

JULY-AUGUST 2020

NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

POSITIVE NOTES

Music gets us through
hard times

WHO'S TO BLAME?

Alternatives to scapegoating
and injustice

FAITH/SCIENCE

*Why should people of
good faith encourage
scientific understanding?*

7 marks of a
**'Christian
Nation'**
in a perilous hour
nurturingfaith.net

New Normal

What have churches
learned that will
be lasting?

WORSHIP & EVENTS
CANCELED

Study Where You Serve

Learn from your home or office

LIFE IS BUSY & COMPLICATED

BSK makes it possible to pursue your M. Div. degree or certificate online from your home or office. Learn while and where you serve – including live sessions with professors and fellow students.

Our 75 hour M.Div. values...

- Biblical Interpretation
- Racial Justice
- Women in Ministry
- Pastoral Care and Counseling
- Rural Ministry
- Media & Communications

AFFORDABLE

75% of BSK graduates leave with no additional student debt due to our affordable tuition, work-friendly schedule and financial aid.

BSK is accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS).

CONTINUE LEARNING

Whether you are an experienced minister or a church lay leader, BSK offers continuing education opportunities for you.

SHORT-TERM CERTIFICATES

BSK offers two 9-hour certificates: one in Pastoral Care and one in Rural Ministry.

Learn more at: bsk.edu/rural
bsk.edu/care

BIBLE STUDY TEACHER?

BSK's Flourish Center is offering an Introduction to the Bible workshop series this Fall. Visit flourish.bsk.edu for more info.

Questions? Email admissions@bsk.edu



Great Bible Study

IS IN YOUR HANDS!



Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge are scholarly, yet applicable, and conveniently placed in the center of this journal. Simply provide a copy of the journal to each class participant, and take advantage of the abundant online teaching materials at nurturingfaith.net. These include video overviews for teacher preparation or to be shown in class.

See page 21 for more information.

FOR SHORT-TERM BIBLE STUDIES

NURTURING FAITH BIBLE STUDY SERIES

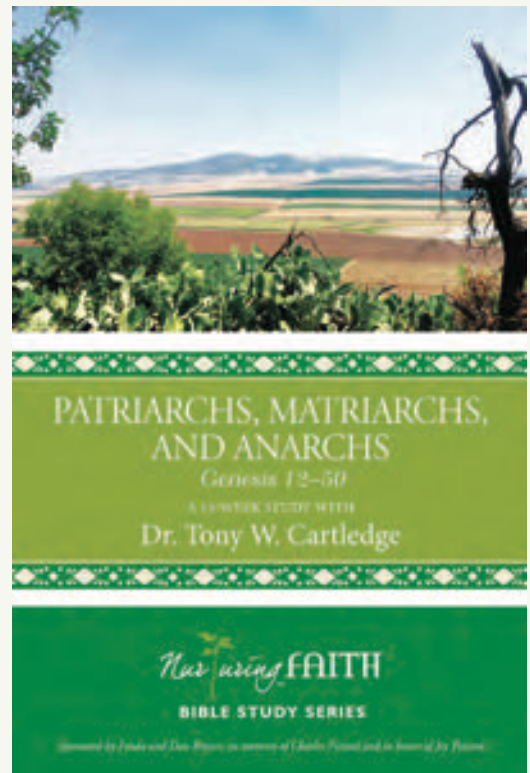
Revelation: All Things New

Ephesians: Upward Faith

Psalming the Blues: At the Intersection of Praise and Pain

A Place for Praise: Ancient Psalms for Modern Times

*Five Scrolls for All Times: Song of Songs, Ruth,
Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*



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

Ideal for groups seeking insightful, applicable Bible studies: Sunday school classes, weekday gatherings, Wednesday prayer meetings, retreats, annual Bible study emphases. Bulk discounts available.

OUR TEAM

JOURNAL STAFF

John D. Pierce, *Executive Editor*
Bruce T. Gourley, *Managing Editor*
Tony W. Cartledge, *Contributing Editor/Curriculum Writer*
Jackie B. Riley, *Copyeditor/Print Coordinator*
Vickie Frayne, *Creative Director*
Jannie T. Lister, *Customer Service Manager*
David Cassidy, *Church Resources Editor*



Walker L. Knight (1924–2019) *Publisher Emeritus*
Jack U. Harwell (1932–2019) *Editor Emeritus*

Directors Emeriti: Thomas E. Boland, R. Kirby Godsey,
Ann B. Roebuck, Guy Rutland III, Mary Etta Sanders,
Mel Williams, Winnie V. Williams

GOOD FAITH MEDIA

R. Mitch Randall, *Chief Executive Officer*
mitch@goodfaithmedia.org

John D. Pierce, *Executive Editor/Publisher*
john@goodfaithmedia.org

Autumn R. Lockett, *Executive Director of
Development/Marketing*
autumn@goodfaithmedia.org

Cliff Vaughn, *Media Producer*
cliff@goodfaithmedia.org

Zach Dawes Jr., *Managing Editor, News and Opinion*
zach@goodfaithmedia.org

Bruce T. Gourley, *Managing Editor, Publications*
bruce@goodfaithmedia.org

Tony W. Cartledge, *Contributing Editor/Curriculum Writer*
tony@goodfaithmedia.org

Jackie B. Riley, *Chief Book Editor*
jackie@goodfaithmedia.org

Missy Randall, *Program Director*
missy@goodfaithmedia.org

Vickie Frayne, *Creative Director*
vickie@goodfaithmedia.org

Lex Horton, *Book Publishing Manager*
lex@goodfaithmedia.org

Jannie T. Lister, *Customer Service Manager*
jannie@goodfaithmedia.org



OUR MISSION

Nurturing Faith Journal (nurturingfaith.net) provides relevant and trusted information, thoughtful analysis and inspiring features, rooted in the historic Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience, for Christians seeking to live out a mature faith in a fast-changing culture.

Nurturing Faith Bible Studies, found inside the journal with teaching resources online, provide weekly lessons by Tony Cartledge that are both scholarly and applicable to faithful living.

Good Faith Media (goodfaithmedia.org), our new and expanded parent organization, fulfills the larger mission of providing reflection and resources at the intersection of culture and faith through an inclusive Christian lens.

GOVERNING BOARD

Jack Glasgow, Zebulon, NC (Chair)
Renée Lloyd Owen, Marietta, GA (Chair-Elect)
Bill McConnell, Knoxville, TN (Treasurer)
Michael Cheuk, Charlottesville, VA (Secretary)
Kevin Heifner, Little Rock, AR
Cynthia Holmes, St. Louis, MO
Cory Jones, Burlington, NJ
Rob Marus, Washington, DC
Jackie Baugh Moore, San Antonio, TX
Mica Stother, Little Rock, AR
David Turner, Richmond, VA

ADVISORY COUNCIL CHAIRS

Marv Knox, Dallas, TX (News & Opinion)
William Neal, Fayetteville, GA (Publishing)
Gary Skeen, Duluth, GA (Development & Marketing)
Ronnie Brewer, Miramar Beach, FL (Experiences)
Starlette Thomas, Washington, DC (Videos & Podcasts)

For a complete listing of the Strategic Advisory Board, visit goodfaithmedia.org.

Nurturing Faith Journal (ISSN 1072-7787) is published bimonthly by: Baptists Today, Inc., 988 1/2 Bond Street, Macon, GA, 31201-1902
Subscription rates: 1 year, \$24; 2 years, \$42; 1 year groups of 25 or more, \$18; 1 year groups of less than 25, \$24; 1 year Canada, \$42; 1 year foreign, \$100. Periodical postage paid at Macon, Ga. 31208 and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address corrections to: P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318 • (478) 301-5655 • © 2020 Nurturing Faith • All rights reserved.



RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS

Gerald R. Ford (1974–1977)

By Bruce Gourley

40

INSIDE

VOL. 38, ISSUE 4
JULY / AUGUST 2020

THOUGHTS

- 7 Pride and prejudices
By John D. Pierce
12 'This changes everything'
By Larry Hovis
14 COVID-19 exposes the great divide
By Mitch Randall
16 The power of showing in congregational prayers
By Chris Caldwell
18 Abide in Christ
By John R. Franke
19 Remembering influential layman Bob Stephenson
By Bruce Prescott
46 Good Faith is coming!
By John D. Pierce
47 Smiting god: You saw it here first
By Tony W. Cartledge
54 REBLOG: Identifying with Jesus — all year long
By John D. Pierce
55 Where is God in the COVID-19 pandemic?
By Benny McCracken
61 MEDIA: Truth and hope, for all times, especially these times
By John D. Pierce



CREATIVITY AMID CRISIS

Drive-in worship fosters community from a safe distance

By Mitch Randall

FEATURES

- 4 POSITIVE NOTES
Music gets us through hard times
By John D. Pierce
8 NEW NORMAL
What have churches learned that will be lasting?
By John D. Pierce
11 LONG-DISTANCE CALL
Church votes on new pastor few have met in person
By John D. Pierce
48 WHO'S TO BLAME?
Jesus offers alternatives to scapegoating and injustice
By Bruce Gourley
56 WITHOUT DOUBT
Seven marks of a 'Christian nation' in a perilous hour
By J. Daniel Day
62 FAITH/SCIENCE QUESTION
Why should people of good faith encourage scientific understanding?
By Paul Wallace

Worth Repeating 6
Editorial 7
Reblog 19
Lighter Side 20
Diggin' It 41

Congregations that adapted quickly to cancelled in-person worship and other activities are now asking: What have we learned? Cover photo by John D. Pierce

Positive Notes

Music helps us get through hard times

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Lee Bains III had planned to be touring with his band, The Glory Fires — that “draws deeply from punk, but also soul, power pop, country, and gospel.” Yet, like just about everyone else, Lee became homebound this spring.

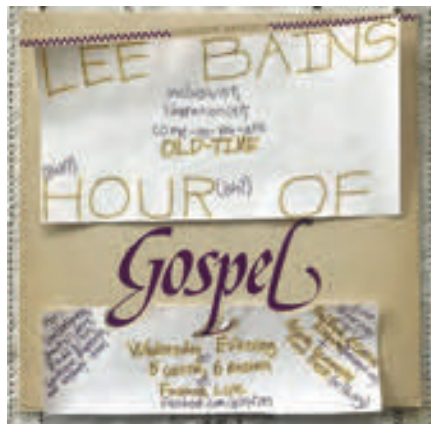
And, like many other musicians of all genre and varied notoriety, Lee has put his good gifts to good use.

Each Wednesday evening — until “COVID is over or I run out of songs” — Lee welcomes listeners into his Atlanta living room for a one-man, low-tech show via Facebook Live. With guitar in hand, or occasionally a banjo, he sings not the latest tunes on his albums or popular cover songs — but beloved hymns that shaped his faith while growing up in Birmingham, Ala.

IT IS WELL

For Holy Week, the live-streamed “Lee Bain’s Inclusive, Liberationist Hour of Gospel” began with a soulful rendition of the spiritual, “Were You There (When They Crucified My Lord).” Then he sang the reassuring “It Is Well With My Soul.”

“This is one I associate with my grandparents,” he said. “When times are tough, this is a good one to sing.”



Check out Lee Bains III at thegloryfires.com.

Other comforting hymns of faith followed, such as “When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder,” “The Old Rugged Cross” and “There’s A Land That Is Fairer Than Day.” As requested by “Aunt Nancy” — Lee’s partner in family Rook competitions — he sang “His Eye Is On The Sparrow.”

One could almost feel the swaying in homes around the Internet when he rocked a bit with Luther Barnes’ “Satan Take Your Hands Off Me,” and the comment stream filled when he slowed things down with Kris Kristofferson’s hit, “Why Me, Lord?”

In an interview with *Nurturing Faith*, Lee said music for him is “a deeply human mode of communication that can carry with it a sense of intimate connection, and I think we are all craving that right now.”

BACK TO ROOTS

Like many musicians, Lee and his band mates had to cancel tours — including a long one in Texas, centered on the popular yet postponed South by Southwest festival. But his music couldn’t completely stop — and the weekly, solo live-streaming gospel hour seemed right.

“We’re definitely a secular rock-and-roll band, who plays songs that I write loud and amped up,” he said. “But I grew up singing and playing in church, and when

I’m having a hard time and dealing with anxiety, uncertainty and doubt, and just generally rough stuff, I sit in our backyard and sing old gospel songs by myself.”

He added: “I’d noticed I was needing to do that more than normal recently.” And he rightly assumed others needed the same hope that comes from old hymns of faith.

“One day, while I was back there singing, I noticed one of my neighbors was quietly drinking a beer and smoking a cigarette in his backyard and listening,” Lee recalled. “When I turned around to say ‘Hey,’ he was like, ‘Don’t mind me; just keep going.’”

So, Lee concluded that others might find such solace and that, in a time of physical separation, the best way was to live-stream his singing of those beloved hymns.

A DIFFERENT WAY

Jim Dant is pastor of First Baptist Church of Greenville, S.C., yet his clergy robe hardly conceals the bass guitar-playing, wannabe rocker inside. So, he has engaged with a wide variety of musicians as part of his ministry.

“Music speaks in a different way,” said Dant. “It has been such a big part of what we are doing.”

Pop singer Livingston Taylor, rock guitarist Nita Strauss, and the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus are but a few to share their unique gifts at the church in ways not typical for them as performers — or for the congregation.

During social isolation, the church shifted to live-streaming for worship and “Viral Vespers” — which include both spoken and musical offerings from the ministerial staff. The music, the ministers noticed, drew a larger online audience.

So, Jim reached out to some musician friends to see how they were doing when unable to hit the road. As a result, the church

decided to sponsor a series of Saturday night home concerts available on Facebook Live.

The church paid \$250 to each artist to “sponsor” the house concert — which was carried on both the church’s Facebook page and the musician’s. This allowed for reaching a larger audience — with fans of the musicians learning about the church and for artists to sell some of their merchandise to help support themselves in this hard time.

“Our people are excited about this,” said Dant, after putting the schedule together. Artists included folk singer Bobby Jo Valentine, renown bassist Adam Nitty, bluegrass band Arkansauce, and singer-songwriter Pat Terry.

CHANGING TIMES

Pat Terry is best known as a pioneer in contemporary Christian music with his three-man band that toured college campuses and churches in the 1970s. After some solo albums, Pat found success in Nashville as a songwriter.

The Atlanta-area resident penned top hits for country singers Travis Tritt and Tanya Tucker. His songs have been recorded by Kenny Chesney, John Anderson, The Oak Ridge Boys, B.J. Thomas and many others.

In recent years he has taken to the road again to sing his original songs — including newer ones that address the challenges and hopes of daily living.

“Artists have to have audiences; songwriters write songs so people can hear them,” said Pat in an interview with *Nurturing Faith*. “It means something to know people are listening.”

The virus-caused shutdown of live music venues is just the latest challenge facing professional musicians, he noted. Other changes are related to technological advances and industry shifts.

“The big thing that’s changed is people stopped buying entire albums,” he said. “When going from selling eight to 10 songs per album to selling one song to someone, the revenue for that is so tiny.”

The shift from purchasing records to streaming subscriptions, he added, means the revenue for writers and artists has become “so small it’s hardly comparable.” Therefore, live performances have become essential for many artists.



Pat Terry’s music is available at patterryonline.com.

“Even to sell records online, the artists have to be visible,” he noted, which is hard when gathering in crowds becomes a life-risking experience. Thus, Internet technology becomes the best available option.

“You have to look beyond the problem and find ways to let that be a springboard to different kinds of success,” Pat added. “The younger generation of artists is coming up in this system that’s developed over the last 20 years, and they navigate it better than artists having to make the adjustment.”

One advantage of the online music scene, he noted, is that most artists have their albums for sale directly on their websites.

“So for anyone who wants to be supportive, it’s a good time to buy some products of your favorite artists,” said Pat, “and to support online concert series.”

FOR NOW

While Lee Bains sings hymns in his Atlanta living room, scribbled signs on his backdrop fireplace invite listeners to make gifts to food banks in Georgia and Alabama. His compassion is deeply rooted in a faith tradition that brought both blessings and curses.

“I grew up with plenty of people trying to cram beliefs and ideas and shame down my throat, so that’s the last thing I want to do to anybody else,” he said. “With this [weekly] live stream, I just wanted to make sure people understood that these songs were being sung in a way that was open to anybody, and celebrated people’s diversity of identity, belief and experience rather than judge them for it.”

Lee is part of The Church at Ponce & Highland (a historic Atlanta congregation) where such openness is well displayed.

“My first experiences singing in church were with my grandparents at their small Methodist church, where my grandmama was the choir director,” he recalled. “My granddaddy and I would sing duets, and I heard in their music a gentle, affirming, loving, open faith that was much more attractive to me than the lambasting that could sometimes come from the pulpit.”

Lee wants his online “Inclusivist, Liberationist Hour of Gospel” to sound such a positive note.

“After doing the latest show, reading back through the comments was so powerful to me,” he said. “We heard from people who hadn’t heard those songs or set foot in a church in 20-plus years — because they’d been harmed by the messages and behavior there — and from people who were atheists, and Jewish, and faithful Catholics and back-row Baptists.”

“It all felt like beloved community,” he added. “People just visiting with each other, and hearing each other’s fond memories and present struggles.”

TIMELESS

While times and technology change, one consistent reality is the unique role that music — with all its vast variety — plays in our lives. We are moved by the lyrics and sounds to the depths of emotions — from tears to smiles, from despair to hopefulness.

And during an unplanned, extended time of fear and isolation, music has risen from every corner to serve as a needed companion.

Whether it was Elton John’s “Living Room Concert for America” — streamed on YouTube — that raised millions for coronavirus relief and showed the world what his kitchen cabinets and dishwasher look like, or a pianist at home playing “His Eye Is On The Sparrow” and sharing it with a few Facebook friends, music has shown itself to be a timeless, comforting presence.

Music and musicians have been there for us in our times of isolation and uncertainty. So if music gets us through our hard times, we might look for ways to help musicians get through theirs. **NFJ**

Worth Repeating

“Because we know kids are always learning, they are picking up lessons that will stick with them and shape who they become. Young minds are like sponges, absorbing how we handle uncertainty, tumult and a loss of control.”

Michele L. Norris, an opinions contributor to *The Washington Post*

“I don’t like politics in church’ is what people — often very political themselves — like to say when their politics have just been dealt a devastating blow by the teachings of Jesus. It translates to, ‘Don’t use Jesus to challenge what I believe and support.’”

Pastor Corey Fields of Calvary Baptist Church in Newark, Del. (Twitter)

“Biblical hope is never about finding a way around suffering. It’s finding a way through suffering so that despair is never the last word.”

Charles Bugg, preaching coach at Center for Healthy Churches, writing on his “Leave the rest to God” blog

“Trust is the only legal performance-enhancing drug. Whenever there is more trust in a company, country or community, good things happen.”

Dov Seidman, author of *How: Why HOW We Do Anything Means Everything*, quoted in *New York Times*

“NASA has been studying the effects of isolation on humans for decades, and one surprising finding ... is the value of keeping a journal... [W]riting about your days will help put your experiences in perspective and let you look back later on what this unique time in history has meant.”

Retired astronaut Scott Kelly, who spent nearly a year on the International Space Station (NYT)

“There is something about pandemics that cause panicked people to empty their minds along with supermarket shelves.”

John Blake of CNN, writing about the rise of doomsday theories

“How quickly can you get them to us?”

Kevin Eckstrom, chief communications officer at the Washington National Cathedral, on the response from local hospitals when more than 5,000 N95 respiratory masks were found that the cathedral had stored during the avian flu outbreak in 2006 (RNS)

“Jesus is a personal savior, but not a private savior.”

Brian Zahnd on Twitter

“Hate doesn’t stop in a pandemic.”

Laura Everett, executive director of the *Massachusetts Council of Churches*, whose March 29 Zoom sermon to First Baptist Church of Jamaica Plain, Mass., was hijacked by trolls injecting racist and anti-LGBTQ messages on participants’ screens (RNS)

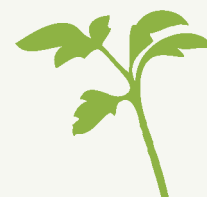
“The sacrifices and the dangers, the toils, the snares that he and Mrs. Lowery faced day and night across one of the most challenging periods of the 20th century: This is now a part of the indelible history of the American experience.”

Retired Cleveland pastor Otis Moss Jr., on the death of civil rights leader Joseph Lowery (RNS)

The place to go between issues of the *Nurturing Faith Journal* is

nurturingfaith.net

- > Blogs, breaking news, and the latest books, resources and experiences from Nurturing Faith
- > Daily religion news from around world, handpicked by online editor Bruce Gourley
- > Teaching resources, including video overviews and lesson plans, for the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge



Pride and prejudices

By John D. Pierce

My heart warms when my mind revisits experiences from my childhood and youth. I confess to occasional doses of nostalgia.

Cutting baseball cards from the back of a not-yet-empty Post cereal box at my grandmother's house was something my parents wouldn't have let impatient little me do.

Doting Aunt Edith, who had no children of her own, would give me a whole quarter before we hopped the city bus to downtown Chattanooga so I could buy whatever I wanted — which was usually a ball of some kind.

My stomach and heart still warm when hot cornbread comes out of the oven — or good honey flows slowly from a jar. An assortment of tastes, smells, sounds and sights brings rushing memories of times, places and people that shaped my life, hopefully for good.

Recalling, even celebrating, days gone by is different from romanticizing our history. Maturity calls for understanding the difference between fondly remembering past experiences and seeking to live as if nothing has improved.

One can be nostalgic, and grateful, for one's own personal experiences while offering an honest assessment of such times and places that acknowledges and confesses the cultural injustices.

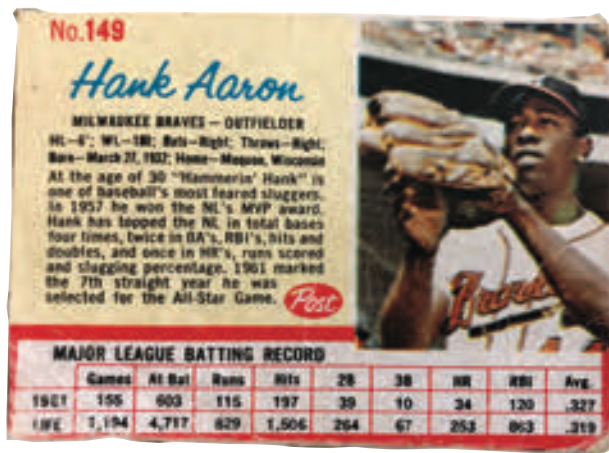
Awareness matters when considering the realities of one's heritage. Growing up as a white, straight, male Baptist in the South — even with limited economic means — provided certain cultural privileges.

Gratitude for the spiritual nurturing

I received doesn't preclude acknowledging the denominational tradition that shaped my life was birthed out of slavery, and related churches and other institutions were built on stolen land.

We prefer false narratives that suggest all the benefits we have enjoyed came from a God who favors us — and our own faithfulness. But one can be sentimental without being naïve and parochial.

The American Civil War battlefield within sight of my birthplace in north-west Georgia was mainly a youthful playground for me. We didn't ignore its historical significance, yet we didn't wrestle with the realities of violence, suffering and gross injustices either.



The Walnut Street Bridge that crosses the Tennessee River in downtown Chattanooga is now a popular pedestrian path. My enjoyment of it is such that I made a donation for its restoration and have a plaque bearing my daughters' names embedded on one of the wooden treads.

Walking that bridge to a music festival or an ice cream shop — or just for exercise or to watch the sun rise over Missionary Ridge — is part of each visit. But I also try to remember the horrors that took place there.

In 1906 Ed Johnson, an African-American man, died at the hands of a lynch mob. He was not the first to hang from the bridge; Alfred Blount was lynched there 13 years earlier.

Only when we acknowledge the evil of the past can we work for justice today.

There's a good — no, bad — reason that the Cherokee-derived names for Chattanooga and Catoosa, my home county, are both found in Oklahoma also. And the same fear and demeaning of people groups that led to the Trail of Tears is alive and being stoked in America today.

The good old days were never as good as we imagined. We can draw from them some precious memories that linger without attributing to them values that never really existed.

While remembering the past with certain fondness, one's time and energy are best spent working for a more just future that embraces humanity with the same passion and inclusivity as the One we claim to follow.

Much of the evil we witness today comes out of a fear of losing one's own cultural dominance rather than a selfless commitment to human equality and compassion. The warning sign is always when one cannot envision a future that does not look remarkably like the romanticized past.

However, it is possible, even desirable, to have pride in one's past without carrying its prejudices into the future. **NFJ**

New normal

What have churches learned in crisis that will be lasting?

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The normality of life — including the rituals and programming of churches — screamed to a halt. The “passing of the peace” could no longer be passed. The “assembling of the saints” became a technological connection without pews.

Adaptation and innovation were no longer optional. Even those resistant to change scrambled to create new ways to be faithful amid unprecedented isolation. And some discoveries were made.

Which raises a good question for congregational leaders: What innovations due to the pandemic will outlast the crisis?

WORSHIP LEADERS

“Our ability to incorporate children in worship has gone up, and I hope we can keep it up when we get back to meeting in person,” said Jakob Topper, pastor of NorthHaven Church in Norman, Okla.

Church leaders chose to pre-record the Sunday worship service, allowing for each worship leader — whether singing, reading, praying or preaching — to record their part on a cell phone and send it in to be edited together.

“It’s allowed us to have a great deal of participation in the service each week,” said Jakob.

Children who wouldn’t feel comfortable singing, playing the piano or speaking in front of the congregation are more open to doing so from the comfort of home, he noted. Then they get excited when seeing themselves as part of the service.

Younger members aren’t the only ones taking on new worship leadership roles.

“One thing I know we’ll do when this has passed is record our homebound members



reading scripture and praying, and patch that into our in-person worship,” said Jakob. “Now we know our church isn’t limited to just who is there in person, and we’ll need to find ways to keep remembering.”

UP CLOSE

Ironically, the absence of in-person worship has actually created a surprising sense of intimacy in worship, said Amy Mears, co-pastor of Glendale Baptist Church in Nashville.

“Maybe it’s because the worshiper’s face is literally 12–18 inches from the person who is preaching, praying or singing,” she said, noting the online worship experience “is the absolute opposite of the theater-seating kind of worship experience” in many churches.

“Intimate is the only word that comes to mind,” she said. “I’m not sure how that could be incorporated when we are back in the sanctuary, but I have a hunch our sense of connectedness will be enhanced in the long term.”

And the weekly encounters between ministers and members have been extended.

“I’m feeling an enhanced connection because of being all up in each other’s faces for several hours a week,” Amy explained. “And the isolation has contributed to more consistent attendance at events.”

Some members she might see in passing on Sunday mornings are now engaged face to face for an hour and a half on Sundays, an hour and a half on Wednesdays, and a half hour on Fridays.

“The feeling that we know each other better is sure to live on past the cloistering.”

Increased intimacy also leads to a greater awareness of individual needs — such as groceries, pharmacy pickups, encouraging notes or calls — and quick responses, said Amy.

“There’s always been a generalized kind of benign attention, but now there are earnest volunteers to care for folks as though lives depend on it,” she said. “I’m hoping that sense of urgency continues.”

TECHNOLOGY

Those who didn’t know Zoom from a zoo when entering 2020 now find their calendars filled with online meetings. Longtime church attendees, sometimes relying on children or grandchildren for tech support, now join Bible study classes, committee meetings and worship via computer screens.

Some of the technological discoveries from the pandemic will likely have a lasting impact.

“Technology can enable the church to be more efficient,” said Bill Burch, pastor

of Northside Church, a United Methodist congregation in Atlanta's Buckhead community. "Although something is lost when participants are not in the same room together, it makes a huge difference in time when I'm able to accomplish a district or regional meeting in a fraction of the time that travel and the meeting itself would have incurred."

However, Bill senses something more important than efficiency will come from this unplanned, unusual time of isolation and innovation.

"On a deeper level, the church has to adapt to the times and use technology in new ways as a tool to proclaim the gospel," he said. "The medium changes, but the message remains the same."

Engaging persons in worship who are not in the sanctuary may well speak to how the church counts involvement in the future, he noted.

"We have a smaller percentage of church members in worship on a weekly basis than we did even 10 years ago," Bill confessed. "The situation is exacerbated in our wealthy congregation because families have second (and third) homes to visit. At the same time, youth sports have become a priority for many families with children."

Which raises the question: What if we welcomed and valued those who join in worship and other activities from afar — rather than failed attempts at shaming them?

"We can curse the times or adapt to the situation," said Bill. "I foresee we will emphasize online worship more — both live-streaming on Sunday mornings and providing additional opportunities during the week."

EXPANDED REACH

Mike Gregg, pastor of Royal Lane Baptist Church in Dallas, shares that renewed sensitivity to those who join worship and other congregational experiences remotely.

"It is my assessment that church will be bigger than our sanctuary," he said. "Folks who have not entered the church doors in a long time are finding a way to enter into worship and activities without the pressure of showing up in person."

Churches need to count differently

than they did in the past, he said. "I think churches will have to consider their online audience when calculating membership after the pandemic is over."

Likewise, worship leaders will need to pay as much attention to those who connect remotely as those seated in the pews.

"I have learned that I need to take my welcome to the people online," Mike observed. "Our live-stream was mostly 'overseeing' our worship before the pandemic."

Now everyone is equally engaged.

"I hope, when in-person worship returns, that I will make an effort to speak directly with those online as that audience will surely increase."

And not just for Sunday worship, said Mike.

"Many of the tech adjustments we have made will continue," he noted. "I hope to put a camera in our main hall where I teach Bible study on Wednesday evenings."

It's all about being more inclusive than those who show up at the church building.

"We've had several folks with health and physical issues attend online activities who could not come to the church," said Mike. "I want to make sure we continue to offer online options for all of our classes to assist those who are not able to attend."

FINANCES

With empty offering plates stacked aside week after week, and rising unemployment and other financial uncertainties, church leaders are rightly worried about congregational giving.

At Nashville's Glendale Baptist Church, worship participants bring their offerings to the front of the sanctuary rather than passing plates among the pews. It's a practice adapted from a partnership with a New Orleans congregation following Hurricane Katrina.

"Worshiping with them taught us the importance of physically moving in worship as we embody our gratitude and response to the work of the Holy in our lives," said Amy.

However, the coronavirus isolation is teaching another stewardship lesson: online giving. It is a practice likely to continue as part of in-person worship.

"It will require us to do what people

have been asking for, and we've been remiss in delaying," said Amy. "That is placing 'I gave electronically' cards in the pew racks so everybody who gives can respond ... by bringing something forward in worship."

Some belt-tightening and reprioritizing can be expected as well, said Mike Gregg.

"I think many churches, including ours, will find ways to spend less," he said. "We will try to move more simply in the world so our funds and resources go to helping Dallas and showing people the love of God."

CONNECTIONS

One unexpected blessing to come from digital church amid isolation, some have noted, has been reconnections across miles and years.

"As we're gathering for worship or prayer or story time or whatever, long-time members are introducing new Glendalers to people who used to be here but now live far away," said Amy Mears. "Who would have thought a pandemic would bring together people formed by their church life 15 years ago and our brand-new members?"

The church has particularly enjoyed reconnection with former ministry interns (called "Glenterns"), said Amy, noting 10 joined in worship over just two weeks.

"They've come in from Flagstaff and Detroit and Seattle and all over to, well, I suppose to do several things: To experience worship they're not having to lead, maybe. To get ideas for their own use as worship leaders. To reconnect with people who were critically important in their own formation as ministers. It has been a moving thing for us to see these young pastoral ministers in worship."

Several ministers noticed a heightened sense of expectation for worship and other church activities — something they hope carries over to future congregational life. Whatever comes next for churches, there is little expectation that everything will return to just how it was done before.

"A church member who was the CEO of a large public corporation had a placard on his desk, which read, 'Normal won't be back!'" said Bill Burch. "So, what does the *new normal* look like?"

Time and innovation will tell. **NFJ**

CREATIVITY amid crisis

Drive-in worship fosters community from a safe distance

BY MITCH RANDALL

Drive-in church was “different, but great,” said David Turner, who has served as pastor of Central Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., for 16 years.

“It was great in spirit and just great to be together,” he said, as the congregation worshipped in the church’s parking lot from their cars on Sunday, March 22, following new directives to avoid public gatherings.

The idea was the brainchild of Central’s associate pastor for worship and adult ministry, Mary Richerson Craven, and her husband, Adam Craven.

They were sitting on the couch, discussing how the COVID-19 virus was forcing churches to adapt their regular routines. Thinking about Central’s response, both asked, “What are we going to do?”

“Drive-in church!” they excitedly concluded.

After consulting with Turner and checking the feasibility of such an idea, Adam began ordering equipment online.

Mary started diagramming logistics, making sure staff and members maintained the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s guidelines regarding social distancing.

She quickly sketched the parking lot on poster board, using Fisher-Price Little People for worship leaders and Hot Wheels to demonstrate where congregants should park.

When Sunday morning came, church leaders were uncertain what the response might be. They were worried people might be too frightened to leave their houses, or might start getting out of their cars once they arrived.

Their fears proved unfounded. Church members and guests alike started parking their cars according to instructions.



Safely tucked into their cars, church members began to wave at each other — appreciative of the congregational connectedness they were experiencing.

“No one was worried about worship style or personal preferences; it was such a joy to gather and celebrate our faith together.” Mary Richerson Craven

As the service began, the ministers — standing outside six feet apart from each other — asked worshippers if they could be heard through the AM transmission that was established. The honking of car horns brought the requested affirmations.

When the time came to pass the peace of Christ, worshippers were instructed to wave at the cars next to them.

“It was so great to see people smiling and waving at each other,” Turner said. One member told him it was nice to feel “somewhat” normal again.

The church was truly “being priests to one another,” Richerson Craven added.

“No one was worried about worship style or personal preferences; it was such a joy to gather and celebrate our faith together.”

When the time for the offering rolled around, Home Depot and Lowe’s buckets were placed strategically on poles in the parking lot. As members drove away, they dropped their offerings in the buckets.

With each gift, members began honking their horns again to say thank you and goodbye.

Turner said a “renewed energy” emerged within this cruel and devastating crisis — with people of faith adapting to the pandemic by tapping into their creativity and compassion.

Long after this crisis has subsided, it would not surprise anyone at Central if they returned to the parking lot during March 2021 to remember and rejoice that the church continued to be the church, a place where the love of neighbor still matters. **NFJ**

—Mitch Randall is CEO of the newly formed Good Faith Media.

Visit goodfaithmedia.org to hear an interview with Turner and Richerson Craven as part of the Good Faith Weekly podcast.

Strange times call for innovation and adaptation — even when it comes to the spiritual discernment of calling new pastoral leadership.

Long-distance call

Church votes on new pastor few have met in person

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

GAINESVILLE, Ga. — For the first time in its storied history the First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., called a pastor and hardly anyone showed up.

Jeremy Shoulta, who accepted the call to become pastor of the congregation founded in 1837, was introduced in a video posted on the church's web site prior to preaching "in view of a call." Then he preached to row after row of unfilled pews on Sunday morning, March 29 — knowing faithful church members were watching online or listening via a local radio station.

The church's homepage provided directions for joining the worship service and voting afterward.

"What a unique situation," said Matt Nix when introducing the prospective pastor during the worship service.

Nix chaired the pastor search process that lasted more than a year and resulted in a unanimous recommendation. However, many of the committee's plans — such as hosting receptions to meet the candidate and his family — were shelved due to the coronavirus pandemic causing widespread cancellations of public events.

"Who would have believed ... we'd have our 'call Sunday' with nearly an empty sanctuary?" Nix added.



At First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., Jeremy Shoulta preaches to a near-empty sanctuary as members — who would affirm him as their next pastor — joined by Internet or radio.



The web home page of First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., gave instructions for remotely joining the "Call Sunday" service and voting afterward.

Shoulta, who grew up as a pastor's kid in Kentucky, comes from the pastorate of the First Baptist Church of Black Mountain, N.C. He and his wife Valarie have two daughters, Maggie and Macy.

Earlier Shoulta served as pastor at the well-visited Maranatha Baptist Church in

Plains, Ga., where former President Jimmy Carter teaches Sunday school and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter serves as a deacon.

At the conclusion of the March 29 service in the spacious Gainesville sanctuary, occupied by only a handful of well-spaced worship leaders, deacon chair Jim Harrison called the church into conference. Members were invited to vote online or by phone for a one-hour period beginning at noon.

Following the overwhelming affirmative votes, Shoulta began his tenure as pastor in Gainesville on April 19 — while uncertainty remained as to when the pews might actually fill again.

One may wonder what church members of the near and distant past would have thought of someday calling a pastor they had never met or heard personally. But strange times call for innovation and adaptation — even when it comes to the spiritual discernment of calling new pastoral leadership.

A sentiment shared by search committee member Cathy Bowers in the introductory video was widely echoed: "Obviously, this is a special way to do a pastor candidate introduction, but I'm excited."

Yet extending the right hand of Christian fellowship had to wait. **NFJ**

Subscribe to Nurturing Faith E-Newsletter

Just email socialmedia@nurturingfaith.net and say, "Put me on the list."

'This changes everything'

BY LARRY HOVIS

My sister is a senior executive in the corporate world. Most weeks found her traveling around the country attending meetings and visiting clients. She spent many more hours in airports and hotels than her own home.

After we had been forced to stay home for a few weeks because of Covid-19, I asked her if she thought her work patterns would change after restrictions were lifted.

"This changes everything," she said. "I had resigned myself to a crazy travel schedule until I can retire. But we are all learning that we can get much more of our work done without travel, at lower cost, than we ever thought possible. My job will always require travel, but in the future it will require much less."

Businesses are not the only ones learning how to approach their work differently. So are church leaders. Here are seven things I see the church learning from restrictions that have been forced upon us.

How to conduct online worship

At least in North Carolina, most churches gathered for worship on March 8. By the end of the week, the majority had determined not to meet on March 15. That has continued until the time of this writing.

I was amazed at how quickly most churches managed to conduct online worship via Facebook, YouTube or some other platform. Most reported more viewers for these services than typically gather in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings.

New ways to connect small groups

Not only worship services, but Sunday school classes, small groups, committees and teams have developed new ways to meet together, often on Zoom, with very high

levels of participation.

One pastor told me: "We used to struggle to get folks to fight the traffic in our city to come to the church building for Wednesday night activities or committee meetings on other nights. Now we are doing those things on Zoom, and I don't see us going back to only meeting in the building."

How to equip families to lead faith formation

Just as families are learning to partner with teachers to educate their children at home, so are we learning to equip parents to provide for the faith formation at home. Education, children and youth ministers are learning that their roles are more important than ever, not to do all of the teaching, but to support parents as they pass along the faith to their children.



The precarious state of our most vulnerable neighbors

Like most disasters, this crisis has had a disproportionate impact on those most vulnerable physically and economically. During this time when our compassion ministries to "the least of these" (food, clothing, etc.) are most needed, our delivery systems (face-to-face interactions often led by senior adult volunteers) have also been compromised. We are learning that our neighbors need our ministry more than ever, but we need new ways to carry them out.

The importance of online, recurring giving

The same economic conditions affecting businesses affect the church. While many churches have maintained or even seen an increase in contributions from members, some have experienced significant decline.

We have learned there are many factors affecting these results, but overall, churches that have cultivated regular, recurring giving (weekly, monthly, etc.) through electronic platforms have experienced stronger giving.

How to make adaptive changes at a rapid pace

"Adaptive change" is a term from the business world that we have borrowed in the church. It is defined as "change that requires new learning for problem definition and solution implementation."

For some time now, we have known our challenges are not technical (doing the same things better) but require new understandings and new ways of thinking. Yet we joke about the seven last words of the church, "We've never done it that way before." I have been amazed at the level and pace with which church leaders are leading adaptive change.

The building is not the church

Maybe, most importantly, we are learning that the building is not the church. Our theology has always professed this fact. Our practice has not lived it out.

Now we know we can "do church" without going to the building. We have actually done it. It took a viral pandemic to make our professed theology our practical theology.

So, what will the future hold? We will gather in our church buildings again, but we will no longer see the gathering as the only, or even primary, expression of the church.

We are learning that while our gatherings are important to us emotionally and spiritually, their primary purpose is to equip us to be sent into the world, to participate in God's mission in our homes, our neighborhoods, our work environments and our social networks. **NFJ**

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

RESTORE LIFE

CBFNC

YOUTH BEACH RETREAT

"Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." -Nehemiah 8:10



Proclaimer
TORI CROOK
(Yale Divinity student)



Worship Band
SCOTT ENGLAND
AND BAND

\$145/person
September 25-27, 2020
NC Baptist Assembly at Caswell
Register at cbfnc.org.



COOPERATIVE BAPTIST
fellowship
OF NORTH CAROLINA

CBFNC FALL WORKSHOP How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going

MONDAY, OCTOBER 5 & TUESDAY, OCTOBER 6

Registration begins at 1:30 p.m.

Workshop ends at 11:30 a.m.

GREYSTONE BAPTIST CHURCH
RALEIGH

HELPING PASTORS THRIVE

a ministry of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina

Workshop led by **Dr. Susan Beaumont**
-Minister, Consultant, Coach,
Spiritual Director & Author

Get more info at cbfnc.org

- Workshops for Church Leaders
- Breakout Sessions
- Cost: \$10 per person
- Hotel: Embassy Suites, Crabtree

COVID-19 exposes the great divide

By Mitch Randall

The Coronavirus pandemic exposed a great divide in the world. On one hand, a majority of the world came together to make sacrifices and work toward flattening the pandemic curve. On the other hand, others demonstrated their opposition to preventive measures and demanded the quick restoration of a capitalistic economy.

The divide became apparent immediately after Easter, as the curve reached its peak. Some politicians even indicated that people should be willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the economy. Tensions continued to heighten when the numbers of the infected and dead changed.

As the curve declined, a truer nature of people began to emerge. We began to witness two distinct reactions: (1) a selfless reaction based upon facts and the common good, and (2) a



selfish reaction based upon individual rights superseding the common good.

Scientists and healthcare workers tried to encourage communities to stay vigilant with social distancing, proper hygiene, and a gradual opening of the economy based on sound data. Others rushed to the streets, protesting their state's preventive measures that were keeping them safe from contracting the virus and demanding a reopening of the economy.

When writing to the church in Philippi, the Apostle Paul imparted this wisdom: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3).

Which of the two groups described

earlier embodies this wisdom?

Paul does not stop there, though; he interjects Jesus into his argument: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5-8).

As we keep Paul's wisdom close at hand, consider this issue: How would Jesus act during a pandemic? Let's ask some simple questions:

- Would Jesus assist healthcare workers in their effort to save lives and make people well?
- Would Jesus be with those demanding the reopening of the economy without serious consideration of data demonstrating a significant decline of the virus?
- Would Jesus place the stock market and corporate interests above the well-being of the elderly and immunocompromised?
- Would Jesus suggest that people's right to consume goods outweigh the health of others?

When questioned about his identity and authority, Jesus never pointed to wealth, business or power.

On the contrary, Jesus always highlighted his care for the less fortunate. "Go

and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Luke 7:22).

While the protesters during the pandemic had valid concerns about the economy, they voiced those concerns in an unproductive and selfish way. Brandishing assault weapons and political insults did little to demonstrate their concerns. If anything, their tactics and rhetoric perpetuated the great divide in the nation.

As the U.S. heads into an election season, we would all do well to remember the importance of the common good. There will be individuals and groups that will seek to capitalize on the great divide, but let those striving to practice good faith be diligent in our efforts to place others' needs before our own.

Returning to Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, the apostle encouraged his readers to "let the same mind be in you that in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

Let us follow his teachings and example. The Lord was not filled with selfish ambitions but was overwhelmed with humility and love for others.

Jesus was a selfless messiah, always looking out for the common good through making sacrifices and lifting others up. May those of us who follow him do the same. **NFJ**

—Mitch Randall is CEO of Good Faith Media.

GOODFAITHMEDIA

Introducing a new podcast!



GOOD
FAITH
WEEKLY
THERE'S MORE TO TELL

GOOD FAITH WEEKLY
Explores current events at the intersection of faith and culture and offers interviews with compelling guests. Join Mitch Randall and Autumn Lockett along with their guests each week to learn more!

New to Podcasts?

Follow the steps below and tune in today!

1. Open the Podcasts app on your smartphone.
2. Search for "GOOD FAITH WEEKLY."
3. Tap on the podcast cover and tap "SUBSCRIBE."
4. Scroll down to see full list of available episodes.
5. Click any title to begin listening!

*Still having trouble?
Feel free to reach out to info@goodfaithmedia.org

COMING SOON!



GOOD FAITH STORIES
A narrative, episodic podcast highlighting compelling individuals and extraordinary events.



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

The power of ‘showing’ in congregational prayers

BY CHRIS CALDWELL

Show; don’t tell. That’s the mantra of many a writing class.

The Beatles’ “Eleanor Rigby” didn’t make it into my college days *Norton Anthology* merely by telling us about “all the lonely people,” but by showing us:

Father McKenzie

*Writing the words of a sermon
that no one will hear*

No one comes near

Look at him working

*Darning his socks in the night
when there’s nobody there*

What does he care?

Too many congregational prayers tell without showing. We pray for “lonely people,” for “all those who struggle,” for “peace in our world.” And all too often I suspect such prayers float by congregants as lovely, innocuous and largely unnoticed spiritual clouds in a generically blue sky.

I was reminded of this when hearing singer/songwriter Grace Potter being interviewed by Chris Thile on his radio program, “Live From Here.” Thile said, “You are able to distill personal experiences down into something I can latch onto.”

Potter responded that she went through a dry spell when she tried to write songs “for everybody” but began connecting with audiences when she realized that “if you get specific and put the microphone on your own life, it starts to feel intimate.”

What jumped out at me was the word “intimate.” Like Potter’s songs, pastoral prayers die on the vine if they are not

intimate. Teaching-style sermons can work fine many Sundays even if they’re not all that intimate. But a prayer that is not intimate is stale.

So, what does that look like? Well, we don’t want to follow Ms. Potter’s lead by focusing congregational prayers on our own personal experiences, but we should follow her lead by praying for specific people. And I would go further by saying we should pray not only for specific real people by name, but especially by praying for real imaginary people.

By that oxymoronic tidbit I mean “showing” an imaginary person, paradoxically, connects emotionally with real people in the pews. This in turn connects them more intimately with God in prayer, which is the point, isn’t it?

So, in place of praying for those “serving our country” and those “affected by war,” we pray for “soldiers sleeping with rifles within two-second reach” and “sleepless children watching bomb-rattled windows shake.”

Or, instead of praying for everyone affected by Covid-19, we pray for “the doctor desperate not to endanger her family by making one protective gear mistake” and the “homeless grandfather trying to decide where he could go to wash his hands or clean his clothes.”

During the Great Recession I once prayed for the “manager lying awake as she considers who she must let go.” A choir member came to me after worship and said, “Who told you I had to lay people off this week?” “Nobody,” I said. “It was just an example, but I’m sorry you’re having to live with that stress.”

The power of “showing” also extends to how we talk about God. Too often in prayer we “tell” people who God is: “O God, Creator of Heaven and Earth.” Okay, true enough. But what does that really say? Isn’t that really restating the obvious?

Can we be honest enough to say that too much Christian prayer is fogged in by clichés? I once referred in a pastoral prayer to “God who chuckles when toddlers steal cookies and weeps when abusers steal childhood.” That’s better writing and better theology than I offered most Sundays.

Which brings me to my final point: It takes a bit more work to “show” than to “tell.” We slide into telling because it’s been a busy week and we need to knock this prayer out so we can get back to the sermon or to the capital campaign. But being challenged by a church member 20 years ago to do more with my pastoral prayers led me down one of the most fruitful paths of my career, when I started giving an extra 10–20 minutes to the pastoral prayer each week.

One of the great privileges of the 25 years I spent as a pastor was being one of poet George Herbert’s “Windows,” being the one who allowed God’s light to shine on the people and their weekly spiritual journeys. That requires intimacy, and intimacy requires specificity.

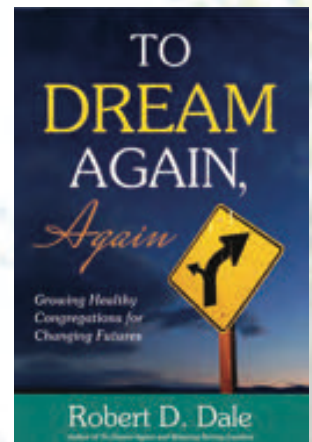
May God bless you as you gather your people nearer to God, to others, and to their truer selves in prayer. **NFJ**

—Chris Caldwell is part of the faculty and administration at Simmons College of Kentucky, a historic black college founded in 1879.



HEALTHY CHURCH

RESOURCES



Healthy Church Resources are a collaborative effort of the Center for Healthy Churches, the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation, and Nurturing Faith Publishing.

NOW AVAILABLE AT NURTURINGFAITH.NET!

478-301-5655

Abide in Christ

By John R. Franke

As I write these words, we are in the midst of a global pandemic. Words and phrases such as novel coronavirus, community spread, quarantine and social distancing have become a regular part of our everyday vocabulary.

Life has changed dramatically for the church. Worship services are held online — if at all. Meetings, classes and events are conducted by technologies such as FaceTime, Skype and Zoom.

Many people are wondering about the future of the church: What will our gatherings look like after the pandemic? How will things be different? What will change?

These are all worthwhile questions, and doubtless we will be surprised both by the things that change and the things that don't. One thing that won't change is the mission of the church to make disciples who are faithful participants in the mission of God.

This has been a regular topic in this column, along with the contours of a Jesus-shaped worldview. The applications of these commitments will change, but their basic nature remains constant.

Another aspect that remains constant is the means by which the followers of Jesus are enabled to accomplish the work God has given us to do. We must abide in Christ.

In John 15:5 Jesus tells his disciples: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

Jesus is telling his closest followers that while he will soon be leaving them physically, they must nevertheless abide in him

to accomplish the mission for which he has been preparing them — and apart from this abiding they can do nothing of value for the purposes for which they have been called.

In light of this, a natural question arises: What does it look like to abide in Christ?

Of course, the specific answers to this question have varied throughout the history of the church. However, one important indicator comes immediately after the initial encouragement to abide.

We read in John 15:7-8 that if the disciples abide in Jesus and his words abide in them, they will receive what they ask for; God will be glorified; and they will bear much fruit and become his disciples. This appears to connect abiding in the living presence of Jesus with knowing his words and doing his will.

One particular ancient practice — developed in the Christian tradition — invites us to abide in Christ through an increased awareness of his presence with us and our knowledge of scripture: the *Lectio Divina* (Latin for "divine reading").

This practice has its roots in the third century through the influence of Origen of Alexandria and was developed over the years before being established as a regular monastic practice in the sixth century. The standard four-step process commonly used today was formalized in the twelfth century, and is widely practiced by Christians who are seeking to grow closer to God through the reading and hearing of scripture.

The intent is to treat scripture primarily as a living word rather than as an object

to be scrutinized and dissected. In the four steps of the practice, the particular passage for the day is read or recited four times with four different focal points of attention and concentration each time.

The first step is simply reading (*lectio* in Latin). Here, we pay attention to what the passage is saying: what words, phrases or events stand out as we hear the text.

The second step is meditation and reflection (*meditatio*). In this action, we open ourselves to be addressed by Jesus as we take note of the intersections of the text in our lives or perhaps even imagine ourselves in the midst of the unfolding story.

In the third step we pray and respond (*oratio*) to the ways in which we hear Jesus speaking to us. We ask questions, worship, offer thanksgiving and confession, asking God for what we need.

The final step is contemplation (*contemplatio*) in which we remain in God's presence and listen for God's response to us as we commit ourselves to live transformed lives from our encounter with God.

Many people who have made this practice a regular part of their devotional lives over the centuries have experienced what it means to abide in Christ. In so doing, they have discovered inner peace and strength to cope with any situation in life while bearing witness to the goodness of God.

I am convinced that abiding in Christ through practices such as *Lectio Divina* is one of the most important things we can do during strange and unprecedented times. May the peace of Christ be with you. **NFJ**

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



Remembering influential layman Bob Stephenson

BY BRUCE PRESCOTT

Outside athletic circles at the University of Oklahoma few people would recognize the man in this picture, but he was the best friend I've ever had. A lot of others would say the same thing. Bob Stephenson died March 20, and his passing leaves a hole in lives all around the country.

Bob was born and reared in Blair, Okla. — a small farming town where his family grew wheat and cotton. In high school he was the star player on state championship baseball and basketball teams.

From 1947 to 1950 Bob played shortstop for the University of Oklahoma's baseball team and, in 1950, was named a second team All-American. When he graduated, he signed a contract to play professional baseball with the St. Louis Cardinals.

He played with a farm club in Houston and with a Western League championship team in Omaha before being drafted into the Army. In 1952–53 he served his country mostly by playing baseball and basketball to entertain troops on R&R from the war in Korea.

In 1954 he returned to professional baseball, playing shortstop for Columbus in the American Association — making the league's All-Star Team.

Then in April 1955 — the same spring 19-year-old Sandy Koufax and 20-year-old Roberto Clemente entered the big leagues — a seasoned 26-year-old veteran named Bob Stephenson played his first big league game as a St. Louis Cardinal.

He started 48 games at shortstop, seven on second base, and one game covering third base. His major league career fielding percentage of .948 was just 52 hundredths short of perfection. His major league batting average was .243, with an on-base percentage of .274 and a slugging percentage of .270.



Bob retired from baseball in 1957 and began his career as a petroleum geologist. After working for 10 years for the Pure Oil Company, Bob co-founded the Potts-Stephenson Exploration Company based in Oklahoma City.

He and his business partner were very successful in their explorations for oil and natural gas in Oklahoma. This success would enable Bob to become a generous philanthropist.

Bob and Norma Capps Stephenson, his wife of 70 years, raised their two children, Tim and Sandy, in Norman, Okla., and between their respective marriages Tim and Sandy gave them seven grandchildren.

Family is what Bob treasured most. The rest of his treasures he laid up in heaven.

Bob gave away most of his wealth. He was generous to a variety of causes, particularly toward the University of Oklahoma, his church — he was a longtime member of First Baptist Church of Norman and then a founding member of NorthHaven Church in Norman — and to moderate Baptist causes.

He founded Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists and brought former President Jimmy Carter to give the keynote address at the regional meeting of the New Baptist

Covenant meeting held in Norman in 2009.

The legacy Bob leaves in the oil industry is legendary. A few years ago some global energy giants began some creative, Enron-style accounting practices to the detriment of independent oil and gas producers and consumers. Bob sued them. It was truly a David against Goliath kind of case.

The case was more complicated than a jury of lay people could reasonably be expected to understand. None of the other producers were willing to face the expense of waging a lawsuit against these corporate giants because, if the case was lost, they could also be forced to pay the enormous legal expenses for the energy giant's high-priced corporate lawyers.

For Bob, it was a matter of principle. What they were doing was wrong. So he took them on all by himself — testifying on the witness stand for days to explain the case to the jury. He won his case that set a landmark precedent for the oil industry.

That is the kind of man Bob Stephenson was — a man of integrity both as a Christian and a businessman. **NFJ**

—Bruce Prescott is a retired minister and educator living in Norman, Okla.

What does your pulpit say?

By Brett Younger

I had been at Plymouth Church for three weeks when I said, “I’m a little short and the pulpit is a little tall. Do we have any other pulpits?”

The executive administrator immediately responded: “That pulpit was good enough for Martin Luther King Jr. when he preached here. But by all means if you need something better, we’ll get right on it.”

What is most amusing about his response is that Martin Luther King Jr. preached at Plymouth Church in 1963 and this pulpit arrived in 2010.

If I had thought about it, I would have realized that our pulpit looked nothing like an MLK pulpit. King’s pulpit at Ebenezer Baptist Church was substantial, authoritative and short. (Martin Luther King Jr. and I — both 5’7” — just saying.)

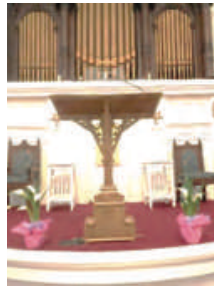
The Christian church borrowed the idea of pulpits from the raised platforms from which the rabbi read the scriptures in the Jewish synagogue — though some rabbis preached while sitting down, which seems lazy. (Important note: Jesus, who preached sitting down, was not lazy.)

New Testament churches could not have pulpits until they had sanctuaries. Early on, some preachers delivered their sermons from the steps of the altar — setting the stage for the children’s sermon 1,900 years later.

The first pulpits were in the east end of the church, which is now the case in about 25 percent of sanctuaries. According to the preachers, elevating the pulpit symbolizes the elevated stature of the scriptures, and not the preachers. Some early pulpits had enough room to accommodate several people at once, a bad idea that did not catch on.

The pulpit became a permanent fixture in the 14th century. Some English churches had portable pulpits that were moved to different positions in the sanctuary so that different sections would get a chance to have the best sound. This would confuse American churchgoers who sit in the back because they have no desire for the best sound.

In the 18th century, triple-decker pulpits, such as the one at Gibside Chapel in England, showed up. The three levels



were intended to show the relative importance of the words delivered there. Lay readers used the bottom tier, ministers read scripture from the middle tier, and the top pulpit was devoted to the sermon. (Historians have not been able to ascertain where female missionaries stood while telling about their slides.)

Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican churches have a divided chancel, with the preacher’s pulpit on the left. The lectern, the tiny pulpit on the right, is for the unordained to share details about the church barbecue. The communion table is at the center. (Helpful hint: when the table is at the center the sermon is shorter.)

Most evangelical churches place the pulpit at the center — symbolizing the preacher’s fear of being anywhere but the middle on any issue.

Different pulpits communicate different messages. This wooden pulpit says, “Something old and historic is going on. Someone in a robe is about to quote John Calvin.”

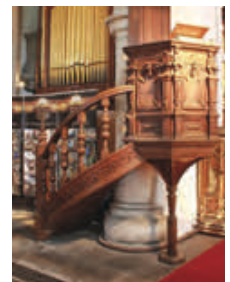
This clear acrylic pulpit says, “Worship is cooler than you think. Someone in an open-collar shirt is about to quote Rick Warren.”

John the Baptist would not know what to do with the pulpit at St. John the Baptist Cathedral in Russia.

A minister’s taste in pulpits tells you a lot about the minister. Preachers who are not flashy do not want a rotating, bedazzling pulpit. How much of themselves do ministers want to reveal? Those who carry extra weight may appreciate a pulpit that covers their sins. Preachers who have been working out like pulpits that make their efforts visible.

In many churches, pulpits have been replaced by stools or tables. Some platforms have no furniture at all, so the preacher can walk around like a stand-up comedian.

Ministers need to understand why pulpits are holy for many of us. The preacher, the Word of God and the people of God come together in that focal point. The pulpit symbolizes the promise that God is present to love and change us, particularly preachers who recognize the sacred place in which they stand. **NFJ**



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



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

ATTENTION TEACHERS: HERE'S YOUR PASSWORD!

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



Adult teaching plans by **David Woody**, associate pastor of French Huguenot Church in Charleston, S.C., are available at nurturingfaith.net



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

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

IN THIS ISSUE

What the World Needs Now ...

July 5, 2020

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
The World Needs Rest

July 12, 2020

Matthew 13:1-23
The World Needs the Word

July 19, 2020

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
The World Needs Patience

July 26, 2020

Matthew 13:31-34, 44-52
The World Needs Wisdom

Aug. 2, 2020

Genesis 32:22-31
The World Needs Engagement

Aug. 9, 2020

1 Kings 19:1-18
The World Needs Faith

Aug. 16, 2020

Isaiah 56:1-8
The World Needs Justice

Aug. 23, 2020

Isaiah 51:1-8
The World Needs to Remember

Aug. 30, 2020

Jeremiah 15:15-21
The World Needs Mercy

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

A Prayer List for Today

Sept. 6, 2020

Psalm 119:33-40
Teach Me, Lord

Sept. 13, 2020

Psalm 103:1-13
Forgive Me, Lord

Sept. 20, 2020

Psalm 78:1-7, 34-38
Convict Me, Lord

Sept. 27, 2020

Psalm 25:1-9
Deliver Me, Lord

Oct. 4, 2020

Psalm 80:7-15
Restore Us, Lord

Oct. 11, 2020

Psalm 23
Lead Us, Lord

Oct. 18, 2020

Psalm 96:1-13
Be Honored, Lord

The Right Stuff

Oct. 25, 2020

Matthew 22:34-46
The Right Questions

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

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 5, 2020

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

The World Needs Rest

R*ed rover, red rover, send Mary right over!* So we sang in one of my favorite playground games as a young boy. Two lines of children, facing each other and holding hands, would call for someone in the other line to run over and try to break through their line. If they failed, they would join that line. If they succeeded, they would take a “captive” and return to their home line. It was one of the few games boys and girls played together.

The opening verses of today’s text use children’s games as an illustration of how the people of Jesus’ day responded both to him and to John the Baptist: it seemed that most people didn’t want to play.

To those who won’t play (vv. 16-19)

Today’s text is preceded by a discussion involving John the Baptist. 🇺🇦 🇺🇦 Even John had apparently begun to wonder about Jesus, and he sent some of his disciples to ask if Jesus truly was the long-expected messiah, “the one who is to come” (vv. 2-3). Jesus told them to tell John what miraculous things they saw Jesus doing (vv. 4-6). Then he turned to the crowds, describing John as the prophesied messenger

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. (Matt. 11:28)

sent to prepare the way for the messiah, like a new Elijah (vv. 7-15).

Religious leaders, however, had rejected both John and Jesus. “But to what will I compare this generation?” he asked. “It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn’” (vv. 16-17).

Perhaps Jesus imagined a group of girls who wanted to play “wedding,” but the boys would not do the circle dance typically done by men. Maybe the boys wanted to play “funeral,” but they couldn’t get the girls to imitate the women who typically keened loud laments.

John was a hard-edged, locust-eating ascetic who wore uncomfortable clothes, lived in the desert, and called for repentance. Many people regarded him as too intense. They accused him of having a demon and would not sing his mournful song of repentance (v. 18).

Jesus, in contrast, enjoyed parties with good food and drink, and wasn’t above tapping into divine power to keep the wine flowing after a wedding. He befriended tax collectors and sinners and called others to join the circle of gospel liberation, but they would not dance (v. 18a).

John was too strict for them, and Jesus was too free. They didn’t want to mourn with John or to dance with Jesus. They could not recognize the new reality before them. But, Jesus said “Wisdom is vindicated by her

deeds” (v. 18b). 🇺🇦

His own generation might reject Jesus, but he would ultimately be vindicated by his works. 🇺🇦

To those who won’t repent (vv. 20-24)

Matthew continues the theme of rejection in the following verses. Jesus “began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done,” the author says, “because they did not repent” (v. 20). Other texts tell us that Jesus spent most of his active ministry in Galilee and even made his home in Capernaum, by the sea of Galilee (Matt. 4:13).

Chorazin was a few miles northwest of Capernaum, and Bethsaida was a few miles to the east, along the shore. Jesus was well known in those towns and did many “deeds of power” there. Still, the people as a whole did not repent and turn to him.

If the same miracles had been done in the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus said, the people would have been moved to repent in sackcloth and ashes (v. 21).

This teaching suggests that those who have been most exposed to the gospel are more accountable than those who have not heard about Jesus. At the judgment, Jesus said, the people of Tyre and Sidon – even the people of Sodom – would fare better than residents of the towns who knew Jesus best (vv. 22-24).

To those who want rest (vv. 25-30)

The harshness of vv. 20-24 softens as Matthew pictures Jesus pausing to offer a prayer: “At that time Jesus said,

Additional information at nurturingfaith.net



‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will’” (vv. 25-26).

If Jesus spoke Aramaic, as we think, he probably would have used the term *Abba* for “father,” an intimate term not unlike “Daddy.” A surface reading of the prayer seems to absolve those who rejected Jesus of responsibility, implying that it was God’s will to hide the truth from “the wise and intelligent” and reveal it to “infants.”

In all of the lead-up to this prayer, however, Jesus was holding people accountable for choosing to reject him. It is unlikely that he would contradict himself by asserting that their rejection was predestined.

Instead, Jesus was using sarcasm. His reference to “the wise and intelligent” clearly points to the highly trained scribes and Pharisees, the experts in interpreting the Jewish law. He portrays them as being stubbornly proud of their knowledge and unwilling to accept the possibility that they could be wrong. Thus, they failed to perceive that Jesus had come to inaugurate the inbreaking of the kingdom of God in a fashion wholly different from what they expected.

In contrast, those who were like “infants” – a word that can also mean “simple” – were not so devoted to authoritative preconceptions. They were more open to accepting the revelation of Christ, even if it did set the traditional interpretation of the Law on its head. Later Jesus would emphasize this more clearly by calling a child to him and saying “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”

(Matt. 18:3-4).

It is God’s gracious will that *anyone* who comes to Christ in childlike faith is welcomed into the kingdom – but Jesus knew that some would refuse to budge from their set beliefs and ways.

Verse 27 sounds surprisingly like ideas more characteristic of the Fourth Gospel, as Jesus turned from his prayer and announced: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

Jesus’ primary critics considered themselves experts on all matters of the law and of understanding God. They prayed to God as “Father” just as Jesus did, but Jesus made it clear that they did not know God as he did. Using an intensive form of the verb for “to know,” he insisted that no one truly knew the Father but the Son, and those to whom he chose to reveal such knowledge: it was more than comprehension of the Torah.

Jesus cannot be understood in terms of preconceived human notions, but only as God knows him and has revealed him to be.

The next three verses, found only in Matthew, are among the most beautiful and comforting words in scripture: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

We often misinterpret these words, reading them as an invitation for overworked people to lay down their burdens and follow Jesus on an easy path. Not so. The “burden” Jesus has in mind is the Jewish law, especially

as taught in the oral tradition of the rabbis, who developed no less than 613 commandments to “build a fence around the law” by adding hundreds of specific prohibitions designed to prevent anyone from getting close to breaking the written commandments.

In the Gospels, the word “burden” is always used in reference to burdens of the oral law. Elsewhere Jesus criticized the religious leaders who “Tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them” (23:4).

The law was sometimes referred to as a “yoke,” the wooden harness used to attach oxen plows or heavy carts. Jesus also had a yoke, but his understanding of the law was not harsh and burdensome, but “easy” (better translated as “kind”) and “light.” Following the metaphor, his yoke had no sharp edges or splinters to cut when pulling, but was smooth and well fitting, “kind” to the one who wore it.

While the rabbis rained down 613 laws, Jesus said the law could be boiled down to loving God with our whole being and loving our neighbors as ourselves (22:37-40). Living in this way, believers could bypass petty rules and focus on “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” (23:23).

We notice that Jesus did not say “obey the law” or even “come to God,” but “come to *me*.” When we come to Jesus, following his example and learning from him, we learn to obey the true spirit of the law. In doing so, we find rest for our souls. 🇺🇸

When we find such rest, we become a living example to others who are burdened with fruitless attempts to find meaning in life, and become channels of blessing as we point them to the good way, the way of Jesus. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 12, 2020

Matthew 13:1-23

The World Needs the Word

When I was in college at the University of Georgia, a former president of the Baptist Student Union who had gone off to seminary came back to speak in a chapel service. Using the parable before us today, he titled his message “A Species Analysis of Dirt.”

As a science major learning to identify the species of everything from bacteria to broccoli to bears, I was all in with the title. It was also helpful, because we often call it “the parable of the sower” after v. 13, but it’s not just about the sower or the seeds – it’s about the soils. 🇺🇸🇺🇸

A dirty story (vv. 1-9)

Why did Jesus perch himself on a boat and tell this particular story, and why was it so memorable that all three Synoptic Gospels include it (compare Mark 4:1-9 and Luke 8:4-8)? Several accounts leading up to chapter 13 reflect the theme of rejection: the religious leaders of the day opposed Jesus outright, and while curious crowds came out to hear the new teacher, few chose to follow him on the path of discipleship.

When the Gospel of Matthew was

But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. (Matt. 13:23)

written many years later, rejection was still a problem. Faithful followers had been spreading the gospel for 50 years or more, but the response was disappointing. Converts were few, especially among the Jews.

Jesus – and the author of Matthew – used the parable in part to reassure faithful followers that their work was not in vain as they sowed the seed of the gospel. They would not always get a hoped-for response.

The story is grounded in ancient farming techniques that would have been commonly known. Carefully marked and cultivated fields or garden plots as we know them were not the rule. Rather, a small landowner would want to utilize as much of his property as possible. When planting time came, farmers would typically broadcast seed across whatever land might be promising. Plowing typically took place *after* sowing, turning the seeds under the soil along with whatever vegetation remained from the previous year. 🇺🇸

Jesus pointed to realities of life that anyone who had walked through rural areas would have observed. Seed that fell on or near hardened paths were likely to be gobbled up by birds and never have a chance to sprout.

Seed that fell on a thin layer of soil above a limestone shelf – commonly found in Palestine – would sprout quickly with sufficient rain but wither before reaching maturity because the

ground would dry out quickly, with no room for a healthy root system.

Wheat or barley tossed into scrubby areas might also get a good start, but even though the surface weeds and thorns might have been plowed under, they would come back and grow strong, choking out the once-promising grain.

Finally, seed spread in good, deep soil with few weeds could be trusted to grow unhindered and produce the expected harvest.

And that’s the story Jesus told in vv. 3-8. The only real surprise was in the remarkable harvest from the good soil: “some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” Farming in antiquity typically resulted in multiples of 7 to 10 times the amount of grain planted: a harvest of 30 to 100 times more would have been rare and memorable.

Jesus told the story with no further explanation other than a warning: “Let anyone with ears listen!” (v. 9).

A curious question (vv. 10-17)

Despite the presence of crowds so thick that Jesus had to teach from a boat (vv. 1-2), v. 10 presumes a later setting in which the disciples could come separately to Jesus and ask “Why do you speak to them (i.e., the crowds) in parables?”

The word “parable” (*parabolē*) literally means “cast alongside,” as in two things that are set side by side for comparison. New Testament parables grew from similarly figurative Old Testament teachings. The Hebrew *mashal* was not just an explanation, but also carried the sense of a teaching that was enigmatic, like a riddle designed to provoke curiosity and further thought.

Additional information at
nurturingfaith.net



Jesus told the disciples: “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (v. 11). Those who had proven receptive to God’s offer of grace could grow in understanding and assurance of a place in the kingdom, but those who rejected Jesus would lose the opportunity they once had (v. 12).

Parables weren’t just illustrations designed to clarify a point – sometimes they did the opposite. Jesus spoke of himself as carrying on in the tradition of Isaiah, who God instructed to be faithful in preaching to the people of Jerusalem despite their stubborn refusal to hear the message or see their need for repentance (vv. 13-15, citing Isa. 6:9-10).

Parables weren’t designed to make people stubborn or to prevent them from entering the kingdom – but they could not be understood by those whose intentional stubbornness left them as outsiders. 🇺

In contrast, Jesus said, those who chose to follow him were more blessed than prophets and saints of the past who would have longed to hear what Jesus was teaching them (vv. 16-17).

A secret explanation (vv. 18-23)

Verse 18 brings us back to the parable in question and Jesus’ explanation of it.

We should note that scholars through the years have proposed many ideas about how we should interpret parables. Early church fathers and their followers tended to read many parables as allegories. After the advent of critical scholarship of the Bible, it became common to argue that Jesus’ parables originally had only one central point, but that the gospel writers, reflecting early Christian traditions, added allegorical elements to them. In more recent years, it has become more

common to acknowledge that parables can have different levels of meaning, and that readers naturally bring their own contexts to the text and interpret through different lenses.

As Jesus explained it, the sower and the seed remain constant: what is different in each case is the type of soil on which the seed falls. Three types of soil yield little or no fruit, while one type of soil produces three levels of abundant fruit.

The hard ground by the path describes those who are so resistant to the gospel that they don’t even try to understand it. Whatever interest might be sparked by a Christian friend or a moment of crisis is quickly swept away (v. 19).

Some people are like shallow soil over a rocky shelf. They respond to the gospel quickly, but their faith is shallow, and withers when challenged by persecution or hard times. Persecution was more common in Matthew’s day than ours, but believers may still face ridicule from others. Or, they may have unrealistic expectations that God will protect them from harm, and fall away when the hard edges of life intrude through illness, divorce, or financial struggles (vv. 20-21).

When high-pressure evangelists sell the gospel like fire insurance, drawing people down the aisle to escape the prospect of hell, it’s like seeding shallow ground. Meaningful faith must have roots that go deeper than a desire for a free ticket to heaven. It doesn’t last.

Jesus knew that some believers would hear the gospel and respond with all good intentions, but later be led astray by emerging temptations that choke out their faith. Children, for example, may trust Jesus in all sincerity, but they face growing temptations with every passing year. Promising faith may give way when “the cares of

the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing” (v. 22).

When the seeds of selfishness and materialism are allowed to grow unhindered, they grow deep. Overcoming human selfishness without deep spiritual roots is like trying to eradicate a stand of kudzu with a garden hoe. It’s a lost cause.

But there is good soil that makes room for strong roots to ground the faith. The good soil, Jesus said, would bring a harvest of 30, 60, or even 100 times more than was planted. In ancient times, that would be an amazing, miraculous crop.

Jesus knew, and the author of Matthew knew, that rejection is a reality of life. We can’t count on every seed we plant to sprout or grow, to reach maturity or to produce fruit. And yet, we are called to sow with the promise of an ultimate harvest that is hard to imagine.

The parable challenges us to look inward and work the soil of our own hearts so that we are not too hard to receive the word, not too shallow to give it root, not too encumbered with worldly cares to grow in faith and discipleship.

As we look to our own makeup, we also look outward. We are not to give up on others whose hearts are hard, for they may yet be softened by the rains of repentance. We cannot ignore those who quickly fall away, but must help them to transplant their lives and find room for deep roots. We dare not turn away from persons whose lives are overgrown with temporal concerns, but continue reminding them of eternal matters.

Discouragement comes easy, but Jesus holds before us the promise of an abundant harvest. As Christ himself continued to serve faithfully despite disappointment, so he calls us to sow good seed in a world of need. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 19, 2020

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The World Needs Patience

Darn that Darnel! He goes out drinking every Saturday night and then shows up for church just in time to sing in the choir. Should such a weedy character be rooted out?


And what about Dannie? Everything can be going okay and then she pops up like a dandelion in a fescue lawn and starts some gossipy conversation that just ruins everything.

And don't get me started on Charlie. He kind of looks at everybody in a creepy sort of way that makes people uncomfortable. Wouldn't worship be better without him around?

Have you ever thought about such things? We dig weeds out of our gardens and flower beds. Should we do the same in our churches?

That's not a new question.

A practical question (vv. 24-30)

The "parable of the wheat and the tares" is the second in a series of parables found in Matthew 13, and it appears only there among the biblical gospels. A shorter version of it appears in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, which adapted it from Matthew. 

Matthew portrays parables as containing coded knowledge that would

Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen! (Matt. 13:43)

not be accessible to everyone. Thus, Jesus tells the story in public but explains it only in private conversation with his disciples.

The story is straightforward. Like the parables of the sower before it and the mustard seed that follows, it grows from the common experience of Galilean farmers.

A certain farmer planted a field of wheat, using good seed, but a subversive enemy came behind and sowed weeds in the same field. As the plants neared maturity, the farmer's servants recognized weeds among the wheat and asked what should be done. The farmer understood that removing the weeds would damage the wheat, so he decided to let both grow until harvest time, when the two could be separated and used for different purposes.

A bit of background may help us understand this agrarian tale more clearly. Farmers in the ancient Middle East generally broadcast seed rather than planting in rows, and then plowed to turn the seed under.

The weed in question, called "tares" in the KJV, is designated by the Greek term *zizania*. It could refer to noxious weeds in general, but typically described a plant known as "darnel," a plague of ancient farmers. The grassy weed, also known as "bearded darnel" or "false wheat," is virtually indistinguishable from regular wheat when the plants are young. Only when heads of grain begin to form do their differences

become apparent (see "The Hardest Question" online for more).

While growing, the tough roots of the hardy darnel plant grow deep and intertwined with the wheat. By the time the plants become distinguishable, the roots are so enmeshed that it's impossible to pull up one without the other.

The two have to be separated, though, because darnel seeds are poisonous. Ingesting them can cause dizziness, nausea, and hallucinations: in sufficient quantities, even death.

So, despite the added labor, darnel had to be identified and separated from wheat as it was being harvested. Then it could be bundled up and used to fuel cooking fires or pottery kilns.

A cautionary answer (vv. 36-43)

Everything makes good sense so far, though we might wonder what kind of enemy would be motivated to raise or find enough darnel seeds to sabotage someone's fields with harmful weeds.

The disciples wondered, too. The author has them wait while Jesus added the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven (vv. 31-33, which we will consider next week).

In vv. 34-35, Matthew returns to the idea that Jesus told parables that were intentionally obscure in keeping with divine instructions to Old Testament prophets that they should prophesy even though many would not understand them or accept their words (vv. 11-15).

Jesus' teaching fulfilled "what had been spoken through the prophet," the author wrote, citing: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will

Additional information at
nurturingfaith.net



proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.”



The citation is not from a prophetic book, but is adapted from Psalm 78:2: “I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old.” The psalm was attributed to Asaph, who “prophesied under the direction of the king” (David), according to 1 Chron. 25:2. Jesus was regarded as a descendant of David, and Psalm 78 was largely a recital of God’s saving acts in history, so early believers came to consider Jesus as the one who fulfilled God’s ultimate work of salvation. Psalm 78:1-2 was seen as a prophecy of Jesus’ teaching in parables, revealing hidden mysteries of God’s work among humans.

After Jesus retreated from the crowds and entered a house – unidentified, but often thought of as Peter’s home in Capernaum – the disciples asked him to explain “the parable of the weeds of the field.”

What follows is a strongly allegorical interpretation. Scholars are divided as to whether the interpretation goes back to Jesus, or to the author of Matthew’s special source, or if it was the author’s own interpretation of Jesus’ words for his setting.

The allegory goes like this: the one who sowed the good seed is “the Son of Man” (Jesus), while the enemy who sowed weeds is the devil (*diabolos*). The field is the world, the good seed are “the children of the kingdom,” and the weeds are “the children of the evil one.”

The time of harvest represents the final judgment at the end of the age, when angels would separate the children of the kingdom from the children of the evil one. The latter would be thrown “into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” while the righteous would “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father”

(vv. 37-43).  

The allegory makes use of stock phrases and images common to apocalyptic writings in the first century, including the concept of a supernatural evil power who opposed God and a burning hell for his followers. While some readers remain comfortable with such eschatological imagery, we may also recognize the metaphorical nature of some ancient concepts. We don’t have to believe in a personal devil or that the loving God we worship will consign nonbelievers to eternal flaming torment in order to understand the parable.

The primary point of the parable is not that there will be a judgment and an ultimate separation between good and evil: that was assumed. The intent of the parable is to answer the question of why such judgment was delayed, and to remind believers that judgment is God’s business, not ours.

“The field is the world,” Jesus is reported to have said. The most casual observance makes it clear that the world includes positive and productive people on the one hand, along with “bad seed” who muck things up on the other.

Sadly, the same is true of the church, which is within the world. As some have observed, the church is not “solely holy.” Some members take Jesus seriously. They seek to live by his teachings, centering their worldviews and their lives around loving God and loving others as Jesus instructed us to do. They are generous with their time and their talents and their resources. They build community, keep the wheels turning, and point the church in the direction of ministry.


We also know, as harsh as it sounds, that the church includes people who are more like weeds than wheat. Some may draw on the church’s resources without giving anything in return. Others may

hinder the church’s mission by clinging tightly to narrow or racist attitudes that would cut off the church from its wider community. Others may bring embarrassment or harm to the church through their public behavior.

Sometimes, when we look inside our own minds and motivations, we may recognize elements of both weeds and wheat. Which will win out?

What do we do with weeds among the wheat? Should we practice the kind of church discipline that publicly rebukes wayward members or revokes their standing on the church roll? If so, where should we draw the lines? There may come a time for a certain measure of discernment: a later story in Matthew suggests that when someone persists in harmful or toxic behavior and resists all efforts at reconciliation, they should be treated “as a Gentile or a tax collector” (18:15-17).

But Jesus’ parable suggests that we can never know about weeds, and sometimes we can’t even be sure about wheat. Wheat and darnel were so similar that some ancient people thought the darnel weeds were just good wheat gone bad. Could bad weeds become good wheat?

Let them both grow, Jesus said. Take care of them both while they grow, wait until the harvest, and let the reapers sort things out. Judgment is God’s business, not ours – and aren’t we glad? It’s so easy for us to judge prematurely, or wrongly, or incompletely. We rarely know the whole story. We don’t know others’ hearts. 

We may recognize members of the Christian community who seem to be on a different track and maybe even holding the church back, but our calling is to be patient with them and to love them no less.

As Jesus said, we who have ears to hear had better listen. We can never tell about weeds. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 26, 2020

Matthew 13:31-34

The World Needs Wisdom

Some things are just too difficult to describe in technical terms alone. How does one explain love, or pride, or an adrenaline rush?

When vocabulary and logic fail, stories come to the rescue. When Jesus tried to explain such difficult concepts as the Kingdom of God, he told stories that had the power to enlighten those who had the ears of faith and discernment to listen, while leaving hard-hearted or hard-headed people in the dark.

Today's text finds us again in Matthew 13, where the author has strung together a series of parables about the kingdom of heaven. Part of Jesus' task was to help his followers to unlearn some of their misguided ideas and to comprehend the true meaning of God's reign.

Many first-century Jews imagined the kingdom as arriving with a divinely assisted victory over Rome, led by a messianic warrior who would then rule as a mighty king – someone like David, only better.

But when Jesus thought of the kingdom of God, he had in mind the rule of God in the minds and hearts and lives of those who followed him. It was not an external empire encompassing the earth's population, but an internal

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. (Matt. 13:33)

relationship between God and those who follow God's way. The kingdom had begun in Jesus and was growing through the disciples and others who followed Jesus, but it was not yet all that it would be. Thus, the kingdom was both a present reality and a promised fulfillment.

Parables of mustard seed and leaven (vv. 31-34)

The third parable in Matthew 13 is the first that is not given an interpretation. It appears in slightly different forms in Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-19. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field," Jesus said. "It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

The story is not a botany lesson: mustard seeds are not in fact the smallest seeds (orchid seeds are smaller), but they were likely the smallest known in first-century Palestine. ↓

Jesus' hearers were familiar with a plant known as black mustard (*Brassica Nigra*). When left alone, it could reach eight to ten feet tall. It was spindly and not technically a tree, but large enough to attract birds who might perch on its branches as well as eat the seeds.

The primary point seems fairly obvious. As the mustard plant began as a tiny seed but grew into a large bush, so

the kingdom of God had a small beginning in Jesus and those who followed him, but it would come to an amazing fruition.

While the focus is on contrast and not allegory, many readers see in the birds an image of how the kingdom would grow to encompass people from every nation. ↓

Matthew paired the mustard seed with another story of mysterious and surprising growth: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened" (v. 33, compare Luke 13:20-21). ↓

Some interpreters try to find meaning in the idea that leaven was sometimes described in negative terms as a corrupting influence, as something Jews had to remove from their homes before Passover. But there are positive images to balance those. Jews ate leavened bread every other week of the year. Like leaven affecting bread, we have the ability to influence others, whether for good or bad.

"Yeast" is better translated as "leaven," something like sourdough starter. Every day, when a woman finished kneading the dough and prepared to bake bread, she would put a small piece of dough aside in a covered bowl: the yeast in it would continue fermenting and serve as leaven for the next day's bread.

The point of the story is again seen in the power of the leaven to spark amazing growth. Like a seed that grows underground and out of sight, the woman "hides" the leaven in the doughy mixture of flour and water. And what a mixture it is: three measures of flour would have been around 40-60

Additional information at
nurturingfaith.net



pounds. That would make enough bread for a party of 100 people or more.

God's kingdom, still hidden in the lives of Jesus and his disciples, would grow beyond measure and instill a spirit of celebration to boot.

Parables of a treasure and a pearl (vv. 44-46)

After an interlude in which Jesus explained the purpose of parables (vv. 34-35) and the meaning of the parable of the wheat and the weeds (vv. 36-43), Matthew portrays Jesus as relating several other parables to the disciples alone.

Two parables are again paired. Both are found only in Matthew, and both emphasize not the surprising growth and size of the kingdom (as in the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven), but the kingdom's surpassing value – something so desirable that it calls for total discipleship.

The first story concerns a treasure hidden in a field, “which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (v. 44). ⤵

The point of the story is not to raise ethical questions about buying a field without disclosing its hidden treasure, but to portray participation in God's realm as so valuable that one should be willing to give up all else in order to find it. We do not possess the kingdom as we would a treasure. Rather, we are possessed by such a desire for relationship with God that we are willing to put God first in our lives.

The second story is similar: a certain merchant in search of fine pearls came across a single pearl so magnificent that he was determined to have it, so “on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it” (vv. 45-46). ⤵

Merchants were generally consid-

ered to be shady characters in scripture, but it was not unusual for Jesus to appreciate people that others did not. We should observe that, once the man sold all that he had to buy the wonderful pearl, he was effectively no longer a merchant. There is no indication that he planned to sell it for a profit: he had become just a man with a very valuable pearl.

We presume the man who bought the field would make use of the treasure to buy what he needed, but how could the former merchant eat and where would he sleep if he had sold everything to buy a pearl?

Practicality is not the point, which is that being a part of God's kingdom is so valuable and so important that it calls for complete surrender. But, Jesus also recognized that we have human needs. We may recall his advice in Matt. 6:33, which encouraged people not to worry about material possessions: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

A parable about good fish and bad fish (vv. 46-50)

The seventh parable in Matthew's kingdom collection returns to the judgment theme of the parable of the weeds among the wheat. Here Jesus speaks of a net thrown into the sea that catches fish of every kind. The fishermen bring all the fish to shore, where they keep the good fish and throw out the bad – presumably inedible or non-kosher fish (vv. 47-48).

Using vocabulary and phrases similar to v. 42, Jesus (or Matthew) explained it as a parable of judgment in which angels would “separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (vv. 48-49).

The point is that a time of separation

will come, and only the righteous will remain within God's kingdom realm. (For more on the symbolic language of judgment, see last week's lesson.)

A word about the wise (vv. 51-52)

Having drawn his kingdom teachings to a close, Jesus asked the disciples if they understood. Probably overstating the case, they claimed that they did (v. 51).

Jesus then reminded them of their ongoing responsibility as teachers: having such understanding, they would need to explain the gospel and its kingdom implications to others. Using an analogy that some consider to be an eighth parable, Jesus said “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (v. 52).

“Scribes” were the teachers of the law, rabbis who had been trained in understanding the written Torah as well as the oral law. They were the teachers of Israel. Jesus now speaks to the disciples as Christian scribes who could comprehend the great treasures of the Old Testament scriptures as well as the teachings of Jesus – and could relate the two. With the emphasis on the latter, they could bring out “what is new and what is old.” Matthew, no doubt, also had in mind Christian pastors and teachers of future generations. ⤵

As the church experienced kingdom growth, it would need trained teachers to help believers understand how the love of God stretched from creation to eternity in an ongoing tension of judgment and grace, and with a desire to encompass all people.

We teach by both word and example. Who can you bless by bringing out treasures, both new and old? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Aug. 2, 2020

Genesis 32:22-31

The World Needs Engagement

I have never understood why people enjoy professional “rasslin’,” as we called it when I was a boy and the Saturday afternoon matches on TV featured characters like the mountainous Haystacks Calhoun, the masked “Mr. Wrestling,” and a bad-guy tag team known as “the Assassins.”

Does watching beefed-up men in tights being thrown around, choked, and stomped give viewers an adrenaline or testosterone rush? Do the theatrically staged violence and “hero vs. villain” aspects provide a vicarious way for people to give vent to their anger or frustrations? I don’t know, but there’s a market for it.

When most of us wrestle, it’s most likely to be a mental effort to overcome an unhealthy habit or to wrangle our finances into shape. Sometimes, though, we may find ourselves feeling as if we were wrestling with God over some personal struggle. We may plead, argue, or bargain with God, but few can claim to have engaged the divine in hand-to-hand combat.

There is one man who could. His name was Jacob.

Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” (Gen. 32:28)

A long road


Jacob had traveled a long and winding road before we meet him in today’s text. He was the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, with a much-deserved reputation as a rascal. Jacob cheated his brother Esau so badly that he had to flee for his life while still a young man. After spending 20 years or more in the northwest Mesopotamian city of Haran with his conniving uncle Laban, he prepared to return to his homeland as a prosperous man with a large family.



Traveling south along the eastern bank of the Jordan river, “the angels of God met him,” the narrator says, leading Jacob to believe he had stumbled upon “God’s camp” (32:1-2). This apparently encouraged him enough to send messengers to his estranged brother, alerting him that he was moving back toward home (32:3-8). (See “The Hardest Question” online for more on Jacob’s encounters with angels.)

Still nervous about their reunion, Jacob referred to Esau as “my lord Esau” and described himself as “your servant Jacob.”

Jacob got no comfort from a following report that Esau had set out to meet him with a small army of 400 men. Attempting defensive measures, he divided his family and property into two camps in hopes that one could escape if the other was attacked. He then prayed for deliverance, accord-

ing to Gen. 32:9-12.  Hoping to placate his brother, Jacob sent a large gift of valuable livestock ahead of him (32:13-21), spaced out in several groups for maximum effect.


A night surprise (vv. 22-25)

Jacob then took his wives, children, and all his possessions across the ford to the south side of the Jabbok river (now called Zarqa) – and surprisingly left them there while he returned to the north bank to remain alone through the night.

Was Jacob being cowardly? Did he need some “alone time”? Did he want to pray for deliverance in private? The text doesn’t say, nor does it tell as much as we’d like to know about what happened next.

A man appeared, we are told, and “wrestled with him until daybreak” (v. 24). The Hebrew word for “wrestle” is from the same root that means “dust.” Literally, it means “to get dusty,” which is bound to happen when one wrestles in the dirt.

Because we have read the whole story, we know that the “man” (*’ish*) was either God or a supernatural stand-in in human form, but apparently with some self-imposed limitations. God had “stood by” Jacob and blessed him as he prepared to leave Canaan. God met him again as he prepared to re-enter the land – but this time blessing was preceded by wrestling.

We don’t know how or when Jacob concluded that he was dealing with a divine opponent. Commentators have proposed that he may have thought his assailant was Esau, or a river demon.  The writer said the grueling match lasted through the night, but offers no details.

Additional information at nurturingfaith.net



That Jacob should prove to be a strong opponent is not surprising. He was known for having moved a heavy stone well cover by himself (Gen. 29:1-10), and tenacity was his trademark. As daybreak drew near, Jacob's opponent saw that he "did not prevail" against Jacob through pure wrestling, so he struck him a blow that dislocated his hip (v. 25).

The word translated as "strike" can also mean "touch," and some read this to mean that God exercised supernatural power by just touching Jacob's hip and putting it out of joint. But, since the opponent is clearly portrayed as self-limited and unable to prevail, the probable intent is that the divine adversary maneuvered Jacob into a vulnerable position and then struck his hip in such a way as to put it out of joint.

A sunrise blessing (vv. 26-31)

Though the dislocation would have been extremely painful, Jacob held tight when his opponent said "Let me go," even though God reminded him that dawn was breaking. It was widely believed that anyone who saw God's face would die, so the request was for Jacob's benefit. Still, Jacob was determined to wrangle a blessing from his adversary and was willing to risk his life in the effort.

The encounter switched from physical to verbal. God asked Jacob's name, which he readily supplied. God then gave him a new name: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (v. 28). "Israel" can mean "God fights," but it could also be read to mean "he struggled (with) God." Given the context, the latter seems more likely. 📌 📌

Jacob was not satisfied to receive a new name of his own, however: he wanted to know the name of his

combatant. Was he still uncertain with whom he was wrestling, or did he hope that God would reveal a more personal name that might grant Jacob some advantage? God's only reply was "Why do you ask?" (v. 29).

Jacob did not learn the name of his opponent, but he did win a blessing. God refused to give Jacob what he wanted, but blessed him with what he needed, and that's all we know.

But Jacob also felt blessed in another way. He must have caught at least a shadowy glimpse of his opponent, for he named the place "Peniel" (more commonly spelled "Penuel"), which means "face of God." Proud of having survived the encounter, Jacob said "I have seen God face to face, and my life has been preserved" (v. 30).

One of the most vivid images in all of scripture is the next one, told with bare-bones simplicity: "*And the sun broke out on him as he crossed over Penuel, limping on his hip*" (v. 31). Jacob may have seen God and survived, but he did not emerge unmarked. 📌

Lessons to remember

Can such an arcane story speak to others who also struggle with God? Consider that Jacob's encounter with God was preceded by a prayer for deliverance (32:9-12), followed by the employment of a defensive strategy designed to protect his family. Jacob believed in praying for divine help, but also in doing what he could for himself. We can learn from that.

The nocturnal wrestling match with God, in some ways, combines both prayer and action: Jacob physically struggled with God, while also engaging in a conversation designed to elicit a blessing from God. Do our prayers come too easy, or do they reflect a serious spiritual struggle to become what God wants us to be? 📌

Few of us could claim to have

grappled with God in a physical sense, but Jacob's encounter at the Jabbok reminds us that God still comes to meet us on our own level, in our own imperfections, where we are, and offers blessing. We don't need to wrestle or wheedle blessings from God: they are freely granted.

Jacob's exchange with God reminds us that names are important: both the name we are given and the name we make for ourselves. God knows our names and needs. God didn't have to ask Jacob's name, but apparently wanted the cunning patriarch to confess his nature as one who overreaches. The new name God gave honored Jacob's continued willingness to reach beyond what was expected: as he had struggled with men, so he had struggled with God – and for the good.

Jacob's encounter reminds us that God can break into our lives at any time and lead us in new directions. Jacob apparently had few thoughts beyond protecting himself and his family when he encountered the unexpected, mysterious presence of God. He was still walking when he emerged from the encounter, but his limp was a clear reminder that his life had been changed forever.

Jacob's story might also remind us of another time when God came to earth in human form for the purpose of blessing. Jesus became incarnate, intentionally self-limited during his life on earth. He struggled with temptation and weariness and frustration, just as we do. He engaged in match after match with opponents and critics. He wrestled in the garden with his own very natural desire to escape the cost of Calvary, but he held on to the end, taking our wounds upon himself. Because of that, we can also catch a glimpse of what God is like. We can be changed, and take on a new name, and set out on a new road to live out the meaning of "Christian." **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 9, 2020

1 Kings 19:1-18

The World Needs Faith

In *Canoeing the Mountains* (IVP Books, 2015), Tod Bolsinger writes about working as a consultant for a denominational organization. Countless meetings and interviews and brainstorming sessions were conducted. Progress reports were composed and distributed. Many people expressed excitement about the potential new direction. All seemed positive, but when the final proposal was presented, an underlying fear of change prevailed. After two years of intense work, the proposal was voted down.

Have you ever worked on a project for a long period of time, only to see it canceled? Or, perhaps you have labored faithfully at a job for many years, but nobody seems to notice or care?

Experiences such as these can lead one to feel downhearted, or downright depressed. Sometimes things pile up until we reach the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, and we find ourselves in danger of cracking. We think about giving up and wonder "What's the use?"

If that happens, we may find ourselves in the prophet Elijah's sandals. ↓

Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kgs. 19:9)

A downhearted prophet (vv. 1-9a)

Perhaps we should not be surprised that Elijah's emotional crash came soon after the high point in his career. On Mt. Carmel, he had challenged 450 prophets of Baal to a game of dueling gods. The prophets of Baal failed to bring fire from heaven, but Elijah's prayer to Yahweh resulted in a conflagration that consumed both sacrifice and altar (1 Kgs. 18:20-40). Soon the prophets of Baal were dead, many Israelites had turned back to Yahweh, and Elijah was on top of the heap.

Perhaps Elijah had not considered the political ramifications. He already had a contentious relationship with King Ahab and his Phoenician wife Jezebel, the primary proponent of Baalism. When Jezebel learned what havoc Elijah had wreaked on her pagan prophets, the angry queen quickly sent him a warning: "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them (the dead priests of Baal) by this time tomorrow" (v. 2). ↓

The same Elijah who had bravely confronted 450 priests of Baal now quailed in fear before one angry queen and he fled for his life, running all the way from the northern kingdom of Israel to the town of Beersheba, near the southern border of Judah. ↓

Even that was not far enough: Elijah left his servant in Beersheba and traveled yet another day's journey south into the desert, losing himself in the lonely wilderness of the Negeb (v. 3). ↓

Lost and alone, Elijah collapsed under a lonesome tree and prayed to die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors" (4b). ↓

If Elijah had really wanted to die he could have remained in Israel, where Jezebel would have been glad to assist him. But, for a while, he may have felt like it.

Elijah had been running without food or rest for several days. When he finally fell asleep under that solitary shrub, it was because he had no other choice. He was completely worn out.

God knew what Elijah needed, so when the prophet woke up, it was to the unexpected touch of an angel. ↓ "Get up and eat," the visitor said, "or else the journey will be too great for you." ↓ Elijah saw a steaming cake of bread and a jug of water nearby. He ate and drank, lay down again, then ate and drank some more (vv. 5-7).

Elijah did not eat again for 40 days as he journeyed on to the most sacred mountain in Israel's memory. Some called it Mt. Horeb, while others called it Sinai.

Using the last of his strength, Elijah climbed the hallowed hill until he came to a cave, perhaps the same cleft that had once sheltered Moses (the Hebrew text has "the cave," as if the reader should know the cave of which it speaks). There Elijah spent the night, not knowing what would be next (vv. 8-9a).

Additional information at nurturingfaith.net



An uplifting God (vv. 9b-18)

What came next was a question: “Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’” (v. 9b).

Elijah responded with a litany of complaints that his faithful efforts had been for nothing, the people of Israel had deserted Yahweh, that he was the only prophet left, and now Jezebel was after him (v. 10). Elijah’s protest revealed a self-pitying distortion of the situation. He ignored the faithful Obadiah and the 100 prophets God had kept safe (18:13), as well as the many who had repented following the miracle on Mt. Carmel (18:39-40). He couldn’t see beyond his own grief.

God gave Elijah a chance to vent, then offered him a picture of something bigger than his frustrated self, calling Elijah to come out of his cave and stand on the mountain before Yahweh, “for the LORD is about to pass by” (v. 11).

Elijah remained in the cave, though, when a howling wind blew past, “so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD,” but surprisingly, “the LORD was not in the wind.”

After the wind came the frightful shaking of an earthquake, “but the LORD was not in the earthquake.” On the heels of the temblor, Elijah felt the heat and heard the roar of a wildfire racing across the mountainside, but “the LORD was not in the fire,” either (vv. 11-12).

When all the commotion ceased, an eerie silence settled over the land, so tangible that Elijah could *hear* it. Translators struggle to describe what Elijah experienced. The KJV says there was a “still, small voice,” while the NIV has “a gentle whisper.” Literally, the text says that Elijah heard a *qôl demāmâ daqqâ*: “a sound of a thin silence.”

And that’s where Elijah found the

voice of God: in the silence. The rejection he had felt and the uncertainty of his future and the fierceness of his opposition may have seemed as fearsome as a storm wind, as tumultuous as an earthquake, as ravaging as a forest fire. But God was not behind that. God was not the author of Elijah’s discontent.

Perhaps God wanted Elijah to learn that, in the midst of the storms of life that make it hard to get ahead, the upheavals that turn our lives upside down, and the burning heat of anger and disappointment and loss, God is still with us. In times like that, we may wish for God to speak up and make everything clear, but that is not the way God works. More often, God is present in the sound of silence.

When Elijah recognized the presence of God in the sound of silence, he covered his face with his mantle – proving that he didn’t really want to die, for he was certain that God was present and the Hebrews believed that one who saw God would die. 🇺🇸

Carefully, then, Elijah finally ventured to the mouth of the cave – still short of standing “on the mountain” as God had commanded – and again God asked: “*What are you doing here, Elijah?*” (v. 13).

It was the same question as before, because Elijah still hadn’t dug deep enough to answer it. And despite all he had learned, Elijah remained stuck in his despondency. He gave the same answer as before, complaining that Jezebel had been killing the prophets, that he was the only one left in Israel, and that he was next in line (v. 14).

It’s easy to be hard on Elijah, but if we’d been standing in his place, chased into the desert by a wicked queen’s death threat, we’d probably be rather self-absorbed, too.

Elijah’s depressing response suggests that, if nothing else, he needed assurance that his lonesome

life and his dangerous work had some meaning.

So it was that God did not offer Elijah a theological self-defense of divine actions or a neat analysis of Elijah’s psyche. God answered by giving the prophet a new mission and the assurance that other faithful people remained (vv. 15-18).

Elijah had made the common mistake of thinking it was all about him.

Let’s give another thought to God’s insistence that Elijah listen to (or through) the silence. Our culture seems addicted to noise. Even people out for a solitary walk tend to wear earbuds to crank out music or podcasts. As the daily clamor of life assaults our ears, our minds crackle with inner static as we try to remember all the errands that need doing and the work that hasn’t been done.

One potential blessing of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social isolation is that we’ve had more opportunities for silence and for listening to God. While some have called it “the Great Interruption,” others think of it as “the Great Pause.” The noise continued, of course. We had the option of binge-watching the news or Netflix, but that could only satisfy for so long. With less time spent in traffic or in meetings or in watching sports, we’ve had more opportunity to shed the insulating layers of noise and let our hearts and minds lie bare before God. 🇺🇸

It doesn’t matter how low we may feel, how battered and bruised, how fierce are the storms that surround us: God is there, speaking in the silence, if we are willing to become quiet enough, open enough, vulnerable enough to hear. There is meaning in this life. There is hope. There is work for us, worthwhile work that will make a difference for Christ and for our world. Will we listen for it this week? 🇺🇸 NFIJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 16, 2020

Isaiah 56:1-8

The World Needs Justice


The enforced isolation during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic felt something like exile. We could no longer gather for worship and go about our lives as we are accustomed. We longed for restrictions to end so life could get back to normal.

But did it? Perhaps we'll never know the same "normal" again. We may never hug as freely or sit as closely as we once did. Some jobs, lost during the pandemic, may not come back. Others may see changes in their previous workplace culture.

Debts that piled up while millions of people were out of work don't magically disappear. Unemployment checks and government stimulus funds can only go so far – for those who got them.

Life for many people may still have the taste of exile.




A continuing challenge (vv. 1-2)

Such thoughts may help us to understand the plight of those who heard the prophet's sermon that is our text for the day.  The people who had been carried into Babylonian exile had finally been allowed to return to Jerusalem. Many


Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. (Isa. 56:1)

came with high expectations, fueled in part by the hopeful promises of the prophet we often call "Second Isaiah." (See "The Hardest Question" online for more on this.)

Sadly, their happy hopes soon ran aground on the shores of a city that was largely in ruins and home to an assortment of squatters. Life was hard and prospects were uncertain. Religious leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah, along with the Zadokite priesthood, preached an exclusionary doctrine that called for the returnees to remain wholly separate from Jews who had remained behind as well as foreigners who had moved in.

Lists of former exiles,  warnings against intermarriage,  and the rejection of help from local people made it clear that purity and pedigree were at the top of the heap for the religious establishment. 

Today's text insists that their exclusive mood was misguided: God had more in store than preserving a small group of ethnically pure Hebrews.

The prophet believed God had given him a different word: "Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed" (v. 1). 


One's *practice* is more important than one's pedigree. The word translated as "maintain" means "to keep" or "to guard." One should preserve justice

as a primary value. That happens when we "do what is right (*zedakah*)."

Still facing difficult days, the people longed for a greater measure of deliverance, and the prophet believed it was coming. The word translated as "deliverance" is the same word used for doing what is "right." When the people saw God's righteousness revealed, how would their behavior compare?

The prophet offers a tangible example of right behavior in v. 2. "Happy is the mortal who does this," he says, "the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil."

The word for "happy" is the same word used to begin Psalm 1. It is echoed in the Beatitudes, where Jesus proclaimed various groups to be "happy" or "blessed." True happiness comes through following God's teaching, doing good and not evil.

Sabbath-keeping is offered as a prime example of faithful living. Careful observance of the Sabbath was strongly emphasized after the return. With or without a temple, it was a public testimony of putting God's interests above one's own. 

An inclusive vision (vv. 3-7)

The delights of Sabbath and inclusion in Israel should not be limited to a special few, the prophet said. Speaking words that would have been radical and provocative, he claimed that God had issued new guidelines that superseded the traditional law with respect to including both eunuchs and foreigners.

Exodus 12:43 declared that foreigners could not share in the Passover. Deuteronomy, which was

Additional information at nurturingfaith.net



probably completed during the exile and would have been known, excluded certain foreigners from converting to the Hebrew faith (Deut. 23:3). When the people heard Ezra read aloud the “Book of the Law,” Nehemiah said, “they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent” (Neh. 13:3). Although Israel’s laws often encouraged people to welcome strangers and care for those on the fringes, requirements for full participation in Israel’s cultic life were strict.

Only men fully participated in temple worship, with their wives and children considered members of the broader congregation. But not all men were welcome in the temple courts. In what may seem a strange commandment to us, Deut. 23:1 insists that “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.” The rationale seems to be that such men were not sexually whole or fully male and thus somehow unfit for temple worship. 🇺🇸

The same passage bars people of Ammonite or Moabite ancestry from acceptance in the temple: they were not allowed to convert and share in the Hebrew covenant with God “even to the tenth generation” (Deut. 23:3-6). 🇺🇸

Exclusion was the order of the day for religious leaders such as Ezra, Nehemiah, and their allies in the Zadokite priesthood. Seeking to establish a fully separate ethnic identity, they also rejected people of Jewish ancestry who had married non-Jews.

The preacher behind Isa. 56:1-8 had a broader view. It was customary in the ancient world to make eunuchs of males who worked in the palace so they would not be a threat to the royal women or motivated to replace the king with their own dynasty. We may guess that some of the men who returned from the exile had held positions that

required castration. Indeed, Isaiah of Jerusalem had predicted just such a scenario: “Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon” (Isa. 39:7).

Shutting the door on such people was not in keeping with God’s desire to be reconciled to all. “Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say ‘The LORD will surely separate me from his people,’” the prophet proclaimed, “and do not let the eunuch say ‘I am just a dry tree’” (v. 3).

Rather, God welcomed both eunuchs and foreigners “who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant” (vv. 4, 6).

Practice trumped pedigree. It wasn’t a birthright that brought people into covenant relationship with God, but a desire to live by covenant expectations – that is, to “maintain justice and do what is right,” as commanded in v. 1.

Faithful eunuchs would be granted a legacy stronger than children, the prophet said, and God would bring faithful foreigners “to my holy mountain” (the Temple Mount in Jerusalem was often called “Mount Zion”). God would accept their sacrifices and worship, “for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (v. 7).

Do those words sound familiar? Jesus quoted them when he cleansed the temple of priest-endorsed merchants and money changers who continued to practice exclusion: they had taken over the “Court of the Gentiles,” which was designed as a place where non-Jews could gather and pray (Matt. 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-17).

Keeping the Sabbath was important. So was demonstrating justice and doing right, which included having an open heart for those who chose to follow God rather than excluding them for physical or ethnic differences.

A hopeful promise (v. 8)

Contemporary Christians don’t observe the same Sabbath rules, but we are likewise called to worship faithfully, promote justice, and do what is right. Just and right behavior involves a willingness to accept other believers. We don’t run across many eunuchs in our day, but we are increasingly aware of others whose sexual identity may be more fluid than our own. Are we willing to accept such believers who want to worship God and practice their faith within our church community?

We’re also aware that our country is becoming more ethnically diverse. Sometime in the 2040s, America will no longer have a white majority – and the broader church is ahead of the curve. The most dynamic growth in the church is among blacks, Spanish speakers, or other language groups, especially in the Global South.

Many ethnic or language groups prefer to worship in their own language or cultural style, but others would love to assimilate into their neighborhood churches. Do we make them fully welcome?

Likewise, do we welcome people who don’t hew to the same doctrinal beliefs that we hold? Those who are more progressive, or less? Do lifelong church members find it difficult to truly accept those who have moved in more recently? Lines between the “been-heres” and the “come-heres” can remain drawn after years of membership.

God’s vision is more expansive than many Christians want to recognize. The same God who had gathered “the outcasts of Israel” by returning them from exile also declared “I will gather others to them besides those already gathered” (v. 8).

Those who see the world as Jesus does understand that living out God’s call isn’t about deciding who’s in and who’s out: it’s about being just and doing right by all people. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 23, 2020

Isaiah 51:1-8

The World Needs to Remember

You've seen the scene on TV or in a movie: an anxious and usually talkative person gets into such a dither that he or she starts repeating the same phrase or acting so strangely that someone slaps them on the cheek to bring them out of it.

It's likely that we've all known people who acted in similar ways, so burdened by a loss or overwhelmed by trouble that they circle in on themselves and fall into despair. We may find ourselves wanting to shake them while saying "Come on, snap out of it!"

If we can imagine that, we have a bridge toward understanding today's text, a verbal slap designed to jar a disillusioned people into wakefulness and hope.

Perhaps we have needed a similar challenge. We can get stuck in daily routines that don't seem to be going anywhere. Financial, emotional, or family stresses can leave us feeling worn out and so inwardly focused that we can't see a way forward.

We need a word of hope.

Listen and look (vv. 1-3)

The text is from Isaiah, from the section of the book attributed to a prophet who

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. (Isa. 51:1)

lived a century and a half after Isaiah of Jerusalem, when he was inspired by God to prophesy to the people of Judah living in exile. Whereas Isaiah of Jerusalem predicted a coming judgment for the nation's sin, the prophet we call "Second Isaiah" was among those who were experiencing the judgment. His calling was to proclaim hope that the exile would end and better days were coming. 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

The oracle includes three challenges, each introduced by a sharp command to pay attention, as if a coach had blown his whistle and yelled "Listen up!" Though all could be translated "Listen," as in the NRSV, verses 1 and 7 begin with the imperative *shīm 'u*, from the verb meaning "to hear," plus the compound "to me." The structure is emphatic: "Hear me!" or "Listen to me!"

The middle challenge begins with the causative form of a verb that means "to attend," also in the imperative mood: "Pay attention to me!"

And what is it that calls for attention? The first challenge addresses "you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD" (v. 1a). A surface reading leads us to think of devout people who follow God's way, but it's possible that the prophet was being sarcastic, as if putting "air quotes" around "you that pursue righteousness" and "you that seek the LORD."

Another option is to recognize that

the word "righteousness" could also be translated as "vindication" or even "deliverance," as in Isa. 56:1. In this case, the prophet may have in mind those who long for a new day and don't seek God's way as much as God's deliverance.

However we understand the audience, the advice is the same: "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug" (v. 1b). Making peace with the future begins with the past.

While the metaphor of being "hewn" and "dug" from a quarry may seem crude when applied to a human womb, the speaker challenges the exiles to remember that they, along with all Israel, had their origin in the miracle child born to Abraham and Sarah (v. 2). 🇺🇸

If God could take a 100-year-old man and his 90-year-old barren wife and give rise to all the people of Israel, then surely God could "comfort Zion" and "make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD."

The image was metaphorical: the arid city of Jerusalem would not become a lush new garden of Eden, but the prophet saw a day when the wasted city would be restored so that "joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song" (v. 3). 🇺🇸

Pay attention and see (vv. 4-6)

The second call to attention contains a promise that includes the return from exile but also extends beyond it. "Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation" demands that the Israelites listen because God is declaring

Additional information at
nurturingfaith.net



something important: “for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples” (v. 4).

The word for “teaching” is *torah*. With the direct article, it generally refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, or to the sum total of divine teaching. Here, without the article, it could refer to a single decree or to God’s teaching in general.

That teaching results in justice “for a light to the peoples.” The reference to “the coastlands” near the end of v. 5 does not describe Israel’s Mediterranean coast, but lands or islands far away, across the sea. Yahweh’s concern was that salvation and justice would come to all peoples (see also 41:1-7 and 49:1-6).

The promise that God’s deliverance would come “swiftly” has led many scholars to conclude that the prophecy dates from near the end of the exile, when Babylon was falling into disarray under its weak ruler Nabonidus. Cyrus the Persian was on the march and conquering one nation after the other, with Babylon in his sights.

But what are we to do with v. 6, which declares that God’s salvation would outlast even heaven and earth? “For the heavens will vanish like smoke,” and prophet said, “the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.”

We know from history that, though they would return from Babylon and would gain a measure of freedom in Jerusalem, the Hebrews never fully experienced the kind of complete deliverance described here. One might propose that the promise was conditional, and so the promise of a lasting deliverance was shipwrecked on the shoals of Israel’s continued disobedience.

The text, however, clearly looks

beyond the return to Jerusalem. It takes on an eschatological cast and looks to a time when even the heavens and earth have passed away. God’s ultimate and eternal deliverance is something none of us have experienced yet, but something we can anticipate with hope.

Isaiah’s audience might have scoffed at the notion that the earth could “wear out like a garment,” but we know all too well the costs of overusing and misusing the earth. We use fossil fuels as if they are unlimited, though they will come to an end. We choke the atmosphere with pollution as if it has a self-cleaning setting, but human activity is causing undeniable and destructive climate change. Overpopulation leads us to use every arable bit of land and all available water to raise food for all the people, and the resulting monocultures threaten to implode the earth’s natural diversity.

We know the earth will one day wear out, probably long before it is swallowed up by an expanding and dying sun. Some Christians who expect Christ to return soon have no qualms about wasting the earth’s resources, but God instructed us to be stewards of the earth and care for it in a sustainable way. We don’t want to wear out the earth and steal its resources from the generations who will come after us.

As pertinent as this thought might be to us, it was not Isaiah’s main concern. Perhaps he wanted to put Israel’s immediate situation in perspective. We sometimes have to remind self-focused people that “It’s not all about you,” and the prophet wanted Israel to remember it wasn’t all about them. God had a whole world to be concerned about, including other peoples (similar themes appear in Isa. 2:2-4 and 42:1-4).

The ancient preacher had no concept of a galaxy-filled universe as we now know it. He thought of the

earth and the heavens as being all of a piece. That physical entity was temporary, he declared, but God’s salvation or righteousness would last for all time.

Listen and take courage (vv. 7-8)

The theme of God’s eternal sovereignty carries over into the third call to attention. The prophet instructs those “who know righteousness” and who “have my teaching in your hearts” not to “fear the reproach of others,” or “be dismayed when they revile you” (v. 7).

Did he have in mind the Babylonian citizens among whom they dwelt, or neighboring peoples near Jerusalem who would not welcome them home? The troublesome critics may have been skeptics among the Hebrews who had lived in Babylon for their entire lives and who scoffed at the idea of a return to Jerusalem.

Whatever the source of opposition, the prophet wanted the faithful to know that their opponents would disappear like moth-eaten wool. They could take courage and stand up to both critics as well as oppressors, because God – the same God whose saving righteousness was eternal – was with them.

There is irony in this exhortation, because those who truly “know righteousness” and embrace God’s teaching should not need to be reminded of God’s presence – but we know what that is like. No matter how devoted to God we may declare ourselves to be, we may also find ourselves discouraged and in need of a reminder that God is with us, and that God cares.

That reminder often comes through the comforting words or hugs or hospitality of a fellow believer. We don’t have to be prophets in order to be channels of God’s saving presence or beacons of God’s justice.

Is there someone we could encourage this week? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 30, 2020

Jeremiah 15:15-21

The World Needs Mercy

Readers of a certain age are bound to remember a popular variety show called “Hee Haw,” which featured a weekly version of four overall-wearing cast members singing a plaintive song written by Buck Owens and Roy Clark:

*Gloom, despair, and agony on me,
Deep, dark depression, excessive misery –
If it weren't for bad luck,
I'd have no luck at all,
Gloom, despair, and agony on me!*

Each line would be punctuated by a loud moan, and the chorus was followed by a four-line poem designed to elicit laughter before returning for another sad rendition of the chorus. 🇺

While the Hee Haw gang found comedy in misery, the prophet Jeremiah's despair was no laughing matter. In today's text, Jeremiah confronts God with hard questions, including one many of us may have asked in the face of personal trials: “Why?”

**“Why me, Lord?”
(vv. 15-18)**

The prophet Jeremiah lived during the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and into the early years of

*Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook; like waters that fail.
(Jer. 15:18)*

the exile. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more on this.) He was called by God to proclaim an unpopular but familiar message: the people's persistent selfishness and refusal to follow God's teaching would soon result in judgment.

The book of Jeremiah can be confusing because its various prophecies, narrative accounts, and historical supplements are not presented in a neat chronological order. 🇺 So, though our text is from chapter 15 of 52 chapters, it's not necessarily from early in his ministry. Chapters 2–24 consist mainly of oracles promising judgment against Jerusalem and Judea, the sort of preaching that continued right up until the exile.

Jeremiah was not, by any means, a popular prophet. Crowds did not flock to hear him. Already considered an outsider because of his descent from an exiled priest, he was often at odds with the powerful priesthood and court prophets in Jerusalem. In addition, his use of metaphors – including one that involved waving around his dirty underwear – did not sit well with many people (13:1-11). 🇺

Jeremiah accused the priests and prophets of being too cozy with a corrupt society that benefitted the rich to the detriment of the poor, facilitating a ritual religion with little attention to ethical behavior.

Jeremiah was a keen student of current affairs and recognized the looming threat of the Babylonians, but

the court prophets supported the priests' complacent claim that God would never allow the divine dwelling place in the temple to be destroyed. With assurance that Jerusalem was secure, many people felt little motivation to heed Jeremiah's call for repentance and obedience to God (see 7:1-15 for a good example).

Neither priests nor royal officials accepted Jeremiah's critique, but tried their best to silence him. The priests would not allow him to enter the temple. When he sent a list of oracles to the king, Jehoiakim tried to arrest him (ch. 36). Jeremiah remained hidden for a while, but when he tried to leave the city he was arrested, beaten, and thrown into a prison operated by the priests (37:11-15). Even Jeremiah's family turned against him (11:21, 12:6).

Is it any wonder that Jeremiah was a master of lament who became known as “the weeping prophet”?

Jeremiah believed he had been called by God from the womb (1:4-5), but he reached a point of wishing he'd never been born. In a companion lament to today's text, he cried “Woe is me, my mother, that you ever bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land!” (15:10). Jeremiah knew that his message put him on the outs with others. He preached because it was a fire in his bones that he had to express (20:9), not because he enjoyed it.

Feeling alone and unappreciated, Jeremiah prayed for God to vindicate him before those who made his life miserable (v. 15). The prophet felt pulled apart: on the one hand, the knowledge that he had a special relationship with God 🇺 led him to speak of hearing and embodying God's words as “a joy and the delight of my heart” (v. 16).

Additional information at
nurturingfaith.net



At the same time, the burden of those words – expressed as “the weight of your hand” had dictated a lonely existence in which he could not experience the pleasures of ordinary life known to others (v. 17).

From that lonely, desert place Jeremiah asked *why*. “Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail” (v. 18).^U

Jeremiah felt that his pain was unending. He had once proclaimed that God could be trusted as a fountain of living water (2:13), but reached a point of accusing God of being like a dry wadi – a stream bed in the desert that runs with promising water when the spring rains come, but quickly dries up when the summer begins.

Jeremiah was not the last to have preached water and breathed dust.

I’ve had that experience, and perhaps you have, too. Faithful living, like faithful preaching, may put us at odds with our culture and on the outside looking in.

“Because I called you” (vv. 19-21)

One might expect Jeremiah’s bold accusations to be answered with a lightning bolt, but God was willing to let the prophet have his say. God’s ego is not threatened by feverish and angry prayers – a lesson we would do well to learn. Jeremiah, like Job, learned that God respects an honest prayer more than empty words couched in platitudes.

God can hear our shouts and bear our fury without taking offense, because God understands that life can be hard and following God’s way is not always popular.

But God is not done with us and does not leave us groveling in self-pity. When Jeremiah accused God of being a deceitful stream, Yahweh did

not respond defensively, but patiently explained that Jeremiah needed to change his orientation.

Jeremiah, the great prophet of repentance, was instructed to repent.

On God’s behalf, Jeremiah had challenged Israel: “Return, O faithless children; I will heal your faithfulness” (3:22). Now God charged the prophet: “If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me” (v. 19a).

Had Jeremiah intended his heated complaint as a letter of resignation? Whether Jeremiah was ready to quit or not, God was not finished with him. He was to continue serving as God’s voice to the people by speaking “what is precious and not what is worthless.” It was not Jeremiah’s job to gain acceptance by becoming like the people: it was their responsibility to turn to God and become more like him (v. 19b).

Jeremiah may have felt weak and oppressed, but God promised to make him like “a fortified wall of bronze.” Others might fight against him, but they would not prevail, “‘for I am with you to save you and deliver you,’ says the LORD” (v. 20).

The good news is that Jeremiah remained faithful and continued to preach. When the Babylonians carried others into exile in 597, they allowed Jeremiah to stay in Jerusalem. Before Jerusalem was destroyed 10 years later, Jeremiah found his way to Egypt, where he continued to prophesy and send letters of encouragement to the exiles.

God never gave up on Jeremiah, and Jeremiah never gave up on the people, even when being caught in the middle caused him pain.

What about us?

So where does this story leave us? Have you ever tried to do the right thing, but others criticized your best intentions? Or, have you sought to live a good life but discovered that you were not

immune to sickness or financial hardship or to tragedy?

We don’t have to become a lightning rod prophet in order to experience disappointment in life, even despair – but we can be sure that God does not want to leave us in that dark place, captive to fear or immobilized by frustration.

In God’s response to Jeremiah we may hear a similar challenge to focus less on ourselves and more on God’s calling – to get back to the work of being faithful and to trust God for the strength we need.

On the other hand, what if we find ourselves, not weeping with Jeremiah, but complacently living our lives with little thought for what God expects of us? How many of us find church little different from civic clubs or social events with the exception that alcohol isn’t allowed?

Do we feel even a hint of the tension tearing at Jeremiah’s soul, or are we so self-focused that the needs of a hurting world and the call to a life of service don’t even register? Do we care enough about the plight of others to be upset that things aren’t any better? Do we not complain because we don’t really care?

Writing in *Feasting on the Word*, Angela Dienhart Hancock offers a chilling observation: “The anger that wells up between prophet and world, and between prophet and God, is evidence of love. Only those who love experience hurt, anger, and doubt. The indifferent are just fine.”^U

Hancock goes on to note that however complacent we may be, “God never has been, and never will be, indifferent toward us.”

Where do you find yourself in today’s text? Wherever we stand, Jeremiah’s lament and God’s response have a message for us. Will we hear it?

NFJ

Gerald Ford (1974–1977)

By Bruce Gourley

Even for the heart of the Great Plains, a region with a long history of violent tornadoes, the 1913 Easter Sunday storm was memorable.

Near the banks of the Missouri River an estimated 103 people died in or near Omaha, Neb., late in the afternoon on March 23, victims of the 13th deadliest tornado in U.S. history.

The F4 tornado's track passed near a nondescript house at 3230 Woolworth Avenue that possibly suffered minor damage. Inside a tragedy of another kind lurked. Dorothy Ayer Gardner King, six months pregnant and a victim of domestic violence, lived in fear of her life.

The abuse began on her honeymoon six months earlier when Dorothy realized she did not really know the man she had agreed to marry. Deep in debt and an alcoholic, Leslie Lynch King Sr. took his anger out on his new bride. Shortly thereafter she left him, but returned upon his entreaties. Perhaps she hoped against hope that the baby she carried within her would transform her angry husband into a good father. But it was not to be.

BEGINNINGS

Leslie Lynch King Jr. was born July 14, 1913. Within days after the child's birth King Sr., brandishing a butcher's knife, threatened to kill his wife and newborn baby. Sixteen days after Leslie Jr.'s birth, the mother and son left the abusive husband and father, never to return.

Later that year, living in Grand Rapids, Mich., with her parents, Dorothy was



Chief Justice Warren Burger administering the Oath of Office to President Gerald R. Ford while Betty Ford looks on.

awarded full custody of her son. The boy's paternal grandfather, disappointed over his own derelict son, agreed to pay child support.

In February 1916 Dorothy married a kind man, Gerald Rudolff Ford, a paint salesman in Grand Rapids. Although Ford never legally adopted Leslie King Jr., the couple began calling the boy Gerald Rudolff Ford Jr.

He grew up with three half-brothers, not learning about his biological father until age 17. In 1935 at the age of 22 the young man, upon graduating from college, legally changed his name to Gerald Rudolph Ford, an Anglicized version of his stepfather's name.

During his childhood in Grand Rapids, one of the leading conservative Dutch Reformed communities in the U.S., Ford attended a local Episcopal church irregularly. Sundays in many respects were simply

another day to the young man.

"I'd just go out and play baseball," he recalled years later. "Of course, some of my Dutch friends weren't allowed to do that,"

In high school a young and athletic Gerald Ford excelled in academics, graduating near the top of his class, while also earning the distinction of being one of Michigan's best high school football players. A football scholarship at the University of Michigan followed, where Ford played center for the Wolverines and majored in economics.

Upon graduation the Detroit Lions and Green Bay Packers professional football teams each sought to sign him. Declining, Ford in 1935 accepted a job as an assistant football coach at Yale University, where he hoped to enroll in law school. Through persistence Ford was accepted in Yale's law school three years later, thereafter graduating in the top third of his class in 1941.

This is the 38th article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, managing editor for Nurturing Faith Journal, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.

WAR

Returning to Michigan, Ford opened a successful law practice and soon became involved in Republican politics. All too briefly, however, his early career came to a halt following the bombing of Pearl Harbor and arrival of World War II.

Enlisting in the U.S. Navy in 1942, Ford served four years. Rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel, he received 10 battle stars for his service and left the Navy believing that the U.S. should remain involved in world affairs.

Ironically, during his early naval wartime service Ensign Ford, while aboard the aircraft carrier *Monterey* in the South Pacific, nearly lost his life in a typhoon. Returning to Grand Rapids and a second stint in law, Ford met and proposed to Elizabeth (Betty) Ann Bloomer, a divorcee and dancer.

POLITICS

Entering politics, he campaigned for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in the 1948 election season. The hotly contested Republican primary pitted Ford against a five-term incumbent allied with the state's Republican party machine.

As the challenger, and not wishing to alienate the conservative Calvinists in his district, Ford waited until after his primary victory to marry Betty, the wedding taking place on Oct. 15, 1948 at the Grace Episcopal Church in Grand Rapids.

Winning his race for Congress, Ford began serving his first of 13 successive terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. Ideologically conservative while simultaneously perceptive and personable, Ford, often tacking to the center of Republican politics, in the 1960s emerged as his party's most influential House member.

In Washington, Gerald and Betty Ford attended the Episcopal Immanuel-on-the-Hill Church in nearby Alexandria, Va. In Ford's early years as a congressman a Christian film executive and sports chaplain stopped by his office and gave the Michigan representative a Bible. The two men struck up a friendship over their mutual love of sports.

In time Ford, listening to Billy Zeoli preach about "God's Game Plan" to the

visiting Dallas Cowboys who were in town to play the Washington Redskins, felt moved to privately ask about Christ and forgiveness. Ford later credited Zeoli with helping him put his "trust in Christ, our Savior" and rely "on Him for direction and guidance."

Congressman Ford's words reflected a view of Christian salvation often referred to within evangelical circles as "born again," a metaphor borrowed from the gospel passage of John 3:3 descriptive of a religious conversion experience.

(Popular in religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening of the early 19th century, "born again" reemerged into popular nomenclature in 1976 in a book of the same name written by Chuck Colson, a Watergate conspirator who afterward had a Christian conversion experience. Jimmy Carter further elevated "born again" in reference to his own evangelical faith during the 1976 presidential contest.)

ANOTHER STORM

Although Ford's personal religious faith remained private, from his position of influence and in sync with white conservative evangelical emphasis on personal responsibility, the congressman became a leading opponent of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs.

A strong supporter of President Richard Nixon's successful presidential bid in 1968, Ford thereafter championed the Republican president's efforts to dismantle Johnson's Great Society, including efforts to "reform" welfare.

After two decades in the U.S. House, Ford, following reelection to yet another term in 1972, contemplated retirement in 1977 following a presumptive reelection in 1974. But even as Ford made plans for a quiet end to his career in politics, a political gale descended upon Washington D.C.

From the summer of 1972 and for the following two years the nation increasingly fixated on the unfolding Watergate scandal of crimes committed, and then covered up, by a ruthless President Nixon. Amid the tempest a separate scandal also rocked the Nixon administration when a justice department investigation charged Vice President

Spiro Agnew with bribery, necessitating his resignation.

The first modern vice president to resign (James C. Calhoun had voluntarily resigned the office in 1832), Agnew's departure sent Nixon in search of someone to fill the vacant seat. A Democratic majority in both houses of Congress, their assent to Nixon's selection necessary, limited the president's options.

Advised that only the likable and pragmatic Gerald Ford would garner congressional approval, Nixon nominated and both houses overwhelmingly approved the Republican nominee on Dec. 6, 1973, amid the escalating Watergate scandal.

VP TO PRESIDENT

Initially a strong defender of Nixon, one month following his swearing in and as the evidence against Nixon mounted, Vice President Ford began distancing himself from the increasingly toxic president.

Nixon's strategy for political survival amid widening investigations of criminality hinged on preventing at all costs the release of damaging White House tape recordings. To no avail Ford privately urged the president to voluntarily release the tapes. Not until a July 1974 Supreme Court ruling demanding that Nixon provide the recordings to investigators did the president relent.

When the tapes revealed damning evidence of Nixon's role in the Watergate crimes and cover-up, Ford publicly called for the president to step down. Three days later on Aug. 8, 1974 a still-defiant Nixon resigned. The following day Gerald R. Ford took the oath of office, the only president in American history never elected to either the presidential or vice-presidential office.

"Our long national nightmare is over," newly-elected President Ford pronounced amid public distrust in the office. Ford's desire to quickly brush past Watergate, however, masked a larger political storm yet unabated.

In the wake of Watergate and Nixon's resignation Americans demanded honesty and accountability. Good-natured in demeanor and frugal in habits, Ford's personality provided a soothing antidote to Nixon's arrogance and abrasiveness.

Weeks after Ford's ascension to the presidency the August 30, 1974 edition of the conservative *Christianity Today* published a profile of his religious faith. The article noted the president's statements to newspaper editors declarative of his faith as "a personal thing. It's not something one shouts from the housetops or wears on his sleeve. For me, my religious feeling is a deep personal faith I rely on for guidance from my God."

QUIET FAITH

The story expressed appreciation of a little-known private prayer group in which Ford participated, characterizing the president's Christianity as "a quiet faith."

Both during his vice presidential and presidential years, and in addition to weekly prayers with a few Washington friends, Ford's evangelical friend and White House chaplain Billy Zeoli sent him weekly devotionals and prayed with him about once a month. For his part, Ford in later years recalled "I prayed probably more actively as president."

Upon his swearing in as president, however, Ford abandoned Nixon and Billy Graham's practice of using a weekly White House worship service to stoke political support among conservative evangelicals, signaling a disinterest in the politics of Christian nationalism.

In the early weeks of his presidency Ford also sought to establish relationships with civil rights leaders, reversing Nixon's pattern of avoiding African Americans. He appointed the nation's first black Secretary of Transportation, William T. Coleman. When racist white southerners petitioned Ford to abandon the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the president instead expanded and extended the legislation for seven years.

Later in his presidency, however, Ford seemingly caved to widespread racism embedded in the Republican Party under Nixon's leadership. When whites in Boston, disdainful of blacks, violently opposed federal busing mandates designed to break up de facto (circumstantial rather than legal) public school desegregation, Ford criticized busing and did little to quell the unrest.

RIGHTWARD SHIFT

Conservative opposition to liberalism also took other forms during Ford's presidency. With federally mandated integration of schools in the South largely complete, many middle and upper class whites sent their children to white private schools. Others sought revenge by banning liberal views from school textbooks.

Opposition to abortion, meanwhile, intensified following the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court's siding with women's privacy rights by legalizing the controversial procedure with certain restrictions in second and third trimester pregnancies.

Conservative Roman Catholic leaders led the way in stoking religious opposition to the court decision. But as always, many female members of the Catholic Church paid little attention to Church orthodoxy or the opinions of male clergy regarding women's issues.

Southern Baptists, disagreeing with the Catholic Church that life began at conception, nonetheless also experienced a growing divide: during the 1970s some individuals increasingly expressed opposition to abortion, while many moderate pastors and denominational leaders largely if often quietly accepted *Roe v. Wade*.

At the same time and throughout much of America, conservative Christians at large opposed a rapidly growing women's rights movement demanding equality for women on par with men, a movement that pressured Protestant churches to sanction women deacons and pastors.

Concerned more with political realities than religionized politics, Ford in the summer of 1974 faced the inherent difficulties of forging policies with a solidly majority Democratic Congress further empowered by Nixon's criminal presidency.

Seeking to assuage liberals, Ford selected iconic liberal Republican Nelson Rockefeller as his vice-presidential nominee. In addition, after mere weeks as president, Ford voiced support for "conditional amnesty for Vietnam draft evaders and deserters as an act of mercy and as a means of uniting the nation."

Shortly thereafter, however, and with the encouragement of Nixon's evangelist



friend Billy Graham among others, Ford made a surprising and controversial hard tack to the right.

PARDON

Sunday morning Sept. 8, one month following Nixon's resignation, President Ford attended morning communion at Washington's St. John's Episcopal Church. Afterward he returned to the White House to make a surprising announcement.

Late that Sunday morning "when the Government buildings were almost empty and no one was expecting any dramatic presidential action," the *New York Times* reported: "At 11:04 Mr. Ford walked into his Oval Office, where a small group of reporters and photographers were waiting, and sat at his desk. His face was grave."

Acknowledging he was about to take action lacking historical or legal precedent, Ford announced "a full, free and absolute pardon" of Nixon for all federal crimes he had "committed or may have committed or taken part in."

The first former president to face criminal prosecution, "Richard Nixon and his loved ones have suffered enough," Ford declared in announcing his decision, and so had the nation. The timing of the pardon, on a Sunday morning, in the words of the *New York Times* served to "emphasize that the pardon was an act of mercy, not justice."

The *New York Times'* coverage of the extraordinary and unprecedented development ended with these words: "Mr. Ford, after announcing the decision, went to the Burning Tree Country Club and played a

round of golf. At the White House, switchboard operators said, ‘angry calls, heavy and constant,’ began jamming their boards soon after Mr. Ford’s announcement.”

One of the most memorable moments in American presidential history, Ford’s unconditional and widely controversial pardon of Nixon became the singular event that publicly characterized Ford’s presidency. Moderates and liberals, joined by some conservatives, expressed anger at Ford’s unjust pardon of a criminal president.

MIXED RESPONSES

White evangelicals offered a mixed message, their disagreements noted in a Sept. 27, 1974 *Christianity Today* article titled “Ford’s First Month: Christ and Conflict.” “Like the rest of the nation,” the article read, “religious leaders were divided over the controversial action.”

Billy Graham praised Ford for acting with “decisiveness, courage and compassion” in pardoning Nixon from a criminal prosecution that “would have torn the country apart more than Watergate itself.” Equally conservative theologian Carl F.H. Henry, on the other hand, suggested Ford’s pardon was amoral and unethical, arguing the act “confuses even more the distinction between justice and mercy at a time when both need to be clarified in American affairs.”

Another noted evangelical leader, President Hudson Armerding of Wheaton College and the World Evangelical Fellowship, declared Ford’s pretext of mercy in pardoning Nixon an act that “calls into question the principle of equal justice under law for all.”

Ford could easily dismiss religious critics, but political dissent to Nixon’s pardon affected his prospects for a successful presidency. Congressional Democrats, campaigning against Ford’s whitewashing of Nixon’s crimes, for months held up their approval of vice president nominee Nelson Rockefeller before finally voting their assent on December 8.

Worse yet, in the November 1974 congressional elections, voters effectively punished Ford by significantly increasing their already-solid Democratic majority in both the House and Senate. Against the

backdrop of his pardon of Nixon, Ford’s approval ratings in Gallup polling plunged from 71 percent in August 1974 to 37 percent by January 1975, hovering there for months.

ECONOMICS

In addition to the political repercussions of pardoning Nixon, President Ford faced the daunting challenge of reviving a declining national economy suffering from international manufacturing competition that shifted more American jobs to the low-paying, service sector.

Manifested in rising inflation and unemployment — collectively referred to as “stagflation” — alongside an energy crisis, the growing economic downturn defied easy answers. The 1973 Yom Kippur War, during which America sided with Israel and against Arab nations, had soured relations with OPEC, the Middle East consortium of oil-exporting nations. The price of crude oil had skyrocketed, and now Americans at the gas pump were paying double the pre-1973 price of gasoline.

Reluctant to admit that America was in economic recession, Ford in the fall of 1974 proposed a tax hike coupled with a reduction in federal spending to curb inflation. Neither the public, nor the media nor the politicians were impressed.

Critics accused Ford of ignoring soaring unemployment, while congressional candidates on the campaign trail had no appetite for either tax hikes or a reduction of federal spending.

Reversing course, Ford in early 1975 proposed tax cuts with no reduction in federal spending. Congress instead passed a tax cut and raised government spending. Ford reluctantly lent his signature. Additional congressional spending proposals Ford vetoed, though he did concede to one more tax cut.

With an eye on the 1976 elections, the president also battled congressional Democrats over the energy crisis, reaching an agreement in December 1975 to slowly phase out price controls on oil in return for a reduction in domestic oil prices.

As free-market conservatives seethed over Ford’s acquiescence to tax cuts, more

government spending and the government’s continued role in managing oil prices, the economy recovered in 1976. Inflation dropped from 9.1 percent to 5.8 percent, and unemployment from nearly 9 percent to 7.4 percent. Just in time for the 1976 presidential election season, Ford’s approval ratings rose in tandem to the modest economic upswing.

POPULARITY

Meanwhile, Gerald Ford presided over a time of foreign policy difficulties inherited from the Nixon administration and rooted in the ongoing worldwide conflict between democracy and communism.

As the capital of South Vietnam fell to communistic North Vietnamese forces, Ford ordered the evacuation of remaining U.S. personnel and South Vietnamese with U.S. connections, the drama of American failure playing out on live television.

In nearby Cambodia in May 1975 a Ford-ordered commando raid against Cambodian communists — the Khmer Rouge — secured the freedom of the crew of a captured American cargo ship, offering a salve to a wounded nation. Afterward, Ford’s approval ratings moved upward. Meanwhile, Ford continued Nixon’s middle-of-the-road policies of negotiating with communistic China and the Soviet Union.

Although Ford’s approval ratings rose and remained near 50 percent for the second half of 1975, white evangelical enthusiasm for the man of “quiet faith” remained underwhelming.

Billy Graham, smarting from his previously naive support of Nixon yet disappointed in Ford’s refusal to embrace Christian nationalism, maintained a cordial but aloof relationship with the new president. Periodic golf outings with Ford comprised the pair’s main point of contact.

On one occasion Graham invited Ford to join him for an evangelistic crusade in Pontiac, Mich., though unlike during Nixon’s presidency, Graham did not ask President Ford to address the crowd.

Meanwhile, Christian nationalists intent on suppressing pluralism and transforming America into a Christian nation looked on in disbelief as Ford appointed a liberal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

CHURCH-STATE

John Paul Stevens, a fierce advocate of religion-state separation, represented the traditional presidential understanding of religion-state relations. Prior to the late 1800s, U.S. presidents honored the First Amendment's prohibition of religion and state mingling, a stance that began slowly unraveling amid empowered white Protestantism around the turn of the 20th century, then evaporated among Republican presidents' embrace of anti-communist Christian nationalism from the 1950s onward.

Appointed to the Supreme Court by Ford in December 1975, Stevens quickly dissented against the eroding of religion and state separation.

In a 1976 case, *Roemer v. Board of Public Works*, Stevens, dissenting from a ruling affirming a Maryland law allowing state funds to support religious colleges, warned against "the pernicious tendency of a state subsidy to tempt religious schools to compromise their religious mission without wholly abandoning it."

Thereafter until his retirement from the Supreme Court in 2010, Stevens remained firm in his defense of religion-state separation. A 2002 Supreme Court case reflected his 35-year commitment to opposing government favoritism of any religion.

In an Ohio case, *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the Supreme Court sided with the use of public school vouchers for education at religiously affiliated schools. Dissenting, Stevens noted that the majority of justices had forsaken the nation's founding ideals.

Warning of the consequences of joining religion and state, he bluntly wrote: "Whenever we remove a brick from the wall that was designed to separate religion from government, we increase the risk of religious strife and weaken the foundations of our democracy."

Meanwhile and simultaneous to Stevens' appointment to the Supreme Court, fundamentalist Christian Bob Jones University in Greenville, S.C., received notice of the Internal Revenue Service revocation of the religious school's tax-exempt status due to violations of a 1971 law prohibiting racial discrimination by tax-exempt private schools.

RACE

As had white evangelical southerners for generations, Bob Jones University defended its right to discriminate against African Americans on the basis that their biblical beliefs superseded U.S. laws.

Choosing to fight the January 1976 revocation of their tax-exempt status, Bob Jones assembled a roster of Christian nationalists that became founders of the politically-oriented, Christian nationalist Christian Right (frequently but inaccurately referred to as the Religious Right). Birthed in an orchestrated effort to forcefully integrate white supremacist, discriminatory evangelical beliefs into government policies, judicial law, society and culture, the Christian Right within a few years would become a powerful player in Republican politics.

Among prominent conservative personalities and organizations defending Bob Jones University were: Paul Weyrich, conservative political activist and founder of the 1973-birthed, far-right Heritage Foundation (1973); James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family; and popular televangelist Jerry Falwell, founder of tax-troubled fundamentalist Liberty Baptist College and a national figure with a public Christian nationalist agenda that contrasted with Billy Graham's more cautious approach.

Temporarily sidelined by Nixon's resignation, white Christian nationalists' anger at Ford's rebuff of the movement and his liberal economic and judicial policies reached the boiling point in the election year of 1976. Evangelist Billy Zeoli, white evangelicals' best hope for influencing the president, had failed to prevent Ford's political compromises with liberals.

Fervor to transform America into a Christian nation paralleled Christian nationalists' belief that God would soon bring the world to an end. Espousing 19th century-birthed — and until the 20th century heretical — premillennial dispensationalist theology and following Israel's victories in 1967 and 1973 armed conflicts with Arab nations, many white conservative evangelical leaders, Jerry Falwell included, preached a new gospel.

With enthusiasm they pronounced the imminent return to earth of a venge-

ful Christ who would rescue the faithful, fight and vanquish the evils of liberalism — communism, socialism, humanism — and create a pure and holy New Jerusalem on earth reserved exclusively for the chosen righteous.

Christian nationalists' task of preparing the way for God's apocalyptic defeat of liberalism ran through a Nixon-shaped Republican White House. Ford, disdainful of the nationalists' agenda, nonetheless needed their votes in the 1976 election. With reservations on both sides, a political dance began.

FUNDAMENTALIST DANCING

Hoping to secure white evangelicals — by some estimates one-quarter of the electorate — without compromising his own convictions, Ford's courtship took several forms, including inviting Falwell and other religious broadcasters to the White House, where the president voiced code words intended to soothe doubts about his faith.

"I have said on several occasions, when asked, that I have a commitment to the Christian faith and I have a relationship with Jesus Christ through my church and through my daily life," the president declared. "Prayer is very important to me" and "as a Christian, I strive to live up to the moral code as set forth in the Ten Commandments and in the teachings of Jesus," Ford assured evangelicals.

On the campaign trail Ford spoke to the National Association of Evangelicals and at the annual Southern Baptist Convention, of the latter the first sitting president to do so. More moderate than independent fundamentalist Baptist Falwell, and largely unreceptive to the siren call of Christian nationalism, the leadership of the influential Baptist denomination nonetheless was on the cusp of a fundamentalist takeover orchestrated in part by Falwell.

To the assembled audience of ministers and lay leaders Ford focused on his belief in the Bible, "a steady compass and a source of great strength and peace" during his "career in public service." Seeking to ease doubts about his Episcopal faith, the president spoke of his admiration "for the missionary spirit of Baptists and the fact that you strive



Gravesite of Gerald Ford, 38th President of the United States, and his wife Betty Ford, at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

to keep the Bible at the center of your lives.”

Concluding his speech, Ford expressed hope for a “rekindling of religious conviction” and a “new appreciation for biblical teaching” in America. He spoke of his desire for a time when Americans would “come to know peace not as the mere absence of war, but as a climate in which understanding can grow and human dignity can flourish.”

Ford’s open talk of his faith and the Bible represented a reluctant acquiescence to the power of white evangelicals, a group that fostered within a growing Christian nationalist movement.

For his part, Falwell, while declining to endorse a candidate in the 1976 presidential election, made publicly clear his support of a president who would ally with God to make America strong again.

“We have lost every war since the Second World War,” Falwell preached to his large white evangelical conservative constituency during the presidential campaign season. He voiced his desire for a president who would toe the conservative line drawn by Nixon.

Channeling the now-disgraced former president, he called for balancing the budget by increasing defense spending and elimination of “our foolish welfare programs” at home and abroad. Singling out Lyndon Johnson’s enduring Great Society programs designed to uplift African Americans, Falwell dismissed such efforts as “giveaway programs which are producing a generation of ‘bums’ in our society.”

BORN AGAIN

Evidencing the post-Nixon open ascendency of white evangelicalism into presidential

politics, three candidates in 1976 touted themselves as “born again”: President Ford, Republican; former California Gov. Ronald Reagan, Republican; and former Georgia Gov. Jimmy Carter, Democrat.

Nonetheless, Watergate, Ford’s pardon of Nixon, a disgraceful end to the Vietnam War, and the worst recession since the Great Depression collectively struck a stronger chord with the larger American electorate than did religion.

Although Ford secured the Republican nomination over Reagan, he entered the general election season as a clear underdog to the Democrats’ candidate Carter, a moderate Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher.

Carter with candor and cheerfulness campaigned on an evangelicalism inclusive of minorities and civil rights, angering many white evangelicals. In the closing months of the campaign a Carter interview with *Playboy* magazine in which the Democrat admitted lusting in his heart provided an avenue for Ford to capture more of the white evangelical vote.

With the November presidential election looming and still trailing Carter, Ford notched up his efforts to woo conservative white evangelicals.

As part of his outreach effort the president invited prominent Christian nationalists to the White House, including Wallie Amos Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas. Criswell evoked Carter’s *Playboy* interview, asking Ford if he would ever agree to do such an interview.

Ford replied that he, too, had been asked by *Playboy* for an interview. But “I declined with an emphatic no,”

he declared.

Shortly thereafter Criswell invited Ford to his Dallas church. On Sunday, October 10, Ford sat “in the congregation of the nation’s largest Baptist church and heard its influential pastor denounce the activities and words of Jimmy Carter, in what amounted to an endorsement of the Republican president,” reported the *New York Times*.

“Mr. Criswell at no point used Mr. Carter’s name, but his allusions were unmistakable. As Mr. Criswell said goodbye to Mr. Ford on the steps of the downtown church, he was asked if he wanted Mr. Ford to win the November election, and he answered, ‘Yes.’ Mr. Criswell said last week that he would support Mr. Ford.”

The blessings of key Christian nationalists helped, yet could not compensate for Ford’s weaknesses as a candidate. In the November presidential election Ford narrowly lost to moderate Baptist Jimmy Carter.

POST-OFFICE

Voted out of the nation’s highest office to which he had never been elected, Ford and his wife retired to Rancho Mirage, Calif. In addition to speaking engagements, writing books and playing golf, in the closing decades of the 20th century he reemerged politically as an elder statesman of the Republican Party, albeit remaining critical of Christian nationalist “zealots” and declaring his support for legal abortion and gay rights.

In 1999 Ford received some vindication from pardoning Nixon when President Bill Clinton awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom for helping heal the nation after “the nightmare” of Watergate.

Ford died on Dec. 26, 2006, at his California home. Following a state funeral in the nation’s capital, local funeral services took place at the Grace Episcopal Church in East Grand Rapids, Mich., the Ford’s family church since the 1940s.

Born into obscurity and domestic violence and later thrust unexpectedly into the White House, the former president was laid to rest in peace on the grounds of the Gerald R. Ford Museum in Grand Rapids. **NFJ**



TEAMWORK—Newly forming Good Faith Media combines and expands its experienced team that includes (left to right) Missy Randall, Bruce Gourley, Tony Cartledge, Autumn Lockett, John Pierce, Mitch Randall, Jackie Riley, Zach Dawes and Cliff Vaughn. Not pictured: Vickie Frayne and Jannie Lister.

Good Faith is coming!

Since announcing the formation of Good Faith Media, we have been buoyed by the widespread interest and affirmation. This new venture brings together the varied media and experiential resources of Nurturing Faith and EthicsDaily.

The sum of Good Faith Media is greater than the parts, however, as we seek to provide reflection and resources at the intersection of culture and faith through an inclusive Christian lens.

July is now the targeted month to have this new organization fully formed and the new web site launched. However, the gifted staffs from both organizations are now functioning as one solid team.

The public rollout planned for a June launch in Atlanta — as just about everything public — had to be scratched. However, a new approach — using digital and print exposure — will get the word out this summer.

Then the GFM team hopes to hit the road in the fall — to personally share the vision and story of this emerging and expanding media ministry that includes

news and opinion, videos and podcasts, resource publishing (including this journal and books), and transformative, in-person experiences.

Already, there are new offerings such as the Good Faith Weekly podcast hosted by CEO Mitch Randall and Executive Director of Development/Marketing Autumn Lockett. The podcast launch was moved up to allow for addressing pertinent issues related to Covid-19.

The best way to keep up with the emergence of Good Faith Media is to visit goodfaithmedia.org. Temporarily, that link goes to the GFM splash page on the EthicsDaily site.

There is general information including announcements, staff and a “Frequently Asked Questions” section — with responses. For example:

Will my Nurturing Faith Journal subscription continue?

Yes! Good Faith Media strengthens the good things EthicsDaily and Nurturing Faith are already doing.

If I’m subscribed to the EthicsDaily e-newsletter or the Nurturing Faith email list, will I receive the GFM e-newsletter when goodfaithmedia.org launches?

Yes! When goodfaithmedia.org officially launches in July, the email lists for both EthicsDaily and Nurturing Faith will be migrated over to Good Faith Media.

We will offer two email subscription options: (1) a daily email with the new content posted that day; and (2) a weekly email with selected, highlighted content. Anyone can subscribe to either list or both lists through an online form that will be embedded at goodfaithmedia.org.

The current splash page also has links to GFM social media and to the new podcast — showing the various topics and guests. The robust, new Good Faith Media web site will make its appearance at goodfaithmedia.org in July.

Thanks for your interest and support! We want you to be a vital part of this exciting new venture. **NFJ**

You saw it here first

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

We were in the right place at the right time. A few days into our first real archaeological dig experience, my wife Susan and I were working in the same square when she began to uncover what first looked like a spear point.

Others, including the dig director and area supervisor, gathered around as she carefully brushed the dirt away to reveal, not a spear, but the feather-shaped head of a ceremonial scepter.

As others crowded around to look at the find, an errant foot crumbled the edge of a baulk. As soon as everyone cleared out, I scooped up the displaced dirt and sifted it. A treasure rose to the surface: a small bronze image of a “smiting god,” probably intended to depict Baal Resheph.

The image was a standard form, showing the god striding with his left foot forward, holding a thunder club in his upraised right hand and a spear or lightning bolt in the left. His tall, pointed crown was a symbol of divinity.

Baal was widely regarded as the weather god, especially of storms. Most of the right arm was missing, but the posture was unmistakable.

We were digging at Lachish with a team led by Yosef Garfinkel of Hebrew University and Michael Hasel of Southern Adventist University in the summer of 2015. Lucky for us, we had been assigned to a designated square that turned out to be part of a Canaanite temple dating to the late Bronze Age, somewhere around 1200–1300 BCE.

Lachish was destroyed in a fiery conflagration sometime during that period, as evidenced by layers of ash, burned mudbrick, and fallen ceiling plaster we had to dig through. Was the city defeated by Joshua, or by the Egyptians? There’s not enough evidence to say.



I was given permission to describe our finds in the August 2015 issue of *Baptists Today* (now *Nurturing Faith Journal*) soon afterward, so long as I didn’t provide details and showed the smiting god only in its uncleaned form.

Full archaeology reports take time to be published, and sometimes never are. The Fourth Expedition to Lachish extended from 2013–2017, so the recent publication of the Canaanite temple in the January 2020 issue of the archaeology journal *Levant* was quicker than usual (“The Level VI North-East Temple at Tel Lachish,” by Itamar Weissbien, Yosef Garfinkel, Michael G. Hasel, Martin G. Klingbell, Baruch Brandl, and Hadas Misgav, published Jan. 16, 2020).

Excavations the year following our participation had continued to outline the extent of the temple, where another smiting god, two small altars, jewelry, bronze cauldrons, a nice pottery assemblage, and ritual standing stones were also found.

The story was big news, and received extensive coverage through an Israel Antiquities Authority press release, the Israeli

newspapers *Haaretz* and the *The Times of Israel*, London’s *Daily Mail*, and many others,

But you saw it first — right here! **NFJ**



The “smiting god” on the left was uncovered in 2014. The one on the right was found by Tony Cartledge during a dig the next year. Pegs on the feet would have been inserted into wooden stands. The figures likely served as cultic offerings. Credit: Tal Rogovski, IAA.

“Pandemics reveal a simple truth ancient humans could not understand and modern humans often refuse to admit, despite clear scientific evidence: the entire human race is some 99 percent genetically identical.”

WHO’S TO BLAME?

Jesus offers alternatives to scapegoating and injustice

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Whether among early cave dwellers or in the midst of a modern coronavirus crisis, religious tribalism seems to be woven into the fabric of the human story.

Spiritual leaders preach divisive messages condemnatory of others. Adherents from generation to generation, and in rote fashion, recite exclusive dogma designed to reinforce group think.

Loyalty to a wrathful deity bonds followers in a pact of anger that breeds violence.

TRIBALISM

Belief in a deity or deities is a universal phenomenon that evolutionary biologists, anthropologists and psychologists trace to cognitive and social adaptations among early humans. In the face of diverse individual temperament along with the necessity of group social bonds for survival, early humans formed competing tribes.

Tribes in turn created distinct, cohesion-forming narratives expressed in rituals, designed to make sense of the world, and centered on mythologized ancestors, heroes and supernatural beings.

For many millennia the earliest humans remained few in number. In small nomadic bands of hunters/gatherers they collectively wandered across a vast landscape, each group bonded by a distinct mythologized narrative serving as a primitive religion in a struggle for survival.

Clashes between bands occurred, but not on a large scale. Only in relative recent history did humanity reach numerical

proportions large enough for communities to wage systematic warfare against one another.

The earliest known cave paintings depicting humans pierced with arrows are approximately 30,000 years old. The earliest known mass human grave site, approximately 13,000 years old, is Jebel Sahaba on the banks of the Nile River in present-day northern Sudan, a site including arrowheads and human bones impacted by arrowheads.

Some 60 men, women and children were killed by archers over the course of a long period of drought, researchers believe, as groups of humans came into close proximity to one another along the banks of the Nile.

TRANSITION

About 10,000 years ago in present-day Israel the first known organized community, Jericho, evolved into a distinctive town. Surrounded by a stone wall and inhabited by as many as 3,000 people, Jericho became an early example of humanity’s transition from nomadic hunter/gatherer societies to stationary agricultural societies.

Over the next several thousand years Jericho’s population and ethnic composition fluctuated. By the time of the Bronze Age in the early era of the biblical Old Testament, more human communities transitioned to agricultural village life and staked claims to geographical boundaries in proximity to one another.

In corresponding fashion, people groups increasingly nationalized their community deities and transcribed into writing their oral religious mythologies

interpreted for evolving circumstances.

Adverse climatic events, meanwhile, drove people groups to seek the best lands suitable for agriculture. Wars over land ensued, victors attributing their triumphs to the superiority of their god or gods above those of their vanquished foes.

Over time the growing proximity of humans to one another led not only to an increase in warfare, but also gave rise to pandemics.

Throughout the Bronze Age and into the Early Iron Age, deaths from wars rose as people groups of perceived differences, each supplicating help from their gods, battled for control of land commonly desired.

But in Greece, one war in the late fifth century BCE signaled a shift in history’s evolving story of human death.

TRADITIONS

Athenians in ancient Greece largely believed that gods existed. In rituals and festivals, citizens honored and celebrated their religious traditions acknowledging the gods’ interaction in human affairs, and hoping to appease their gods whose actions and motives remained mysterious.

Within the space of the important but veiled human-god relationship, community leaders deployed their gods as political weapons — religionizing politics in ways known today as religious nationalism.

In all these respects the rival Spartans followed suit in their own way as the two city-states sought the wisdom of their gods before clashing in war when Sparta laid siege to Athens in 431 BCE.

The early historian Thucydides

witnessed and recorded the war that ensued. The siege of Athens devastated the surrounding countryside and crops. It also made the confined Athenians susceptible to a disease that Thucydides recorded as beginning in Ethiopia, moving to Egypt and Libya, and from there to the Greek world and into the larger Mediterranean.

As written by Thucydides and substantiated in the 1998 discovery of a fifth-century BCE mass grave near Athens' ancient Kerameikos cemetery, the pandemic devastated the city.

With the Spartans camped outside the walls and deaths mounting inside, Athenians crowded into their temples. Yet citizens' faith waned as the sacred buildings filled with the dead and dying victims of an invisible enemy while the gods remained silent.

Eventually the pandemic — likely typhoid fever — waned and the war continued until Athens, besieged for a second time, surrendered in 404 BCE.

PANDEMICS

Since that time pandemics have sporadically but persistently plagued humanity, irrespective of political and religious divisions, including the Justinian Plague.

Conventionally believed to have spread by flea-hosting black rats, the pandemic arrived in Constantine, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, in 541 CE and ravaged the Mediterranean region. Wreaking death and economic devastation, and periodically returning over the next two centuries, the plague ultimately and indiscriminately killed as many as 50,000,000 people, or one half of the world's population, across Europe, Asia, North Africa and Arabia.

Pandemics reveal a simple truth ancient humans could not understand and modern humans often refuse to admit despite clear scientific evidence: the entire human race is some 99 percent genetically identical. We are one singular humanity.

From cave-dwelling days to the present era of supercomputers and interstellar exploration of the universe, humanity has always been vulnerable to simple organisms that exploit in sometimes massively deadly ways our common genetics.

Especially deadly was the 14th-century



Black Death pandemic, followed by the 1918 misnamed "Spanish" flu pandemic. Although the public widely blamed Spain at the time, the pandemic's origins remain uncertain. Spain, one of the few nations retaining a free press during widespread World War I press censorship, simply was first to report news of a mysterious illness.

ASKING WHY

In a primitive era of vaccines and antibodies, cities that enacted quarantines suffered less, while death compounded in cities where crowds continued to congregate, including Philadelphia. As many as 100,000,000 people died worldwide.

As did the ancients amid pandemics long ago, people of religious faith struggled to understand and respond to the 1918 pandemic.

Historian Howard Phillips, a leading scholar of religion and the 1918 flu epidemic, examined religious responses to the influenza epidemic among Afrikaans (white South Africans). In his 1987 academic paper, "Why Did It Happen? Religious and Lay Explanations of the Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918 in South Africa," Phillips identified patterns of religious responses.

"Among laymen," Phillips concluded of South Africa's white Christian churches, "there was no shortage of those who were convinced that God had sent the pandemic." And in "nearly every case" of those who pointed to God, the deadly illness "was interpreted as punishment for sin."

Many respondents identified "social and moral" sins as including immorality, dishonesty, selfishness, shameless behavior, drunkenness, avarice, worldliness and

materialism.

Religious sins included a wide range of references to unfaithfulness to or disbelief in God, including blasphemy, failure to attend church, violations of the Sabbath, and "worshipping science."

Political sins focused on a lack of national unity regarding policies and religion, including political leaders' perceived lack of morality.

Christians who pointed to World War I as the cause of the flu pandemic often turned the conversation to religion, pointing to reasons as varied as defiance of God in participating in the war, or a prompting "by God to be more energetic in the cause of righteousness."

CAUSATION

Beyond white South Africans, Phillips' additional research plumbed religious sentiments elsewhere.

Many Hindus often spoke of the flu as "an indication of divine wrath." In India, Mahatma Gandhi voiced the opinion of many Hindus in framing the flu epidemic as God's punishment on Western civilization's colonialism.

Muslims frequently accepted the deadly illness as the will of Allah. Irish Catholics pointed to the "will of God" in explaining the 1918 flu epidemic.

In France and apart from Phillips' research, a diary kept by Michael Corday during the 1918 pandemic offers an altogether different perspective. Corday wrote of a theory, embraced by many French Catholics, that God sent the deadly flu to restore an appropriate balance between the sexes.

Although no comprehensive study of causation views of the 1918 pandemic among religious Americans exists, glimpses available from the historical record indicate that during the crisis religious ideologies often divided rather than united humanity.

Many white Christian leaders in urban areas, for example, pinned the blame for the pandemic on the very people they kept in servitude by means of racist and unjust civil codes: African Americans. Having in many cities and towns forced blacks to live in poverty-ridden, segregated and even apartheid environments, whites often pointed to the squalid conditions of black neighborhoods as originating the deadly illness.

In contrast, Francis J. Grimke, pastor of Washington D.C.'s Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church and one of America's leading African-American clergymen, identified a much different cause of the epidemic. In Grimke's estimation the deadly flu was at God's "command."

God willed the deaths, choosing to remove the victims "out of this world into the next," white and black alike. Grimke focused on the sin of racism as God's reason for sending the plague upon Americans, irrespective of skin color.

God was trying "to beat a little sense into the white man's head" in an effort to teach him that "the color of his skin counted for nothing." "It is the folly of this stupid color prejudice," Grimke insisted, for a judgment day of "solemn account."

BLAME GAME

Famed evangelist Billy Sunday, meanwhile, during a crusade in Providence, R.I., blamed the Spanish.

"The whole thing is a part of their propaganda," he decreed. The flu "started over there in Spain, where they scattered germs around, and that's why you ought to dig down all the deeper and buy more Liberty [WWI] bonds. If they can do this to us 3,000 miles away, think of what the bunch would do if they were walking our streets. There's nothing short of hell that they haven't stooped to do since the war began — darn their hides."

Even as he spoke, some in the audience collapsed, weak from the flu. Shortly there-

after city officials shut down the crusade.

John Quincy Adams Henry, speaking at an open-air service of the First Baptist Church of San Francisco, represented many white Christians when he decreed the pandemic as God's wrath upon sinners, those "who have been lamentably weak in moral and spiritual leadership and have not yet risen to the august occasion confronting them."

"Our churches have become conventional, cowardly and worldly," he continued. "Not only the people, but the churches must repent of their sins, and when they do the plagues will cease."

On the other end of the theological spectrum a Methodist minister called for "Intelligent Christians" to trust science rather than asking God to perform miraculous healing.

In short, while America's church leaders during the 1918 flu pandemic typically obeyed closure mandates of their houses of worship for the sake of the general welfare of all, religious ideologies often gave rise to public voices of division and hatred at odds with inclusive biblical teachings of all humanity created equally in the image of God.

HUMANITY

Now, a century after the 1918 flu pandemic, the world is besieged with yet another pandemic. In this new crisis the reality of our common humanity is once again evident: COVID-19, the coronavirus, is no respecter of ethnicity, race or socioeconomic standing.

Despite our common humanity, however, persons of financial means live in healthier environments, enjoy better medical care and experience more economic stability than impoverished individuals and families. The economic chasm between the haves and the have-nots subverts the common good and creates tensions in perilous times such as the present.

Endangered by a virus that preys upon our common humanity on the one hand, while divided on the other by economic and social systems that reduce humanity to a Darwinian struggle for survival, America and the entire world struggle with difficult choices.

Maximizing the saving of lives by extended quarantines requires placing economic systems on hold for a long period of time, leading to massive bankruptcies and, potentially, lives lost to starvation, suicide and deaths by myriad other causes.

Fully reopening global economic activity, however, could easily lead to the worldwide deaths of tens of millions of additional people whose lives could have been otherwise saved.

A middle-of-the-road, cautious approach — seeking to minimize the loss of life while slowly opening the economy in stages — offers a nuanced path forward that, fraught on both sides of the equation, may or may not achieve either objective.

BASIC QUESTION

From a different angle Michael Sandel, a political philosopher at Harvard University and widely recognized as one of America's leading ethicists, employs religious imagery in calling America to a "moral and political revival" amid the pandemic.

In our efforts to both overcome the pandemic and restore the nation's shattered economy, Sandel suggests we ask "a basic question that we have evaded over these last decades: What do we owe one another as citizens?"

"The more we believe that our success is our own doing," he notes of a decades-long period of global capitalist hubris, "the less likely we are to feel indebted, and therefore obligated to, our fellow citizens. The relentless emphasis on rising and striving encourages the winners to inhale too deeply of their success, and to look down on" the less fortunate.

"What kind of economy will emerge from the crisis?" Sandel asks. Will it continue to "create inequalities that poison our politics and undermine any sense of national unity? Or will it be one that honors the dignity of work" and "gives workers a meaningful voice and shares the risks of ill health and hard times?"

Will we "emerge from this crisis with an economy that enables us to say, and to believe, that we are all in this together?"

Sandel's suggestion that America refocus on a "we are all in this together"

economy is evocative of a largely forsaken system of societal well-being proposed some 250 years ago.

SYMPATHY/EMPATHY

Although bearing no formal name at the time, a late-18th-century proposal by a cross-disciplinary Scottish social scientist, ethicist, moral philosopher and theologian Adam Smith piqued the interest of millions of ordinary people, the disapproval of kings and nobility, and transformed the world.

Drawing from in-depth macro analysis of nation-state history, intensive micro studies of small communities of people, and Enlightenment theological currents, the revolutionary ethical system identified a single human characteristic as essential to the survival of human society: *sympathy*, the natural capacity of individuals to put themselves in another's place, imagining how the other is thinking and feeling. (The word *empathy* — which now defines this understanding — emerged much later.)

Conversely, a common historical characteristic of a nation's internal failures was greed, a selfish and excessive desire for more than what one needs.

Working from the basis of sympathy (empathy) as primary to societal well-being and greed as fundamentally destructive to human society, the Scottish thinker proposed a system of individual freedom and nation resource management based upon the cultivation of compassion, justice, conscience, morality and virtue (the outward manifestations of sympathy/empathy), and the containment of greed.

Within this paradigm, resources (or wealth) of a given society or nation consist of land, minerals, water, air and other natural resources of limited quantity, money, and human capital, or labor. Management of resources in an equitable manner among citizens ensures the success of societies and nations.

If all citizens of free accord live with sympathy/empathy toward others, economic transactions inherently benefit both seller and buyer, thereby contributing to equitability and success. But greed inevitably supersedes sympathy in the lives of some individuals.

In excess, greed creates a highly inequitable distribution of wealth by enriching the few and leaving the masses impoverished. When this happens, revolutions occur and societies and nations collapse from within.

Therefore, safeguards on greed must be put into place by systems of governance in order to prevent inequitable distribution of wealth.

SAFEGUARDS

This revolutionary ethical system proposed four basic safeguards:

1. progressive taxation, with wealthy citizens paying more proportionally than poor citizens;
2. banking and mercantile (corporate) regulations to prevent high interest rates, excessive profits, and monopolies;
3. robust, government-funded public education;
4. regulations ensuring “just and equitable” wages and providing for the basic necessities of adequate food, housing, clothing and “whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without.”

Wages were to rise in tandem with increasing national wealth — what today would be called “living wages.”

Scottish thinker Adam Smith published his well-thought-out system of ensuring successful human societies and nations over the course of two books: *The Theory Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *The Wealth of Nations* (1776).

Moral Sentiments never obtained widespread popularity, whereas *Wealth of Nations* quickly became a sensation in the Western world. The latter was translated into French and became a best seller.

Smith's calls for the equitable distribution of wealth contributed to the French Revolution — pitting royalty, nobility and clergy against impoverished common laborers. The volume also crowned Smith as the father of “capitalism” (although the term was birthed long afterward), modern economics and free markets.

However, the success of *Wealth of Nations* — detached from the foundation

of human sympathy/empathy previously established in the less popular *Moral Sentiments* — led in time to gross misinterpretation of Smith's teachings.

UNBALANCED

Today's popular expression of capitalism and free markets lacks Smith's foundation of sympathy/empathy and falls short of full implementation of Smith's balanced formula for preventing abuses of greed.

The result of these failures is the very problem that Smith addressed across his two volumes: the inevitability of the implosion of societies and nations when too much wealth is accumulated in the hands of too few people, otherwise known as plutocracy.

“What do we owe one another as citizens?” contemporary philosopher and ethicist Michael Sandel asks America today during a pandemic that has killed hundreds of thousands and devastated economic systems worldwide.

Two centuries ago, Scottish social scientist/ethicist/moral philosopher/theologian Adam Smith answered that very question with an economic system rooted in human compassion and constrained of human greed. Unfortunately, traditional capitalism as envisioned by Smith failed to withstand the impersonal forces of industrialization that steered Western economies into more, rather than less, wealth inequality.

A century after the publication of *Wealth of Nations* and during the Gilded Age prior to early 20th-century labor reforms, literature — nonfiction and fiction alike — increasingly argued that American capitalism had crossed the line into plutocracy.

Some prominent American leaders, too, swam against the surging plutocracy of the Gilded Age, including Rutherford B. Hayes. As governor of Ohio in 1871, Hayes worried about “the colossal fortunes ... consolidating into the hands of a few men.”

Long a reader of Adam Smith, even in the camps of his Union regiment in the Civil War, Hayes was not quite ready to resort to government intervention as proposed by Smith. Rather he suggested that “the home, the school, the platform, the pulpit, and the press” should address the problem of wealth inequality.

MONEY POWER

Elected to the nation's highest office six years later, amid a railroad strike in which laborers demanded living wages, President Hayes more fully embraced Adam Smith's concerns for laborers as he pondered railroad barons' demands to call out federal troops to suppress the strikes.

To his cabinet Hayes proposed "that if railroad workers were to be subjected to governmental force, perhaps the railroads should be subjected to governmental supervision in their labor policies."

Talked out of government supervision of the railroads, Hayes reluctantly sent troops to quell the strike. But the president still struggled for answers to capitalism's plutocratic bent.

If "force" was not the "real remedy" to the problem of conflict between workers and corporations, he mused, perhaps "education of the strikers" and "judicious control of the capitalists" could "diminish the evil" of capitalism's excesses, he wondered.

In his post-presidential years, and free of the constraints of the White House, Hayes used his influence to promote Smith's capitalism.

Drawing from Smith and colorblind to a degree many were not, Hayes in the 1880s advocated for federally funded "universal education" for all — white and black, men and women — believing it would help poor young people achieve financial independence and serve "the common interest of the whole people."

Year after year Hayes grew bolder in publicly speaking against plutocracy while wielding Smith's philosophy. "[F]ree government cannot long endure if property is largely in a few hands and large masses of the people are unable to earn homes, education, and a support in old age," he told an assembled crowd in 1886.

The following year while sitting in "church it occurred to me that it is time for the public to hear that the giant evil and danger in this country, the danger which transcends all others, is the vast wealth owned or controlled by a few persons." The former president continued:

Money is power. In Congress, in state legislatures, in city councils, in the courts, in the political conventions, in the press, in the pulpit, in the circles of the educated and the talented, its influence is growing greater and greater. Excessive wealth in the hands of the few means extreme poverty, ignorance, vice, and wretchedness as the lot of the many. It is not yet time to debate about the remedy. The previous question is as to the danger — the evil. Let the people be fully informed and convinced as to the evil. Let them earnestly seek the remedy and it will be found. Fully to know the evil is the first step towards reaching its eradication.

THE MODEL

Two years later, Hayes wrote to his brother: "The question of our day is, shall a plutocracy own the earth, and all who work with their hands be left in ignorance and vice by reason of poverty? ... Of all places, the pulpit should be the home of truth. The model sermon is the Sermon on the Mount."

Hayes' fears of plutocracy were well founded. Apart from 1930s New Deal programs providing important and lasting protections and benefits for laborers and social security for aged Americans languishing in poverty, Smith's vision of equitable capitalism never took solid root in America.

Today's massive wealth gap between rich and poor is quite similar to that of the 1880s Gilded Age, albeit technology titans and the financial industry have replaced the railroad barons and banks of old.

Nonetheless, Hayes perceptively observed that Smith's sympathy-rooted capitalism — expressed in compassion, justice, conscience, morality and virtue — shared with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount a concern for the well-being of all humanity.

Smith taught natural theology at the University of Glasgow. Portions of his lectures became the genesis of both *Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*.

Justice, revealed by God through the natural world, "is the main pillar that

upholds the whole edifice" of a healthy society, he wrote in *Moral Sentiments*, "but the prevalence of injustice must utterly destroy it."

Today, the coronavirus crisis has laid bare systems of injustice, providing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take stock of our nation's misplaced priorities. Christianity (America's dominant religious faith) and capitalism (America's economic system) are the primary shapers of national politics, society and culture.

Christian nationalism, a large and powerful subset of American Christianity — wielding an exclusivist, tribal god in similar fashion to ancient humanity — is comprised largely of conservative white evangelicals.

Dismissive of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Christian nationalists have a clear and transformative political vision of an anti-democracy, anti-science, theocratic America governed by select biblical laws, allied with exploitative and inequitable economic systems, and embodied in a vastly unjust society.

WEAKNESSES

Numbers tell the tale: Three men — Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and Jeff Bezos — according to some analyses own more wealth than the 160,000,000 Americans (one-half of the nation's population) on the lower end of the economic spectrum, placing America's wealth gap on par with that of Third World nations.

In America's current unjust economic system, access to the basic necessities of life is rationed proportional to wealth. A relative handful of Americans have full access to health care, housing options and quality secondary education. A shrinking middle class struggles to afford health care and has limited housing and secondary education options.

Most Americans, some 60 percent according to surveys, do not have enough savings to pay for an unexpected \$500 expense. They struggle day to day financially, and at best can barely afford the most basic of health care, are housing insecure, and have no or limited and lesser quality secondary educational opportunities.

Many Americans regularly or periodically depend upon government social services and turn to charitable food banks to help feed their families.

Now, the coronavirus crisis has further exposed the weaknesses of America's unjust economic system perpetuated by a government dismissive of inequalities.

Making matters worse, the current administration dismissed years of scientific advice to prepare for a pandemic, defunded programs designed to mitigate pandemics, and ignored multiple early warnings about the coronavirus in particular.

The adverse results of the administration's acute irresponsibility to protect Americans is evident in the staggering death totals from the virus and massive unemployment levels on par with the 1930s Great Depression that spurred New Deal programs designed to reign in the excesses of capitalism.

Such failed leadership, while applauded by Christian nationalists, leaves America without a moral or ethical rudder at a time of great peril. Nonetheless, amid the

greatest crisis in American history in generations, hope remains.

HOPE

Persons of good faith — inclusive and compassionate — have the opportunity to help steer America toward a new day of redemption. Christian tradition teaches that Jesus chose to become fully human in order to redeem humanity from the evil of self-centeredness.

Literally placing himself in the shoes of humanity and upending a long history of tribalistic religion, Jesus taught and modeled a controversial way of life subversive of unjust human systems as defined in his foundational Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 and Luke 6).

Having refused in his wilderness wandering the evil temptation to seize the world's riches and power and force an authoritarian god upon the cities and nations of the world, Jesus pronounced God's favor not merely in word, but in healing broken people who responded to his inclusive ministry.

Unlike countless tribalistic but aloof gods in civilizations across the ancient world, Jesus taught of an inclusive, compassionate and accessible God. Effectively stripping religion of temple buildings, authoritarian clerics and oppressive laws, Jesus told his closest followers to look for God's presence among those who live in fear and sadness.

A road map for nonviolently engaging and leavening inequities and injustices in religious, social, cultural, economic and political systems, the Sermon on the Mount birthed Christianity as a faith of redemption for humble, marginalized persons and communities.

For months many persons of good faith have set aside normal life to protect the common good of all from the deadly, contagious coronavirus. In this pause a rare opportunity is at hand to reimagine the future of our communities, our nation, all the nations of the world, and our planet.

For followers of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount provides answers for a time such as this. [NFJ](#)

Inspirational Reading

From *Zion to Atlanta*, the memoirs of *Baptists Today's* founding editor Walker L. Knight, is an honest and compelling personal story of facing challenges with faith and hope.

Now available
at a special price

\$12

From a Kentucky upbringing that included desertion by his newspaperman father, to service abroad in World War II, to a long and loving relationship with his beloved wife Nell, to carving out a career combining his dual calling to journalism and ministry, Walker takes readers on a fascinating life journey.

Orders: Nurturing Faith Inc., PO Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318
478-301-5655





Writing from a background of encounters with social injustice and suffering in his early years, this physician/pastor/hospital chaplain offers essays, reflections, and poetic verse that speak of the need for our presence in community with the suffering. “Even then,” Bill Holmes tells us, “there is more than a human presence, for in all such instances God is also present. This presence acting in the world is not dependent in any way on whether or not we see or acknowledge it. God spoke first; God will have the last word: ‘In the beginning was the Word’ (John 1:1).”

**AVAILABLE AT
NURTURINGFAITH.NET
478-301-5655**

REBLOG

Identifying with Jesus: all year long

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Communities, including congregations, tend to share cultural identities.

When he was pastor of First Baptist Church in Monroe, Ga., near the college town of Athens, Glen Money said you could yell, “Go Dawgs!” and “a hundred people would show up.”

Coming to the pastorate of the First Baptist Church of St. Petersburg, Fla., four years ago, Glen noted that the diverse “Sunshine City” congregation had less of a particular cultural or denominational identity.

So he and the church are spending 2020 with a clear, singular focus: to lay claim to a shared identity as followers of Jesus.

“We’re going to do 52 weeks of Jesus,” said Glen, who participated last year in one of Nurturing Faith’s Jesus Worldview Retreats in West Yellowstone, Mont.

Reminders are aplenty. The church created “52 weeks of Jesus” coffee mugs so members and guests can start each day focused on the congregation’s priority and identity.

Of course, clergy and lay leaders of just about every church will tell you they are focused primarily on Jesus. But the

52 Weeks of JESUS



reality is that other cultural and political ideologies get baptized and often push the gospel priorities — revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus — to the corners.

Glen said he hopes the year-long emphasis will reinforce and ensure the church’s priority and identity for the years ahead.

“This is going to be what we are known for — not as ‘the big church on Gandy,’” he said of the church’s shared identity. “But as followers of Jesus.” **NFJ**

The church created “52 weeks of Jesus” coffee mugs so members and guests can start each day focused on the congregation’s priority and identity.

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





“A better approach in times of crisis is to ask ourselves a fundamental question about our personal faith: ‘What can I learn about myself and about God in this experience?’”

Where is God in the COVID-19 pandemic?

Benny McCracken, pastor of First Baptist Church of West Yellowstone, Mont., hikes in the backcountry of Yellowstone National Park. Photo by John D. Pierce.

BY BENNY MCCRACKEN

To harken back to my conservative roots: God is on his throne actively caring for his creation. Sadly, however, there must be a tear in God’s eye for the ways some people abuse scripture to exploit the innocent and uninformed.

It is sad when those who possess religious authority turn every crisis into a judgment from God. Such abuses do not reflect the basic understanding of Jesus’ message found in the familiar words of John 3:16-17, and in the affirmation of John 10:10 that, unlike the thief that comes to steal, Jesus came so we can have life in the fullest possible way.

Fear is rooted in the unknown, and this pandemic brings enough realistic fear. Beware, however, of those whose underlying motivation is to generate unfounded and controlling fear in the hearts of their followers.

It is safe to say that, like many of you, nothing in my lifetime has had more unknown quantities than this widely spreading virus. And, naturally, when fearful we look for answers — for someone to provide clarification and insight that might lessen or at least explain our fears.

Knowledge is power in the midst of a crisis. Yet often what we hear within this current, dysfunctional religious-political environment is not reliable information, but efforts at manipulation. It comes from those who see themselves as the sole source of divine directives.

They claim to be the authoritative means by which we understand God’s workings in the world and especially in our nation. It is interesting to think that God would reveal such insights to them and no one else. Their efforts are to control the thought process of their listeners regarding everything from religious belief to politics to finances.

Perhaps, no surely, a better approach in times of crisis is to ask ourselves a fundamental question about our personal faith: “What can I learn about myself and about God in this experience?”

It is worth noting that our pandemic shutdown coincided with Holy Week — a most sacred time that speaks directly to what we’re facing in this crisis. Good Friday is the darkest and most hopeless episode in our journey of faith, yet resurrection always looms — the ultimate sign of hope for all of creation.

This just might be the metaphor and reality for our experiences with uncertainty and suffering today but with an expectation of hope for tomorrow. My faith says it is.

The late John Claypool is my go-to writer in times of crisis. In his book, *Stories Jesus Still Tells*, he reminds us that God’s goodness is always greater than human badness. That is the assurance and comfort that faith brings to me in such times.

When hearing of the harsh, false judgments someone attributes to God, we need to remember that God loves us more than that. However, COVID-19 provides an opportunity to learn more about ourselves and God, and to live differently.

Christianity is not merely a religion of answers. Contrary to biblical rationalists, the Bible does not offer an answer to every question of life. Rather the Christian faith is a journey of relationships — with God and one another.

It is a journey of trust — believing that the God with whom we lovingly relate now is going with us through whatever may come into our lives. **NFJ**

—Benny McCracken is pastor of First Baptist Church of West Yellowstone, Mont.

Deeply entwined

7 marks of a ‘Christian nation’ in a perilous hour

BY DAN DAY

“Without any doubt, we Germans are a Christian nation.”

That pronouncement by Heinrich von Treitschke, an influential German political thinker, was received warmly as the 20th century dawned. His fellow countrymen were pleased that he had perceived “how deeply Christianity is entwined with every fiber of the German character.”

The Christian faith “inspired the nation’s arts and sciences,” he said, and its spirit “animated all healthy institutions of our state and society.”

Germany was, after all, the land of Martin Luther, a nation of 40 million Protestants and 20 million Roman Catholics — all of them “Christian” — with Jews numbering less than one percent of its population.

How, then, did this “Christian” nation become the home for a poison (fascism / Nazism) that snuffed the lives of six million European Jews, plunged the world into a war that took 25 million soldiers’ lives (and perhaps an equal number of civilian lives), and consumed more than four trillion dollars of the earth’s resources?

How was it possible for a “Christian” people to swear fanatical allegiance (“*Sieg Heil!*” means “Holy Victory!”) to a dictatorial Führer who had no use for historic Christianity — a religion for weaklings mired in Jewish filth when what was needed was a muscular “positive Christianity” of pure German identity?

How can we explain church sanctuaries forested with flags depicting a twisted cross (the German word for cross is *kreuz*; the word for swastika is *hackenkreuz*, a hooked cross) and so few worshippers sensing something was horribly wrong?

How did German Christians not see that the nationalism of the Nazi slogan “*Deutschland über alles*” (Germany over All, Germany First) was a point-blank refutation of the primal Christian creed, “Jesus is Lord”?

The problem is complex and helpful answers equally so. But some understanding is crucial if we are to profit from the painful past and walk wisely in the political chaos of the 21st century.

At the risk of oversimplification, following are seven observations about the tragic devolution of the church in Germany between 1919–1945.



ONE: The Church was filled with frustrated, unrepentant citizens.

On Nov. 11, 1919 World War I finally slogged to its conclusion with inglorious defeat for Germany, a nation only 48 years old, formed from a federation of previously independent states.

The hubris and miscalculation that led this first German *Reich* (kingdom) into war ended with a humiliated nation saddled with punitive armistice terms exacted when the victors divided the war’s spoils.

French leader Clemenceau said the only thing not demanded of Germany in the Treaty of Versailles was the Kaiser’s britches. U.S. President Herbert Hoover was less humorous when he wrote:

Destructive forces sat at the Peace Table. The future of twenty-six jealous races was there. The genes of a thousand years of inbred hate and fear of every generation were in their blood. Revenge of past

wrongs rose every hour of the day. It was not alone the delegates that were thus inspired. These emotions of hate, revenge, desire for reparations, and a righteous sense of wrong were at fever heat in their people at home.

For Germany’s role in The Great War even a democratic form of government was forced upon a people whose pattern of subservience to strong, authoritarian rulers was bone deep. Sadly, the inept political bungling of this enemy-mandated democracy (the Weimar Republic, Germany’s second *Reich*) was further exacerbated within 10 years by a worldwide financial collapse.

Thus, during the years of 1919–1933 the pews of German churches were filled by a proud, unrepentant people, raw with political embarrassment, financial deprivation, and cultural rage. They sought the consolations of their religion, surely, but they also sought a leader who could lead them to the international greatness they believed was due them.

Not seated among them, but busy formulating a response to their patriotic yearnings, was a young and opportunistic, bitter veteran of the Kaiser’s army, Adolph Hitler. When the surrender had been announced, he said:

Everything went black before my eyes; I tottered and groped my way back to the dormitory, threw myself on my bunk and dug my burning head into my blanket and pillow.... And so it had all been in vain. In vain all the sacrifices and privations; in vain the hunger and thirst of months...in vain the hours in which, with mortal fear clutching at our hearts, we nevertheless did our duty....

Hitler wrote in his 1925 autobiographical Nazi manifesto, *Mein Kampf* (meaning, “My Fight”): “The more I tried to achieve clarity on the monstrous event... the more the shame of indignation and disgrace burned my brow... I, for my part, decided to go into politics.”

“Preachers found that sermons dealing with the most basic Christian teachings of forgiveness and loving all persons were heard to be ‘political’ and the slightest negative references to current events were construed to be unpatriotic...”

TWO: The Church was politically inexperienced.

From Martin Luther the Germanic people had received a nuanced concept of “Two Kingdoms” in which the spiritual dimension of life was represented in the kingdom of Christ and the mundane, secular concerns by the kingdom of the world.

In Luther’s view these were mutually reinforcing expressions of God’s two-handed way of nurturing personal piety and public order. Christians owed obedience to Throne and Altar.

Four hundred years later, Luther’s Two Kingdoms concept meant in actual practice that the Altar was expected to preach a spiritual gospel and inculcate personal virtue — and leave the affairs of the state to the Throne.

There was little space left for the church to speak to the state, let alone criticize its actions. What today’s activists would call “speaking truth to power” was not within this church’s skill set.

Therefore, when the political winds dramatically changed direction, as they did upon Hitler’s becoming chancellor in 1933, church leaders were ill equipped by church doctrine, practice or congregational expectation to oppose the Throne.

Preachers found that sermons dealing

with the most basic Christian teachings of forgiveness and loving all persons were heard to be “political” and the slightest negative references to current events were construed to be unpatriotic and anti-Hitler.

Pastors were expected to remain politically neutral or be openly pro-Nazi.

One “prophetic” voice, Pastor Paul Schneider, the first pastor to die in a concentration camp, protested to his wife in a letter written from his cell in 1937: “It is not that I and all the rest have said too much in our sermons, but rather that we have said far too little.”

In truth, Schneider and the rest had few models to emulate other than the biblical prophets.

THREE: The Church was financially compromised.

Another aspect of the unification of Throne and Altar was the financial dependence inherent within it.

Just as the rulers of the separate Germanic states had previously appointed their ecclesiastical leaders and funded their activities, so during the Kaiser’s and the Weimar administrations, Germany’s churches were included within the nation’s budget and supported by citizens’ tax dollars.

Administratively, each branch of the Church (Lutheran, Reformed, Roman Catholic, etc.) determined its own leadership, but all were dependent upon the government for their financial livelihood.

The initiation of such church disagreement with Hitler as there was began with Hitler’s desire to assume administrative control of the churches. A large group of Protestant church leaders, calling themselves the “German Christians,” supported his desires, seeking “One Church for One Germany.”

These “German Christians” also ardently supported the Fuhrer’s larger agenda, but from a coalition known as the “Confessing Church” they encountered stout opposition to Hitler’s push for a state-appointed bishop over all the churches. But both groups were understandably wary of offending the hand that fed them.

Tell Your Church's Story

The web is the first place most people go when looking for a new church home. What impression does your church website make?

Get a beautiful, mobile-friendly church website to tell your church's story.

We also offer logo, newsletter and worship bulletin redesign.

Contact Faithlab today.
faithlab.com

faithlab

FOUR: The Church was plagued by unacknowledged racism.

The word “German” and its correlates became in those days Nazi euphemisms for a biologically pure Aryan race. There was and is no such thing as a pure Aryan race, but truth did not hinder propagandists from peddling the lie of a biological basis for the notion of “German” superiority.

From this falsehood they then further legitimated their denigration of all persons not of pure Aryan blood — such as gypsies, Africans and especially Jews.

Although the number of Jews within Germany was miniscule, the Nazis saw (wealthy) European Jewry as being primary contributors to Germany’s defeat in World War I — and thinkers such as von Treitschke gave scholarly credibility to that notion when he concluded his earlier quoted praise of Christian Germany by saying: “Judaism, on the other hand, is the national religion of a tribe which was originally alien to us.”

Even in the now-famous Article 24 of its 1920 platform, the Nazis declared that the Party “combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit at home and abroad and is convinced that a permanent recovery of our people can only be achieved from within on the basis of the common good before individual good.”

Once in power, the Nazis repudiated even the Jewishness of Jesus and sought a German “positive Christianity” free of all Jewish taint. But the odor of Auschwitz crematoria was within the Party’s earliest platform; anti-Semitism was clear from the beginning.

Within the churches, however, the resistance to this arose only when the “German Christians,” following Hitler’s 1933 purging of all Jews from state employment, attempted to purge the handful of church leaders who had been born Jewish.

Their attempt ignited a struggle within the church that only a few people (for example, young Dietrich Bonhoeffer) understood to be a struggle about race; most viewed it as an issue of ordination, of baptism’s efficacy, and of church authority.

The reason for this blindness was the embedded but unacknowledged anti-Semitism within the church.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Baptists and the Holocaust” in *American Baptist Quarterly* (Spring 2018)

Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (Oxford, 1992)

Matthew Hockenos, *Then They Came for Me: Martin Niemoller, The Pastor Who Defied the Nazis* (Basic Books, 2018)

Dean G. Stroud, ed. *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich* (Eerdmans, 2013).

Whereas the Nazis’ anti-Semitism was racially based, the church’s disdain was religiously based and its history reached back to the long venerated interpretation of Matt. 27:25 (“His blood be upon us and on our children”) as an everlasting divine judgment against the Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus — not to mention the many other passages within the New Testament that bear an anti-“Jew” aura.

Even Germany’s favorite historic “Christian,” Martin Luther, had written many astonishingly anti-Semitic paragraphs. Given such a history and the scant number of Jews within the nation, the Nazis’ racist rhetoric was easy to dismiss, if it was even seriously noted.

For church folk the issue wasn’t justice for a minority; it was the attainment of a restored nation with international respect.

FIVE: The church mirrored the nation’s endorsement of a strong leader with bold ideas.

As the darkness of the Great Depression fell upon an already prostrated nation, another seismic shock came to Germany. In the election of 1930, the Nazis astounded the nation’s intelligentsia by garnering 6.5 million votes, granting them 107 seats, the second largest representation in the *Reichstag*.

No doubt this ascendancy was due in part to the Party’s bold ideas. The Party was rabidly anti-Communist in an hour when

the Red Scare was at fever pitch and its Russian homeland only a border away. But it was just as rabidly pro-Germany.

The Nazi promises of prosperity, its list of practices and groups detrimental to a restored Germany, and its avowed resolve to purify a soiled nation offered strong medicine indeed. Tragically, it was a medicine that proved fatal when in 1933 the Nazi’s painter-turned-politician and his gang of thugs wrested complete control of the government.

In that pivotal election year of 1930 the president of the Weimar Republic, Paul von Hindenburg, was 83 years old, an overweight relic of an era that was as dead as the soldiers he had led to defeat in The Great War. The chancellor, Heinrich Brüning, 44, was a thin-lipped, balding administrator who, according to British historian Piers Brendon, had “a habit of speaking quietly as though he were afraid of being heard.”

The pair incarnated everything the 40-year-old Adolph Hitler despised — and dramatically reversed.

Contrary to their prim, monocle-wearing respectability, Hitler campaigned in common clodhoppers, blue serge suit, black fedora, and soiled overcoat, resembling “a suburban hairdresser on his day off,” according to one admirer. But in the 1920s, politics was still more word than image-oriented.

In a 2006 study of *The Language of the Third Reich*, philologist Victor Klemperer noted the abundance of superlatives in Hitler’s speech and Nazi propaganda; superlatives such as “greatest” and “bravest” and “most glorious” always attended Nazi ideas just as only denigrating adjectives were used for all others.

But Hitler used image too. “Only a storm of hot passion can turn the destinies of peoples,” he had averred in *Mein Kampf*, “and he alone can arouse passion who bears it in himself.”

Accordingly, Hitler’s oratory was an explosion of passion. “An orgasm of words” flowed from the man, according to one observer, inducing ecstasy in his listeners who seemed not to care that even his frequent tactic of crushing his spectacles in his clenched fist as he neared his final sentences was scripted for affect.

Brendon noted that Hitler lost about

*“For church folk the issue wasn’t justice for a minority;
it was the attainment of a restored nation with international respect.”*

five pounds in weight during every speech, though he drank small bottles of mineral water throughout. He sometimes took a block of ice to the rostrum to cool his hands.

But he sweated so profusely that the dye running from his suit stained his shirt and underwear blue.

Germany — indeed the political world — had never seen or heard his like. Overwhelmed by the spectacle he presented, the German people — including well-intentioned Christians — gave him just enough power to grab still more power until the world they had known was set afire and lost.

SIX: The church was ruled by self-preservation concerns.

In one sense, this observation is a restatement of the earlier stated financial dependency of the church. But it is also more.

When the church opposed Hitler’s desire to assume administrative control of the church, the objection was not to his wider program of German renaissance; it was a struggle for the theological integrity of the church, about the internal workings of the church.

Even the justly celebrated repudiation of Nazism found in the Confessing Church’s Barmen Confession of 1934 (written primarily by Karl Barth) did not, for all its other merits, address the racist foundation of Nazi ideology.

Later, when the “German Christians” attempted to purge Jewish-born leaders from the church, the debate was focused on the status of Jewish converts to Christianity, not on the value and dignity of the Jewish people themselves.

In both instances, the conflict centered around the institution’s life, not the life of the world. Even Barth admitted: “It confined itself to the Church’s Confession, to the Church service, and to Church order as such. It was only a partial resistance.”

Only in a 1936 document penned by a core of “Confessing Church” leaders (and perhaps never seen by Hitler) did Protestant church leaders repudiate the Nazi administration. The Vatican did so on March 4, 1937, in the papal encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* (“With Burning Anxiety”).

But, by then, it was too late.

We can strive to contextualize and soften this disappointing record by placing alongside it the affirmation of the church given by the Jewish exile, Albert Einstein, who had looked to the universities and the nation’s newspapers to offer great resistance. But they failed. According to Einstein,

Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler’s campaign for suppressing the truth. I never had any special interest in the Church before, but now I feel a great affection and admiration for it because the Church alone has had the courage and persistence to stand for intellectual and moral freedom. I am forced to confess that what I once despised. I now praise unreservedly.

Still, the church in all subsequent ages, must confront the confession attributed to Lutheran pastor Martin Niemoller, who spent 1937–1945 in Sachsenhausen and Dachau as Hitler’s “personal prisoner”:

First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out — because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me — and there was no one left to speak for me.

SEVEN: The church was victimized by ‘cheap grace.’

As Niemoller struggled in 1937 to accustom himself to solitary confinement in Sachsenhausen, he received a book, *Nachfolge* (“Discipleship”), just written by his younger colleague, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

It contained an inscription in Bonhoeffer’s hand: “To Martin Niemoller, who could have written a better book on this subject.”

Bonhoeffer’s work, later published in English as *The Cost of Discipleship*, has however become a classic. Its first section deals with Martin Luther’s much beloved rediscovery of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone.

However, as Bonhoeffer surveyed the subsequent interpretation of Luther’s insight and the spineless state of Protestantism in the reformer’s homeland, he sadly concluded that “the result [is] that a nation became Christian and Lutheran, but at the cost of true discipleship.”

“We gave away the word and sacraments wholesale,” he wrote, “we baptized, confirmed, and absolved a whole nation unasked and without condition... We poured forth unending streams of grace. But the call to follow Jesus in the narrow way was hardly ever heard.”

Written from the epicenter of the modern world’s most climactic *de profundis* hour, Bonhoeffer’s words must be pondered, not as interesting history, but as an admonition to Christians in all hours and places. **NFJ**

—J. Daniel (Dan) Day, pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church of Raleigh, N.C., may be contacted at danday742@gmail.com.

His new book, *What Is the Gospel? A Pastor’s Disappointment and Discovery*, is soon to be published by *Nurturing Faith*.

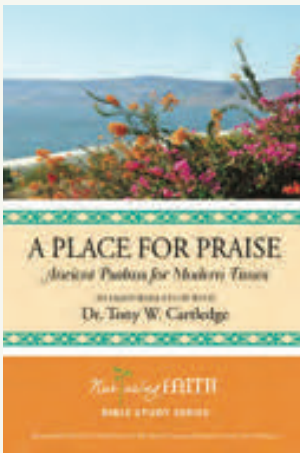
A SPECIAL OFFER

from Nurturing Faith

"Modern challenges often provide age-old feelings of loss, insecurity, and hopelessness. These honest, prayerful, poetic words of the psalmist, however, lead to places where life is sustained and the future can be faced with renewed faith."

—JOHN D. PIERCE,
NURTURING FAITH

Both in times of joy and uncertainty, the Psalms have long brought comfort and hope.



For a limited time, purchase both volumes, including shipping, for just \$8:

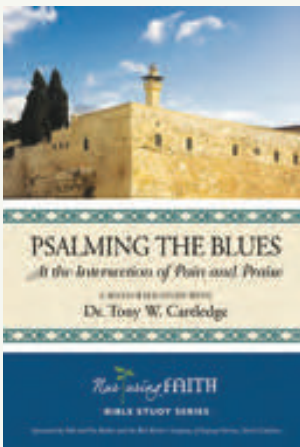
books.nurturingfaith.net/bookstore

(478) 301-5655

Nurturing Faith

P.O. Box 6318

Macon, GA 31208



Explore the depths of these timeless Psalms with Tony Cartledge's *A Place For Praise: Ancient Psalms for Modern Times* and *Psalming the Blues: At the Intersection of Pain and Praise*.

These combined studies of 15 selected Psalms — with Tony's familiar "Digging Deeper" notes, "Hardest Question" answers, and discussion questions included — are scholarly yet applicable to daily living.

Thanks to Bob and Pat Barker and the Bob Barker Company of Fuquay-Varina, N.C., for a gift to sponsor the publication of these studies.

“Without that God-groundedness, truth-telling can readily become nothing more than harping, and hope-telling only wishful thinking.”

Truth & Hope

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

In his timely new book, *Truth & Hope: Essays for a Perilous Age*, Walter Brueggemann writes: “Truth-telling is grounded in the God who will not be mocked by our illusions. Hope is God-grounded in the conviction that even our wayward resistance does not negate God’s good resolve for fidelity in the creation of futures.”

Then he asserts: “Without that God-groundedness, truth-telling can readily become nothing more than harping, and hope-telling only wishful thinking.”

Those persons familiar with Brueggemann know his unique ability to bring forth the prophetic voice within the biblical text in ways that unsettle our complacency and stir our poorly settled priorities.

When blessed to be in one of his doctoral seminars long ago, I described the experience to friends as “listening to George C. Scott as Patton, telling Old Testament stories.”

The intensity and insights have lasted over the decades, and more follow in this latest volume from Westminster John Knox Press.

The prophetic tradition of truth-telling anchored in hope is exactly what we need in this particularly perilous time in which fear and uncertainty seek to rule our days.

If seeking a compromised chaplain to our current culture (and there are plenty of loud ones today), don’t read Brueggemann. For that matter don’t read Jeremiah either,

who voices God’s disgust with injustice and reminds us too that we have forgotten God and trusted in lies (Jer. 13:25).

Crises test our arrogant claims of piety and exceptionalism — and the “moral cover,” as Brueggemann calls it, used to justify aggression toward and exploitation of those we, but not God, consider of less value and expendable.

TRUTH

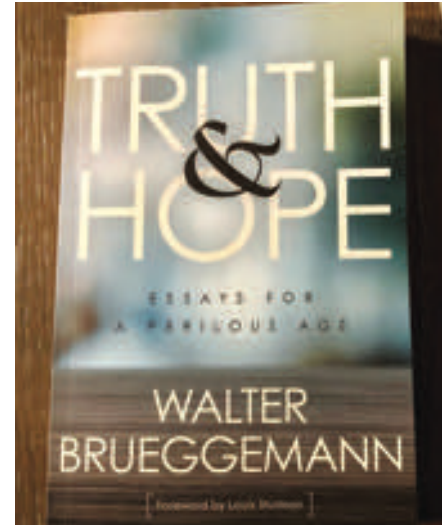
Fact-less ramblings repeatedly flow from the highest level of government. Propagandized memes spread across social media like a virus — with their unsubstantiated claims regurgitated in conversations.

Truth is in short supply, while forgeries abound. Truth is not speaking one’s mind or “telling it like it is” when it isn’t.

Even the one who claimed, “I am the way, the TRUTH and the life,” has his way of life dismissed as inferior to power, prejudice and fear — by the very ones who claim him as Savior and Lord.

Uncritical minds and fearful hearts grasp that which is comforting over that which is, in fact, uncomfortably true.

Daily wolf-crying numbs us to the point that we simply don’t expect to hear the truth — and often don’t want to deal with the upheavals of reality. Truth is a tragic casualty of lazy minds that settle for easy, false answers that temporarily soothe the fears and satisfy the appetite of those unwilling to taste cultural change.



HOPE

The only adequate fuel to keep us going — especially through such challenging times — is realistic hope. It is rooted in the belief that what is beyond us is more promising than our current state.

Hope is what we rest in when we let go of something we love and endure pain that we pray is not lasting. It is betting our lives on the one who promises enduring love.

Back to Brueggemann, who notes that Jeremiah, like other biblical prophets, moved his message from truth to hope in proper sequence: “There can be no hope until truth is told. Our temptation, of course, is to do the work of hope without the prior work of truth.”

Moving through unprecedented times, we can benefit from what Brueggemann notes: “in the Christian tradition, the sequence of truth and hope is given dramatic articulation in the Friday [crucifixion] and the Sunday [resurrection] of the life of Jesus.”

Both truth and hope are rooted in a faithfulness that doesn’t settle for falsehoods or immediate gratification at the expense of others or a damaged future.

Many of us have a bit more time on our hands. We can spend these moments, hours and days on mounting fear amid uncertainty. Or, we can open ourselves up to better embracing and extending that which is truthful — out of which hopefulness flows. **NFJ**

Questions Christians ask scientists

Why should people of good faith encourage scientific understanding?

BY PAUL WALLACE

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of schools, restaurants, stores and businesses of all kinds. It has forced concerts, performances and festivals to be cancelled.

Airports, interstates and shopping malls nearly emptied for weeks. Private vacations and most public events were taken off the books. Globally, life ground to a halt.

Scientists told us social distancing is the key to slowing down the spread of this virus, and most people in most places believed them and acted accordingly. But there are exceptions.

Some people publicly questioned the scientific consensus and disregarded the recommendations of those professionals who have committed their lives to understanding infectious diseases, and many of these people are motivated by religion.

"We are exercising our right as people of faith to worship," Pastor Wilbur Browning of Centennial Olivet Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., told WDRB when asked why he refused to close his church on Easter.

"According to the First Amendment, last time I read it, the governor can't intervene to tell us how to worship our God," Browning continued. "I'm a man of God and we believe in God, so coronavirus, for us, has not taken the place of the power of God in our life."

To his congregation Browning wrote: "By now all have heard of the Coronavirus and the number of people it has affected. Let us be reminded whatever God allows is purposeful... In light of this, we have prayerfully decided not to close the church.



This is... not a time to shrink back, but to move forward, prayerfully and faithfully in the Lord Jesus Christ, who reminded us that tribulations and suffering would surely come."

Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear, who ordered the closing of houses of worship along with restaurants and other businesses, was not amused.

During a news conference, Beshear said of another Kentucky church that refused to close: "It's a scientific fact that [the pastor] holding this service today will spread the virus within his congregation, and at Christmas, he's going to have fewer people in his congregation."

Politics plays a significant part in this. Many citizens, like Pastor Browning, who resist government authority do so out of a sense that their constitutional freedoms are being eroded by orders to stay at home.

And, since the government is following the advice of the scientific establishment, scientists are being rejected alongside elected officials. But the religious motivation cannot be denied, and the rejection of science by people of faith is nothing new.

According to a major study reported

at vox.com, the anti-vaccination movement has a very large religious representation. Creationism is explicitly religious also.

Many people who reject climate science do so for religious reasons, and a significant number of flat-Earthers are Christian believers. Therefore the religiously motivated skepticism of shelter-in-place orders, although backed by science, is just another variation on an old theme.

Why, even when people are dying and lives are clearly at stake, do so many Christians reject science?

Theologies that emphasize the distinction between the wisdom of humanity and the power of God may motivate such rejections by placing science in the "wisdom of humanity" category.

In 1 Cor. 2:4-5 Paul writes: "My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God."

To attribute wisdom and authority to the scientists is to attribute power to the virus, but as Browning said, "Coronavirus, for us, has not taken a place of the power of

Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to editor@nurturingfaith.net.

God in our life.”

Interpreting Paul this way and in this context reminds me of that old story you have probably heard:

A downpour begins and a man’s house starts to flood. A neighbor stops by in her car and says, “We’re moving to higher ground!” The man replies, “No, God will save me!”

When the water reaches nine feet he’s in his second story window and a boy paddles up in a canoe. “Climb in!” says the boy. “No, God will save me!” replies the man.

When the water reaches 18 feet the man has crawled up on the roof and a helicopter stops overhead. “Climb up!” shouts the pilot as a ladder is lowered. “No, God will save me!” replies the man.

So the man drowns, goes to heaven and asks God, “Why didn’t you save me?” God replies, “I tried, three times!”

Among some American Christians there seems to be a sense that God’s saving work must come from inside the church or carry some miraculous and otherworldly elements. But this is just magical thinking, because God so often speaks to us through

the everyday and the non-religious: a neighbor, a helicopter pilot, a scientist on TV.

Scripture should never be interpreted in ways that directly contradict our best knowledge about the world and the way it works, whether it is Genesis and evolution or 1 Corinthians and epidemiology.

Science remains our best way of learning about the biological and physical world. To pursue science is to exercise one’s God-given capacity to learn and know and understand, directed toward God’s very good creation.

Science can even be a way of *loving God*. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your *mind*,” said Jesus in Matt. 22:37.

The pursuit of science, which is but one form of the intellectual love of God, is nothing less than worship for a scientist who is also a Christian.

St. Augustine wrote, “Wherever one discovers truth, it is the Lord’s,” and this includes any and all truth, whether it’s discovered in church, in school, at the observatory, at the physics lab, or at the CDC.

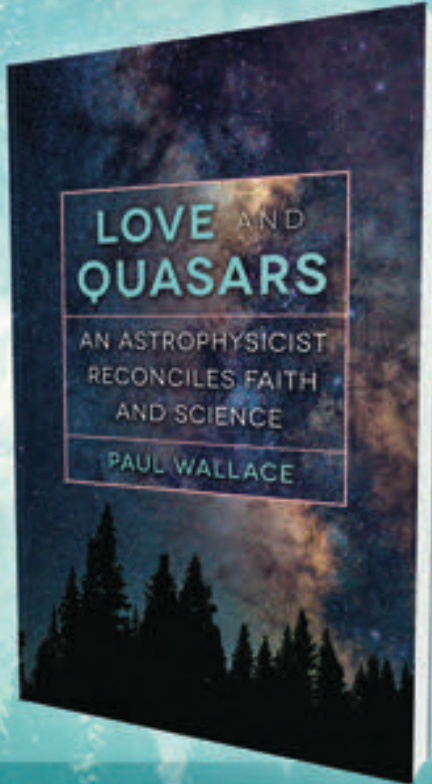
Christianity has not always been true to its foundational beliefs, two of which are: (1) God created the world and called it very good, and (2) Jesus of Nazareth is God incarnate.

These statements of faith both point to a biological and physical world of radical goodness and value, a world God created and entered, a world in which God became embodied in flesh and bone. We have no place to call the world anything but blessed, good, reliable and knowledgeable — and the terrific success of science underlines this truth.

Science has been called the kingdom of facts. This oversimplifies things, but I like it nonetheless.

In my view, facts are divine gifts, fixed points in an ever-turbulent world. I mean this exactly as I say it: Facts are literally gifts from God, and gifts are meant to be shared.

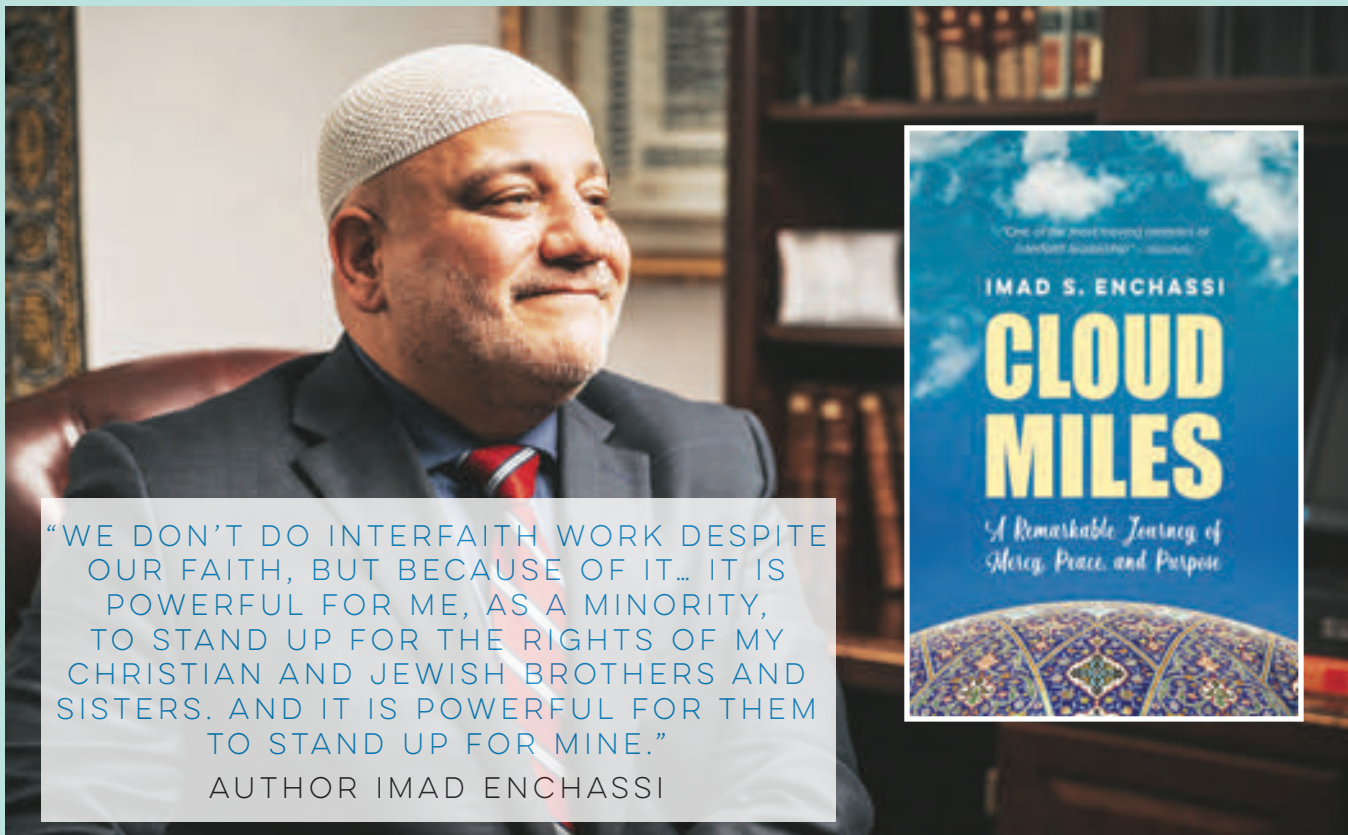
Here’s one fact, for example: Social distancing is the way to beat this virus and save lives. To reject science is to reject these divine gifts, and in this age, to reject them may be to die. **NFJ**



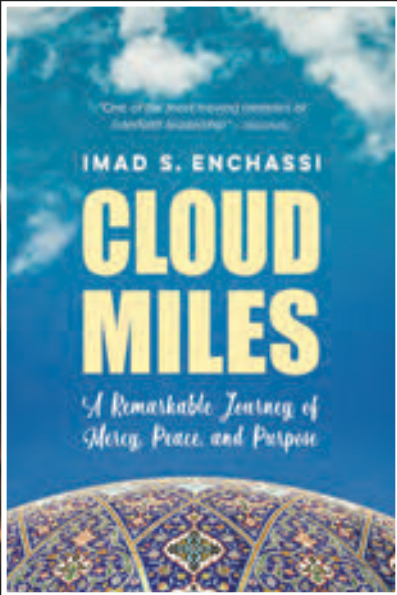
LOVE AND QUASARS
AN ASTROPHYSICIST RECONCILES FAITH AND SCIENCE
PAUL WALLACE

“Wallace offers absolute fidelity to the sciences while speaking authentically to people of faith.”
—MIKE MCHARGUE

fortress press
Now Available Wherever Books Are Sold | Fortresspress.com



“WE DON’T DO INTERFAITH WORK DESPITE OUR FAITH, BUT BECAUSE OF IT... IT IS POWERFUL FOR ME, AS A MINORITY, TO STAND UP FOR THE RIGHTS OF MY CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH BROTHERS AND SISTERS. AND IT IS POWERFUL FOR THEM TO STAND UP FOR MINE.”
 AUTHOR IMAD ENCHASSI



CLOUD MILES: *A Remarkable Journey of Mercy, Peace, and Purpose*

BY IMAM IMAD ENCHASSI, PH.D.

“Read *Cloud Miles* and you will want to share many of the heartwarming and humorous stories. Give this wonderful book to your family and friends. I guarantee they will thank you!”
 —Charles Kimball, Author of *When Religion Becomes Evil and Truth Over Fear*

“*Cloud Miles* invites readers on a journey of heartache, mercy, and hope. For anyone interested in a peaceful future and unrestrained hope, read this book today.”
 —Mitch Randall, Executive Director, Good Faith Media

“*Cloud Miles* is a compelling read that made me think more critically about relationships and, at times, made me laugh out loud and moved me to tears. I highly recommend this book.”
 —Brad Henry, 26th Governor of Oklahoma

“I am deeply appreciative of Imam Enchassi’s tireless efforts to seek common purpose and set aside the things that too often divide us... Empathy and love are the surest paths to coexistence in this world, and I admire his commitment to these ideals.”
 —David M. Holt, Mayor of Oklahoma City

“If you want to feel better about the human spirit, and truly understand the faith of our Muslim sisters and brothers, read this book, and then get to know your neighbors. Nothing would please my favorite imam more.”
 —Robin R. Meyers, Senior Minister, Mayflower Congregational UCC Church, OKC

.....
NOW AVAILABLE AT NURTURINGFAITH.NET!
478-301-5655

New from Nurturing Faith!

“In *Seeing With Jesus*, Jack Glasgow masterfully breaks down into significant pieces practical but deeply spiritual guidance for living with a Jesus worldview... The study of verses you may think you’ve known is surprisingly revealing. There is meat in every sentence, and you will want to read this more than once.”

—Jackie Baugh Moore, Vice President,
Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation

“While living in a world that espouses a different view, Jack invites us... into moments of deep self-reflection on how we are truly living out a Jesus worldview.”

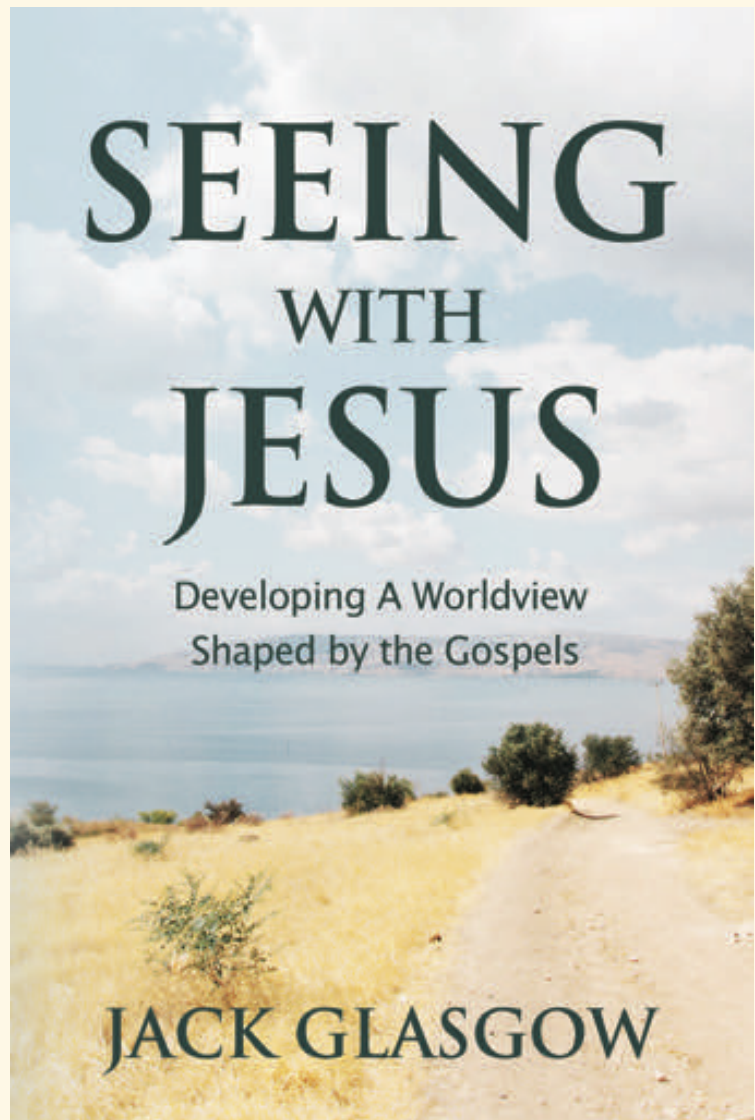
—Renée Lloyd Owen, Executive Director
of Spiritual Health,
Wellstar Health System, Atlanta

“The questions at the end of each chapter encourage the reader to reflect deeply on vital questions about discipleship. For anyone seeking a clearer understanding of the Jesus worldview, Jack’s guidance in this book is a tremendous gift.”

—Larry Hovis, Executive Coordinator,
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of
North Carolina

“What if we could see the world through the eyes of Jesus today? Jack Glasgow shows us how Jesus saw the world in his time so that we can train our vision to see and live into the reign of God in our time.”

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



“Christians, congregations and the larger Christian community have the capacity to center their thoughts and actions around the thoughts and actions of Jesus. A gospel-informed, Jesus-centered faith is both imminently possible and urgently needed.”

—Author Jack Glasgow, Pastor,
Zebulon (N.C.) Baptist Church

This book (available at nurturingfaith.net) is made possible through a Baugh Foundation gift to support the continuing development of Nurturing Faith’s Jesus Worldview Initiative.





NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCES

These highly personalized travel and learning opportunities combine inspiration with adventure. Join us for a memorable time filled with laughter, learning and living in amazing places.

Israel/West Bank

Dec. 31, 2020 – Jan. 10, 2021

This experience was postponed from May and has additional space. Nurturing Faith Bible Study writer Tony Cartledge hosts this remarkable opportunity to visit places and with people not on the agenda of typical Holy Land tours.

For information, please email him at tony@goodfaithmedia.org.

Big Island, Hawaii

May 8-15, 2021

Astrophysicist Paul Wallace, writer of the “Questions Christians Ask Scientists” column, will join this small group in exploring the unique beauty of this island — including a personalized “tour of the sky.”

Yosemite & Sequoia

June 5-12, 2021

Join Good Faith Media hosts for an exploration of two truly remarkable national parks where nature speaks of God’s majesty from every viewpoint. This small-group experience will begin and end in Fresno, Calif.

Yellowstone & Grand Teton

August 7-14, 2021

Host Bruce Gourley brings his insider knowledge of these two western parks with some of the world’s most wonderful natural features. This small-group experience will begin and end in Bozeman, Mont.

Glacier National Park

August 14-21, 2021

Rescheduled from summer 2020, this small-group experience is set among the amazing mountains and lakes of northern Montana. The experience begins and ends in the lovely town of Bozeman.

FOR INFORMATION AND REGISTRATION, visit nurturingfaith.org and click on “experiences.”

[Note: Nurturing Faith Experiences will move to the new Good Faith Media website — goodfaithmedia.org — when it launches in July.]