in its entirety.

Undaunted, O'Reilly pointed out to Sherman that there were a large number of Irish-Catholics in the Union Army. The priest suggested that such soldiers were considering mutiny rather than subject themselves to excommunication from their larger church body.



While historians have debated this legend's veracity, there does seem to be some substance to O'Reilly's showdown with the general. One source substantiates favor the priest had curried among the Union soldiers during the months of the occupation.

Some from the northern army even took to guarding the priest's house from fire. A recent study of the demographics in General Sherman's army in Atlanta shows a disproportionately large presence of Irish-Catholics among the ranks.

Nurse Mary A.H. Gay's diary sheds some light on the times. She observed that Father O'Reilly had served with dedication as a chaplain among soldiers from both armies.

She tells of turning over one dying soldier to Father O'Reilly, and noting that the priest and soldier shared "... a mystic connection" owing to his time among them already.

For several weeks Sherman's army occupied the Catholic parish as the only hospital in Atlanta proper. As the wounded came in, Father O'Reilly turned his ministry toward the needs of this new congregation of sorts.

STILL STANDING

General W.P. Howard, commander of the Georgia Militia, wrote a letter to then Gov. Joseph E. Brown. He reported: "The City Hall is damaged, but not burned. The Second Baptist, Second Presbyterian, Trinity Methodist and Catholic churches ... are safe, all attributable to Father O'Reilly...."

As a result, the various church facilities were placed under guard by the federal army, but used by Sherman for his purposes. Immaculate Conception



Plaques at Atlanta's Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church and the Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception recall shared history from the Civil War era. Also, a monument stands in downtown Atlanta to honor heroic priest Thomas O'Reilly who convinced Sherman to spare five houses of worship.

became a hospital.

St. Philips was turned into a horse stable, while Central Presbyterian became a slaughterhouse for livestock. Only Second Baptist's sanctuary was kept for use as a worship space.

Today, Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church occupies a different building than in the Civil War era. However, the bell that hung in the steeple made the move up Peachtree Road in the 1930s and still rings in the church today.

That bell was the sound that originally rang out warning to Atlantans that Sherman's invading army had arrived. Although he would relent to spare the Second Baptist church building and others from fire, Sherman did on that day unleash his cannons in an effort to silence the noise.

MORE LIGHT

Historical evidence is limited. Second Baptist Church records are silent from July 1864 until April 1865. This is owing to the evacuation of members and the ceased use of the building for congregational purposes in that time.

However, there is a very telling diary entry. S.P. Richards served the church as clerk for 36 years. In his personal journal, he recorded that when the federal forces were shelling the church building, presumably to silence the warning bell, a shell was lobbed through one of the windows.

It landed in the pew Richards was accustomed to occupying at Sunday services. Apparently no notable damage was sustained. The building was then used as a storehouse for dry goods and furniture for the months of occupation.



Father O'Reilly

A more recent happening sheds more light. The Fulton County Sheriff's Department occupies a building adjacent to the old Second Baptist site. In 2003, a renovation of the building was called to a halt.

A bomb squad was brought in because unexploded Civil War era ordinance had been found buried in the dirt beneath the basement. The randomness of the explosives suggested landing rather than storage — lending credence to the notion that Sherman's cannons had fired on the church's bell tower but had not hit their target.

TALES & TOLLS

Catholic leaders who led the recent Mass shared another story of interest. The movie version of *Gone With the Wind* portrays a visit to the military hospital.

Author Margaret Mitchell grew up Catholic, and is said to have attended the Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. As the only hospital in town during the war, the assumption is that use of her own church is what inspired the inclusion of a military hospital in her story.

Monsignor Henry Gracz and a host of other parish leaders were gracious in their hosting. Gracz, the priest today at the Catholic Shrine, demonstrated that the sacred call to serve goes on.

The altar area overflowed with bags of food for the hungry brought by parish members. Gracz noted that, 150 years later, the ethnically diverse congregation still provides sanctuary for worship and tangible provision for ministry.

Following the service, the Shrine held a reception in its basement fellowship hall. Nearby, visitors could make the pilgrimage to Father O'Reilly's crypt.

The church's history indicates that modern parishioners did not realize that their young hero had been buried underneath the church. He died of illness at the tragic age of just 41 years.

Monsignor Gracz said, with a twinkle, "The history says the church only discovered his crypt in 1982 as they rebuilt from a fire. But, the locals knew all along he was buried here. Just something else to keep the intrigue alive."

Part of the charm to these various legends is the banter between those who believe them and those who do not. **BT**

—Charles Qualls is associate pastor of Atlanta's Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church.

BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

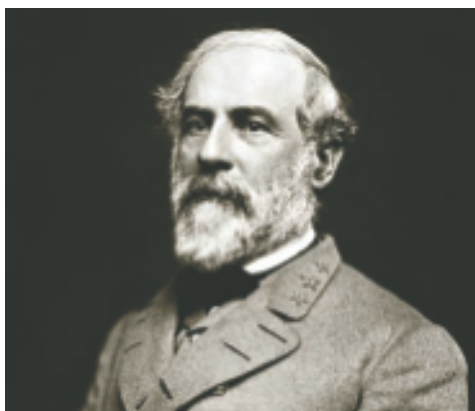
Due to winter conditions, military activity is largely confined to the Deep South this month. Federal forces seize the Mississippi cities of Jackson and Meridian, as well as Jacksonville, Fla. Of little consolation to the south are Confederate victories in minor skirmishes in both states as well as at Dalton, Ga. In each instance Union forces are only temporarily stymied. In southwest Georgia, Andersonville Prison opens, a prison destined to become infamous for the harsh treatment of Union prisoners.

Battlefield despair aside, white Southern Baptists rejoice when Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee suspends military drills and inspections in his army during Sunday morning worship time. The order comes in the midst of ongoing revivals in the Confederate camps. Baptists of the Confederacy hope that the growing number of chapels being constructed in winter camps will lead to battlefield successes in the spring and summer.

Many Southern Baptists, nonetheless, lament the acute shortage of Baptist chaplains in Confederate ranks, often chastising churches and pastors for failing to invest time and effort into evangelizing southern soldiers. In reality, money is scarce and Baptists are the one denomination refusing government pay for military chaplains.

Somewhat perversely, the saving of souls is juxtaposed against a marked increase in the execution of Confederate deserters in an effort to stem the growing tide of desertions. Compounding the problem is the fact that U.S. President Abraham Lincoln's offer of pardon to southerners who pledge loyalty to the Union has proven surprisingly popular in much of the South.

Especially unappreciated by white Baptists of the South are efforts by Northern Baptists



150 YEARS AGO

February 1864

to place northern ministers in vacated southern pulpits. "We are not conquered yet," warns one Southern Baptist editorial, referring to their northern brethren as robbers who are not prepared to "pay the price of blood necessary to place the American Baptist Home Mission Society in possession" of southern churches.

Meanwhile, the United States Congress continues inching toward the abolition of slavery nationally and permanently, of which many Baptists of the North approve. This month the Senate takes up consideration of a proposed constitutional amendment:

All persons are equal before the law, so that no person can hold another as a slave; and the Congress shall have power to make all laws necessary and proper to carry this declaration into effect everywhere in the United States.

The wording changes in the months ahead, ultimately leading to the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The Confederacy, however, is determined to resist emancipation. The Southern Baptist press cheers this month when Confederate President Jefferson Davis calls the war to preserve white supremacy and African slavery "our holy struggle for liberty and independence" that will be won "under Divine Providence."

Southern whites are heartened when northern prejudices against racially-mixed marriages take center stage in Washington, D.C. this month. Samuel Sullivan Cox, a Baptist layman and Democratic congressman from Ohio, accuses the Republican Party of advocating miscegenation, a practice of which northern whites widely disapprove. The furor over mixed marriages continues into the summer, imperiling Lincoln's hope for re-election. Not until after Lincoln wins the White House for a second time in November is the miscegenation scandal proven to be a hoax perpetuated by democratic newspapermen, of which congressman Cox had been an unwilling dupe.

Amidst the ugliness of war and politics, beautiful things yet happen. In the North, Baptist musician William Batchelder Bradbury (author of the tunes to such popular hymns as "Jesus Loves Me," "He Leadeth Me" and "Just As I Am") meets and inspires blind poet Fanny J. Crosby to write songs. At Bradbury's insistence, Crosby writes her first song, a patriotic Civil War piece titled "There Is a Sound Among the Forest Trees." Bradbury also asks Crosby to write a hymn. In response she writes "Bright Home Above," giving it to Bradbury as a gift. Thus begins Crosby's amazing musical career, during which time she writes over 9,000 songs.

Finally, black Baptists are no bit players in the drama this month. Hundreds of black slaves escape to freedom. Thousands of former slaves now serve in the United States Army, fighting for freedom for their yet enslaved brothers and sisters. New, free black Baptist congregations are established almost weekly, both in the North and the South.

As the winter wanes with the close of the month, the impending spring promises new advances in the march for freedom for all. **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.

EXPLORING THE 'OTHER' BAPTISTS

JUNE 4-6, 2014

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Association of Librarians and Archivists of Baptist Institutions



Information: www.baptisthistory.org/bhhs/conferences.html

Lillian Daniel: Reclaiming the practice of testimony

She's been described as edgy, pushy, tough-minded, biting, brutally honest, unique, charming, witty, provoking, earthy, sly and almost irreverent. "ADHD" may also apply because of the way she flits from one thought to another — although she eventually circles back to her original thought to deliver a powerful punch.

Lillian Daniel's audience of mainly ministers at the recent Mercer Preaching Consultation witnessed many of these characteristics, but also experienced her infectious enthusiasm for and devotion to the ministry as she shared sincerely and perceptively as one of them.

One who unapologetically defends the type of community that only the church can provide, Daniel has been the pastor of First Congregational Church in Glen Ellyn, Ill., since 2004, a calling to which she gives priority — often turning down speaking invitations. She values highly the importance of preaching and testimony and teaching that invite honest and open conversation about God, conversation that relates to and interprets the culture without "dumbing down" religion.

Although Daniel is known to a younger generation as an authority on preaching — she has taught at Yale Divinity School, Chicago Theological Seminary and the University of Chicago Divinity School, and has preached or lectured at the National Cathedral, Duke Chapel and the Festival of Homiletics — in her younger years, Daniel would not have



Why I preach:

To redeem bad experiences
 To see God in life and in reflection
 To stay in ministry
 To pay attention
 To improve
 To keep from talking
 To avoid having the same conversation
 To get rid of "stuff"
 To start or change conversation
 To make people laugh
 To increase the discipline of reading, especially the Bible
 To remember
 To confess/repent
 ... Because I have something to say and "I love Jesus so much I'm willing to accept a salary!"

—Lillian Daniel

been a likely candidate for pastoral ministry. In fact, the Episcopal Church of her younger years rejected her call to preach, and instead suggested she work in a non-profit setting where her personality would be better tolerated. She heeded that advice, but while in that employment, some student workers detected her strong sense of call and encouraged her to follow it to divinity school, saying that "maybe you're in the wrong church."

Daniel admitted to the preacher types gathered at the relaxed Atlantic coast setting that her journey since that time has not been without its challenges — and that she almost left the ministry early on. Nevertheless, she feels committed to what she labels in one of her books as this "odd and wondrous calling." She has found her voice especially in the task of preaching.

A vital element of preaching, Daniel said, is that of testimony. Although she acknowledged the merits of head thought touted by the "Chicago school" — translation, explanation, argument, defense, and relevancy — her ideas on preaching are more in keeping with the "Yale school" that values the rigors of head knowledge but also emphasizes the role of the heart and experience.

These personal and relational elements figure prominently in Daniel's case for the importance of testimony in preaching. She said preaching doesn't matter if people can't express

their beliefs to others. The medium of delivery is not important, but rather the gospel is. The preacher's essential task is to create tension: "Take large bills and break them into small change you can use." Therefore, "we need to say something different" — using our own voice and creativity.

Daniel offered these suggestions for using testimony in preaching:

- If the story is more memorable than the scripture or point of the sermon, omit it.
- Keep mystery in the sermon; hang anxiety out and don't resolve it.
- Throw out "Let us," "May we" and other communal phrases.
- Acknowledge that you are expressing your belief and it may not always correspond with the Spirit's voice.
- Don't assume "theological unanimity."
- Claim something without having to back it up.
- Be honest and authentic, but at an appropriate time.
- "Finish cooking" (i.e., don't leave hearers wondering how you're doing after telling an honest story).

In addition to stressing the value of testimony in preaching, Daniel called on those ministers present to nurture testimony within their laity. Asking for responses to a simple question such as "How and where do you experience God in our worship?" can be a starting point. She challenged them to examine what "priesthood of the believer" actually means in their individual congregations. What roles do the laity play? Being a calling/teaching congregation that offers ministry opportunities for young people and others can result in well-trained church leaders and potential professional ministers who will have a vital story to share. **BT**

—Lillian Daniel has served as an editor and/or contributor to *Christian Century*, *Leadership Journal*, *The Huffington Post*, *Christianity Today*, *Books and Culture*, *The Journal for Preachers*, and *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. She is the author of three books: *Tell It Like It Is: The Practice of Testimony* (The Alban Institute, 2006); *This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers* (Eerdmans, 2009); and *When "Spiritual but Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church* (Jericho Books, 2013).

By John Murawski, RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

The **10** most intriguing religion books of **2013**

Jesus, Paul, food, charity and prayer were just some of the areas examined in this year's crop of books under the broad heading of religion. Some of these titles rank at the top of the year's best books, period.

Others barely registered in the mainstream press, but are lavishly praised in their own fields. Here's Religion News Service's list of last year's most interesting religion books, numbered but not ranked.

1. *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*, by Christian Wiman

When he learned he had a rare form of cancer at age 39, Wiman was the editor of *Poetry* magazine, perched atop the nation's most prestigious journal of verse. He was also a lapsed Christian whose brush with mortality triggered a return to belief, surrendering to its depth, mystery and wonderment.

His poetic reflections on the redemptive power of art and faith are moving and evocative, yet unsparingly harsh on atheist intellectuals, self-righteous fundamentalists, and his peers: professional poets preening with the pride of peacocks.

Addressing suffering and sorrow through the prism of Christianity, Wiman's ruminations glow with the "burn of being," his term for pervasive spiritual longing in a world of materialism, violence and loss.

"Please read this book," urged journalist Andrew Sullivan, of *The Dish* blog, in a typically glowing review. "It truly is an essential book for our times."

2. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, by N.T. Wright

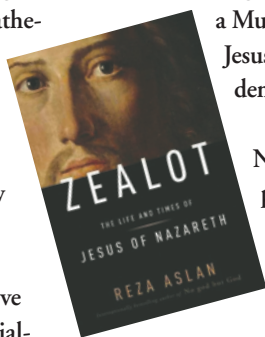
One of the most prolific Christian theologians of our time lays out his case for Paul as a thinker on par with Aristotle and Plato. Clocking in at nearly 1,700 pages, including 70 just for the footnotes, this tome has been hailed as "magisterial" and is already being

held up as the standard reference work on Christianity's first and, arguably foremost, theologian.

Wright's vigorous prose provides an engaging introduction to the Judaism and Christianity of the first century. Wright contends that Paul's writings are to be understood as those of a devout Jew who reworks Jewish redemptive theology around the figure of Jesus in the furtherance of "getting the Creation project back on track."

3. *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, by Reza Aslan

If not for Aslan's fortuitous Fox News interview — in which the creative writing professor was badgered on national TV to explain why a Muslim would write a book about Jesus — *Zealot* might not have made a dent in the public consciousness.



Aslan's premise, that Jesus of Nazareth preached socialism and plotted sedition against the Roman Empire, is not exactly original, and depends on a selective reading of the Gospels. But the YouTube clip of the Fox interview went viral and catapulted Aslan's book into the best-seller stratosphere.

Vivid and cinematic, *Zealot* offers a much-needed antidote to the ethnically sanitized, anodyne Jesus.

4. *A Prayer Journal*, by Flannery O'Connor

Penned nearly 80 years ago, these private journal entries have found the light of day thanks to a biographer's diligent archival rummaging.

The secular literati are greeting this slender volume of personal meditations as revelatory; ordinary readers simply respond

to O'Connor's intimacy, openheartedness and humor.

The pages reveal O'Connor, then in her early 20s and attending the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop in 1946-47, pouring out her soul to God in a manner that is both naive and brilliant. She appeals to God directly as her confidant and confessor about her weakness for "intellectual quackery," her burning ambition to achieve literary greatness, and her all-too-human foibles.

The lifelong Catholic writer would become a pillar of Southern American literature, and the foundations of her artistic vision are already evident here.

5. *Coffee with Jesus*, by David Wilkie

The cheeky, online comic strip that has gained a cult audience of 40,000-plus followers in less than three years is now ready to burst upon the world as a giftable, brightly hued coffee-table book.

Jesus is the star of the show here, tossing sage and cryptic comebacks to goofball stock characters. Bob, hater of gays, addresses the coffee-sipping messiah as "the J-Man." Lisa, who swoons at the thought of owning a Lexus, asks Jesus if the Antichrist is a Jew.

It doesn't end there: Complacent liberal posturing comes in for a drubbing, too.

It's no wonder the strip's caffeinated savior says he's often tempted to take his own name in vain. The wit is barbed, theology surprisingly relevant, and the overall effect highly addictive.

6. *God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America*, by Larry Eskridge

The nearly forgotten chapter of America's Christian hippie revival comes to life in this history of the Jesus People movement, a fusion

of utopian counterculture and soul-saving urgency.

Eskridge, a historian of evangelicalism, contends that the movement, born in 1967 in San Francisco's legendary Haight-Ashbury district, laid the groundwork for the Christian music industry and eventual evangelical embrace of pop culture.

This hippie paradise is threatened by a wolfish rival, the Children of God, an authoritarian sect that ensnares wayward Jesus People. The Jesus People phenomenon spread like blazes throughout the country, was captured on TV documentaries and made the cover of *Time* magazine, then fizzled out in the early 1970s as its members burned out, grew up and tuned back in.

7. *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief*, by Lawrence Wright

Show trials, forced confessions, penal colonies, re-education camps, humiliation rituals, secrecy and spying are the sacraments observed by the "church" of Scientology, according to Wright, a *New Yorker* staff writer who previously won a Pulitzer Prize for his penetrating look into another secretive movement, al-Qaida.

This time, Wright sets out to answer a question that had long mystified him: Why would reasonable people, especially Hollywood celebrities like Tom Cruise and John Travolta, risk their reputations and surrender their lives to a stigmatized, totalitarian regime?

He soon learned the secret: It's easy to get in, almost impossible to leave.

The lawsuit-happy organization's undercover goons tailed Wright as he interviewed Scientology defectors, then pre-empted the release of Wright's book by airing an ad during

the 2013 Super Bowl.

The book's title, *Going Clear*, refers to a stage of Scientological enlightenment, wherein "thetans" (i.e., earthlings) empty their minds of self-defeating "engrams" (suppressed memories from previous lives).

8. *Eat with Joy: Redeeming God's Gift of Food*, by Rachel Marie Stone

The moral imperative of food sustainability has turned many a well-intentioned dining companion into a locavore-vegan-forager scold obsessed with ritual purity at the expense of pleasure.

From the Christian perspective, eating biblically should weigh not only the ethical and environmental implications of food production methods, but also such elements as generosity, friendship, gratitude and worship.

Stone, a contributor to *Christianity Today's* Her.meneutics blog, presents a compelling case to tone down foodie righteousness with common sense and awe of the sacred. Confessing to personal struggles with eating disorders, Stone ends each chapter with lyrical prayers drawn from around the world.

"Better the occasional meal shared with friends at McDonald's than organic salad in bitter isolation," Stone admonishes the new dietary purists.

9. *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition*, by Gary Anderson

Anderson's study examines the concept of voluntary good works, almsgiving and philanthropy, which were not exalted in Greco-Roman culture but became paramount for Jews and Christians.

Though sometimes trivialized as punching an admission ticket to the afterlife, charity was a holy commandment to the Jews, whose ancient sages devised an image of storing up a treasury in heaven. Aiding those in need became understood as making a loan to God, or an investment in the Creation, and trusting in Providence that the good deed would be redeemed at a later time.

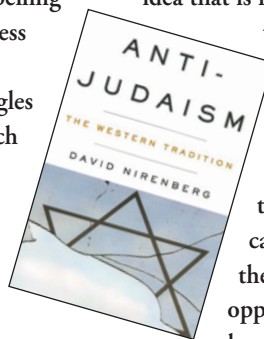
Anderson previously established his bona fides with *Sin: A History* (2009), and in *Charity* delivers a worthy sequel that traces the origins of a single aspect of belief that remains central in religious worship today.

10. *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, by David Nirenberg

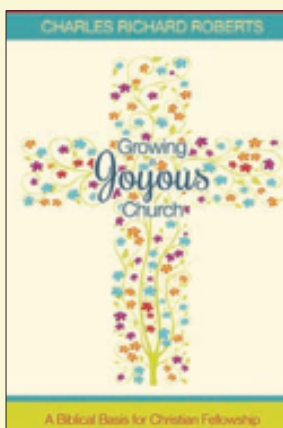
Astonishing, lucid, searing, brilliant, and shocking are the terms reviewers have used to describe this sweeping historical analysis of an idea that is foundational to Western civilization and has proven impossible to eradicate.

Nirenberg's opus is not a catalog of injustices and crimes against Jews, though he cites more than enough examples to make his case; it is a comprehensive study of the ways the idea of Judaism, and opposition thereto, has undergirded theological, intellectual and political discourse for more than two millennia.

Anti-Semitism, a close cousin, requires real Jews for scapegoating, Nirenberg contends, but Anti-Judaism is a much broader pathology: wielded by Christians, Muslims, artists, philosophers, political theorists — and occasionally by Jews themselves — to describe any kind of obstinacy, superstition, literalism and deviancy that is worthy of nothing less than contempt and annihilation. **BT**



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Divine devices or digital distractions?

Alan Rudnick never was a fan of bringing phones into church sanctuaries and never did so himself — until about a year ago. That's when he discovered bona fide uses for electronic devices during worship services at First Baptist Church of Ballston Spa, N.Y., where he is the pastor:

- Capture and upload to the Internet video of visiting missionaries.
- Allow a worshipper to post a quotation from a sermon that struck home.
- Multiply the number of people able to fellowship with the community, albeit electronically.

So, at the Ballston Spa church, the use of electronic devices not only is allowed, but also encouraged.

"I'm a modern person with a cell phone, and I get the whole tech thing," the American Baptist minister said. "I figured out there were enough people in our congregation who are going to connect with what I am doing and be able to interact."

Mobile phone statistics indicate their use in cars, planes and houses of worship is all but inevitable.

"Fully 91 percent of American adults own a cell phone, and many use the devices for much more than phone calls," according to a September 2013 study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

Other uses include text messaging (81 percent), Internet access (60 percent), sending and receiving e-mail (52 percent) and downloading apps (50 percent), the survey found.

More research from the Pew project found a generational factor to be considered in any policies around cell phones and smartphones. A previous study showed 49 percent of Americans ages 18 to 24 own smartphones, and it increases to 58 percent for Americans ages 25 to 34.

People bothered by the existence of cell phones in the pews must realize there's really no going back, said South Carolina-based church consultant George Bullard. Churches with no-cell-phone policies "have their head in the sand," he said.



It's not about being techy for the sake of being techy, said Bullard, president of the Columbia Partnership. Some people use their phones or tablets to give an offering online and will do so during the normal collection time.

"It allows them to actively participate in the offering, even though they are not going to put anything in the offering plate," he said.

Many worshippers use mobile phones and tablets to access Bible apps to follow along with Scripture readings. Some use the devices to take notes on the sermon.

Churches have discovered other practical uses. Church nurseries no longer need to issue pagers to parents but simply text them on their cell phones when issues arise.

Increasingly, preachers urge members to post their whereabouts and meaningful sermon passages to social media, Bullard said.

"I have suggested there ought to be a 17-year-old kid in the control booth texting the pastor's sermon," Bullard added. "And I would say, 'Everybody get out your phone and check in that you're here in worship.'"

Churches' resistance to the use of smartphones is declining. Consider Westminster Presbyterian Church in Burbank, Calif., which posted a video in 2011 prohibiting electronic devices in services. Pastor Paul Clairville said the tongue-in-cheek video is meant as a friendly reminder to prevent ringers from interrupting the flow of services — not

dissuade them from using devices to interact with worship.

"The cell phone has become absolutely ubiquitous," he said. "It's one of those things we have to be cognizant of."

People often post to the church Facebook page during worship, and younger people, especially, are capable of using the devices and following readings and sermons simultaneously.

"With cell phones, we are extending the community — assuming it's not just surfing the Net," Clairville said.

As the owner and publisher of a website and magazine for families, Colleen Pierre relies heavily on her gadgets and social media to connect with community leaders, readers, contributors and others to keep her business going. She's glad her church and pastor take the same approach in reaching out to members and potential members.

So for Pierre, 32, sitting in the pew at First Baptist Church of Ballston Spa, means taking pictures or video now and then or posting updates on social media. She's even been known to whip the phone out while singing in the choir.

"I want my friends to know what the church means to me and that it's a strong part of my value system," said the mother of two, who runs the Saratoga Mama online and print publication.

Rudnick hasn't received many complaints since his church crossed the digital divide by embracing smartphones and other devices in worship. Nor is he concerned about the possibility that some people in the pews may be playing games, texting friends or sending e-mails about non-church topics.

Christians long have used pencil and paper to jot down grocery lists and doodle during sermons, he said. Churchgoers also have been known to sleep through services — long before there were smartphones to distract them.

Either way, the benefits outweigh any negatives, Rudnick said.

"We have to remember that, as long as we don't make it a gimmick, it's just another form of communicating the gospel and interacting with the gospel," he said. **BT**

—Jeff Brumley is assistant editor of *Associated Baptist Press*.

Baptist of the Year

Ethics group honors **Linda Leathers** of The Next Door

NASHVILLE — EthicsDaily.com chose Linda Leathers of The Next Door as its “Baptist of the Year” for 2013. She directs a Nashville-based ministry that serves women transitioning from prison.

Among the services provided are assistance with housing, job training, mental health, relationships and parenting. Founded by women of Nashville’s First Baptist Church, the program now receives significant, widespread support.

More than 1,500 persons released from the Tennessee Prison for Women have been served by The Next Door over the past decade. The ministry is credited with reducing the recidivism rate for women in the state.

“Linda Leathers represents the best of the goodwill Baptist tradition,” said Robert Parham, executive editor

of EthicsDaily.com and executive director of its parent organization Baptist Center for Ethics.

“She is rooted in the Bible with a commitment to social justice and mercy ministries,” he added. “She has a positive ecumenical spirit, and — most of all, best of all — she makes good things happen.”

Leathers will be featured in an upcoming documentary from EthicsDaily.com titled *Through the Door*.

The Next Door and Leathers were featured in the cover story of the March 2010 issue of *Baptists Today*. That feature, titled “Redemption in Action: Faith-based program serves women coming out of prison,” can be found on page 4 of that issue which is available in the online archives at baptiststoday.org. **BT**



Linda Leathers of The Next Door was featured in the March 2010 issue of *Baptists Today*. The ministry to women leaving prison is part of a new documentary from EthicsDaily.com.

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Really old stuff

By Tony W. Cartledge

The oldest building ever found in Israel — the remains of a house that go back 10,000 years to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic age — has been discovered.

The Levant has been occupied by so many people for so many thousands of years that important finds may turn up most anywhere, and all major construction projects must be preceded by an archaeological survey. That's how these finds came to light, in advance of construction to widen Highway 38 near Beth Shemesh, in the Shephelah region southwest of Jerusalem.

In addition to the house, which dates to the earliest transition from nomadic to settled

life, archaeologists working with the Israeli Antiquities Authority discovered a 6,000-year-old building that appears to have served as a temple. Cultic use is indicated by the presence of a large standing stone that was smoothed on all sides and had no apparent purpose other than as an object of worship.

Think for a minute about the significance of such finds. People had lived and farmed and worshiped there for thousands of years before Abraham was a twinkle in his mother's eye. Civilization in the area was already ancient when the Israelites first made their debut.

Speaking of Israelites, new finds from a dig at Shiloh include a stone altar that goes back to the Iron Age (roughly 1200-650 BCE). The altar, about two-feet square and 18

inches high, had been reused in a wall dating to the much-later Byzantine period. As such, it is very difficult to date precisely, though it has given rise to much speculation.

Could it be associated with the presence of the tabernacle at Shiloh where Eli and Samuel served toward the end of the period of the Judges?

Does it suggest continued cultic activity at Shiloh even after the Philistines destroyed the city around 1100 BCE, not long before the emergence of the monarchy in Israel?

Did worship and sacrifices continue at places outside of Jerusalem during the First Temple period, even though Deuteronomy called for a single site only?

Enquiring minds want to know. **BT**

Stuff people hand to the preacher

By John Pierce

Regular churchgoers know the traditions well: when to stand, when to sit, when to bow one's head in a prayerful manner to check the time when the third point of the sermon seems a bit extended.

Then there are practices known only, or mostly, to ministers.

One of those is that some churchgoers like to hand stuff to the preacher at the end of the service with the simple words, "I thought you would like to read this."

These unexpected gifts are always received graciously and often read — while filing away sermon notes the next morning or a bit later when the cleaners find the folded paper in a suit pocket.

Some are mimeographed copies of old sermons that have been given to every preacher the giver has heard during the last half-century or so. Others are well-clipped magazine or newspaper articles, prayers, poems or devotional thoughts — or even a well-worn joke or two.

On a recent Sunday, two older members of the church where I'm pinch-preaching

handed such items to me. One was a nice poem reminding readers to thank God in times good and bad.

The other was a sermon preached 68 years ago — with insight and courage. The man who handed it to me had heard it firsthand and carried the printed excerpts with him.

The stated subject was sexuality, not a topic many preachers addressed in the '40s,



or decades thereafter. But, more so, it was a call for men in uniform to treat women with respect.

Chaplain Frederick W. Brink, preaching in the Ninth Marines Memorial Chapel on Aug. 25, 1945, noted the likelihood that many of his listeners would be headed to Japan. He warned them not to consider the women there to be "chattel" or a "commodity."

"To us who are Americans, and especially to us who call ourselves Christians, every girl, every woman, regardless of her nationality, is a sacred personality," said the chaplain. "...We have no right to think in terms of them on any other than the highest level."

The one who shared this many-times-copied sermon of old said the message resonated with him that day because of his high regard for his mother, his sisters and his girlfriend back home who would become his wife for more than six decades. And its words only increased in value, he said, when he became the father to two daughters.

I appreciate Murry Alford saving this good word that inspired him long ago — and for passing it along. **BT**

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