

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2020

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Journal & Bible Studies

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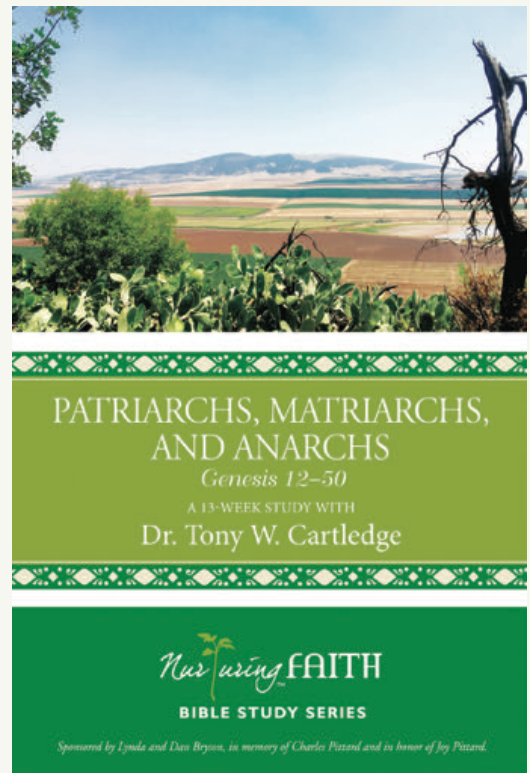
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Autumn in Montana near Glacier National Park. Cover photo by Bruce Gourley. Visit [goodfaithmedia.org/experiences](http://goodfaithmedia.org/experiences)

# Worth Repeating

“I think we are experiencing a divine reckoning in America. I don’t think the reckoning is over our having simply sinned. I think it’s over the fact that we have used God and the Bible to do it.”

Beth Moore, Bible teacher and founder of Living Proof Ministries, on Twitter

“The injustice around us is still within us... We’ve heard a call but we’re not there yet.”

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Executive Coordinator Paul Baxley, speaking to the virtual CBF General Assembly June 26 (Facebook Live)

“Empathy, come home and show others a pain they have never seen, a name worth knowing, and a cause worth fighting for. Come back, Empathy, and move privilege to protest, anger to compassion, and grief to justice.”

Lynn Brinkley, writing for the Baptist Women in Ministry blog

“If you hold religion up against Sunday brunch or game night with friends, religion was near the bottom for them. They prioritized family, friends and having meaningful work all above religion or having a relationship with God.”

Melinda Lundquist Denton, co-author of *Back-Pocket God: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Emerging Adults* (RNS)

“If your religion puts piety over people it’s good religion gone bad.”

Pastor Shaun King, in his May 24 sermon to Johns Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, Ga.

“I’ve never seen self-reports of protest participation that high for a specific issue over such a short period of time.”

University of North Carolina professor Neal Caren, who studies social movements in the U.S., on the nationwide response to the police killing of George Floyd (NYT)

“One of the biggest threats to anti-racist work is white sentimentality.”

Minister and author Danielle Shroyer (Twitter)

“In a culture and economy that operates on consumption and acquisition, it’s difficult to convince Christians to renounce anything. In fact, quite often when American Christians are asked to give up something for the sake of others, it’s interpreted as persecution.”

Jayson D. Bradley, blogging at patheos.com

“When everyone sitting together in a Sunday school class or worship service shares exactly the same political view, it is easy to confuse ‘Thus saith the Lord’ with ‘Thus saith the party platform.’”

Mark Wingfield, executive director and publisher for *Baptist News Global*

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# Selling a knock-off gospel comes at a high price

By John D. Pierce

It's striking. From social media to prominent pulpits we witness professing Christians staunchly taking their stands against a growing societal move toward equal justice.

Oh, they may give lip service to the general concept of equality, but quickly seek to invalidate efforts with any real potential for making a lasting difference.

As with previous cultural shifts — including the abolitionist, women's equality and civil rights movements — they lay claim to divine blessings on their obstruction, and point to isolated overreactions and latched-on violence to discount the legitimacy of the greater social realities.

Defensively, attention shifts from those who actually suffer from inequities and injustice to the self-assigned role of persecuted victims. The emphasis is on protecting “my rights” — that is, preferential treatment and a license to discriminate — rather than the common good.

Little concern, much less effort, remains for seeing “justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

The encompassing fog is unmistakable: it is the fear of losing that which is familiar and comfortable — most specifically, cultural privilege.

Rather than allowing love to cast out fear, as Jesus desires, the opposite occurs. And such anxiety-riddled posturing — baptized in the shallow waters of misguided religiosity — overrides the basic requirements of the claimed faith:

“To act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8) — and to love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37).

The biblical prophets and Jesus are overrun by hyped-up alarm over losing one's “heritage” — or even “civilization” at large. It's as if the prophetic tradition and the teachings of Jesus — encapsulated in the Bible to which they feign such high allegiance — have nothing to do with how Christians should prioritize their lives today.

How did we end up here? For those honestly seeking truth rather than an excuse, the answer comes painfully into view: We have cheaply sold a knock-off gospel, and are now paying a high price.

There are actually two costs. The first and higher one is embedded in the gospel itself and applicable for all times. Jesus is clear that his calling doesn't come cheaply.

Followers are required to turn from a focus on one's own interests (“deny yourself”) and to willingly sacrifice (“take up your cross”) on behalf of others. Not only did Jesus say these things; he demonstrated them with clarity.

To follow Jesus faithfully is to shift from self-interest and self-preservation to engaging on behalf of those with the greatest needs and the least power. If we are not giving up some of our power and privilege for others to the point it feels costly, we are not following Jesus.

The second, lesser risk is faced by those who are in Christian vocations where job security or career advancement requires meeting institutional expectations and appeasing those within who make the most demands.

Overt persecution, even martyrdom,

for embracing Jesus as Lord, as found in other times and in other places today, is not a threat to American Christians. (And it's not hiding around the corner.)

But there is vocational and therefore economic risk in proclaiming the fullness of the biblical message — with a clear call to place the lordship of Jesus (as reflected in his life and teachings) above any self-serving ideology or priority.

The temptation is to soft sell the gospel — even by those of us who would not intentionally repackage and mislabel it. Yet in our tendency to be so cautious in trying to make the Christian faith more palatable — and better aligned with hardened nationalism — we sell a cheap imitation of what Jesus offers.

That's the trap Atlanta megachurch pastor Louie Giglio set for himself, and fell into, by trying to repackage the reality of “white privilege” as a more appealing “white blessing.” In doing so, he provided a prime example of white privilege — for which he apologized.

Toning down the gospel to align with acceptable cultural norms may appease those who want a false sense of peace at any price, but it usually ends up sounding little like what Jesus actually said.

Tragically, when movements toward justice arise within our culture, we find some of the greatest resistance coming from those within the church. They can name the prophets and quote the gospel texts yet ignore them in changing times when they are most needed.

We have sold a knock-off gospel in hopes it would be good enough. Perhaps we were afraid that revealing the full cost would bring in too few investors. Now we are paying the higher price. **NFJ**



# Still writing

## Older authors motivated by calling, continuous learning

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Sherrill Stevens, Lynelle Mason and Bob Maddox have written a combined 13 books published by Nurturing Faith. And these repeat authors have blown out more candles than many of their writing peers.

### 'STICKLER'

At 93, Sherrill is still motivated to write out of “a sense of divine vocational calling” he traces back to his youthful days in a Baptist church.

“I identify freely as a non-traditional, analytical, Jesus theologian,” said Sherrill. “I am guided by the deep conviction that I have a voice that can be used by God to make ‘good news’ live.”

Following military service in World War II, he pursued an educational course that led to a doctorate in Christian ethics. During Sherrill’s Masters program, professor Olin T. Binkley influenced his commitment to writing excellence.

“He was a stickler for word nuance meaning,” said Sherrill, who served as Binkley’s first teaching fellow. “I accepted his challenge and became a committed searcher for exact meanings in both English derivatives and biblical root meanings.”

This writing discipline is revealed in *The ABCs of Religion: The Origin and Development of Religious Thought and Practices* (2016).

Sherrill clearly, concisely and correctly addresses such questions as: “Why did people burn stuff on altars?” “Who remembered and recorded the things Jesus said and did?” “How did our Bible come to be written?”

His *Study Companion on the Gospel of Luke* — and now one on *John* — also are available from Nurturing Faith as well.

### STILL TEACHING

Nearing her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, Lynelle Mason has retired from the classroom but not from teaching: “I still have a strong desire to share with today’s youth and others what life was like long before they were born.”

Therefore, most her writings are historical fiction aimed at a young adult audience but enjoyed by older readers as well. These include *Behind Enemy Lines*, *Where the Rabbits Dance* and her *Trailblazer* trilogy.

Her seventh and latest book with Nurturing Faith is *Climbing Mountains*, the memoir of Phyllis Miller, who overcame obstacles to become a noted physician. Both the author and subject are members of First Baptist Church of Chattanooga, Tenn.

“Positive comments from my readers, intellectual curiosity and a desire to clarify some tawdry events in our nation’s past motivate me to continue writing,” said Lynelle.

“I find great joy in fleshing out a story where a seemingly nobody rises to hero status while exposing the inhumane nature of their antagonist.”

### PERSISTENCE

“Some people like to *have* written, but I *like* to write,” said Bob Maddox, 83, who lives in the Washington, D.C. area.

In the third grade he wrote a short piece titled “An Autumn Night,” which his teacher and mother raved about.

“I do not remember what I said, but I can recall the warm response to my first writing effort,” he said of the long-lost piece.

After writing a paper for an English class as a college freshman, his professor pulled Bob aside and said, “It looks like you plagiarized your paper.” Bob assured her it was his work.

“She shook my hand and said, ‘You are a writer!’ With that commendation from the professor, I started writing and, despite gaps, I have persisted.”

In 2018 Nurturing Faith published *A Faith Journey: No Boundaries, No Conclusions*. It is Bob’s honest memoir of wrestling with truth.

Newly published is his two-volume novel titled *Jesus of Nazareth and the Kingdom of Weeds*. With a firm faith, Bob invites the reader to join him and Jesus on some imaginative walks.

### LONGEVITY

“I am grateful to still be lucid enough to continue studying, learning and writing,” said Sherrill, who lives alone in Selma, N.C.

At her retirement village atop Signal Mountain, Lynelle is often introduced to newcomers as “our resident author.”



Sherrill Stevens



Lynelle Mason



Bob Maddox



“I love it when villagers and church members ask me what I’m currently working on or when my latest book will be published,” she said. “It thrills me when someone says, ‘I can’t wait to get a copy.’”

Most thrilling, however, is when she meets a young person who read one of Lynelle’s books for a book report.

Bob said he finds inspiration in his friend President Jimmy Carter, who has written dozens of books — continuing late into life. Bob, a longtime pastor, spent two years working in the White House as a speechwriter and religious liaison during the Carter administration.

“I figure if he can, I can, with no regard for age,” said Bob. “Between my wife and our children, I think I will know when it is time to fold up the laptop.”

Before the fundamentalist siege of the Southern Baptist Convention, Bob wrote Sunday school lessons for the denominational press as well as the book, *Layman’s Bible Book Commentary on Acts* (Broadman, 1979).

Also, he wrote *Preacher at the White House* (Broadman, 1984), and *Prostate Cancer: What I Found Out & What You Should Know* (Shaw Books, 2000) with a foreword by Bob Dole.

Sherrill, who began writing youth Bible lessons for the Baptist Sunday School Board (now LifeWay) in 1972, wrote the Genesis volume of the *Layman’s Bible Book Commentary*. It sold more than a quarter-million copies.

Changing technology and cultural shifts have impacted book publishing dramatically. Longtime authors have learned to shift as well — while being faithful to the skills and disciplines required.

## DISCIPLINES

“Writing a manuscript is a demanding taskmaster, requiring the would-be author to rewrite, rewrite and rewrite!” said Lynelle, noting there is no substitute for research.

“Since I write mostly historical fiction, I do lots of research in order to better understand the historical factors affecting my protagonist,” she said. “For me, there can be no substitute for accurate research.”

Sherrill applies such discipline to his

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biblical and theological writings — while giving needed attention to being an effective wordsmith. *How* one writes is as important as *what* one writes.

“Religious vocabulary is problematic when trying to communicate with most lay people,” said Sherrill. So he follows his mentor Johnny Godwin’s advice: “Use people talk.”

Bob credits his high school teacher, Mrs. Neely, with drilling grammar into him. “So I can write without having to fret over the basic rules.”

He uses the early morning hours to do “most of the fun labor of writing” — and stops when tired or bored, knowing he’ll pick it up later.

“Since I love to feel the flow, to revel in the use of language, to seek the right word or phrase, to call up all manner of forgotten information, writing is not work,” said Bob. “I may say I am ‘working’ on this or that, but ‘work’ is a misnomer.”

One of the best lessons he’s learned is to be willing to start over if the writing just doesn’t suit him.

Writing is all-encompassing, said Lynelle, not something compartmentalized.

“Writing encourages me to pay attention to the disciplines of mental alertness, patience, spiritual formation, relationships, encouraging others, appreciating my natural surroundings, and to cherish the gift of laughter,” she said.

## CONNECTIONS

A United Methodist Church is using Sherrill’s study of John’s gospel, and he is doing a virtual classroom study of his *ABCs of Religion* book. “None of it would be possible apart from writing and publishing,” he noted.

He sees writing as “lighting candles

and planting seeds” so others might re-examine and re-imagine faith as he has done his entire adult life.

Bob’s writing that brought the most personal connections was not a book. While a pastor he wrote, without invitation, the speech that became the basis for President Carter’s remarks at the signing of the Israeli/Egypt peace treaty.

It included the line, “Peace, like war, is waged,” by Walker Knight, the founding editor of this journal.

“That speech became the springboard that took me to the White House,” said Bob. “And ‘waging peace’ is part of the motto for the Carter Center.”

Lynelle’s first book, *Tarnished Haloes, Open Hearts: A Story of Finding and Giving Acceptance*, helped launch Nurturing Faith book publishing in 2012. It is her life story of growing up in abject poverty, experiencing remarkable trials and finding strong women along the way to encourage her.

Discovering decades ago that her son is gay, Lynelle knew the challenges that would present for her pastor-husband and the congregation they served. Her shielding of that truth from others built a close mother-son bond that continues today — without the secret.

Many who knew Lynelle as a retired teacher and mission volunteer had no idea about her challenging upbringing and advocacy for her son and others. Word spread rapidly through the church and community where Lynelle held book signings and had the opportunity to share more about her inspiring life journey.

Her fiction writing is also a way to advocate for justice.

“Many of my published books address a tumultuous era in Americana when justice for all has been denied,” said Lynelle, who hopes to be remembered for creating “winsome characters that fought against the forces of injustice to achieve their personal goals.”

These drama-filled books serve a purpose beyond entertainment. “I trust that my readers, along with my protagonists, when faced with seemingly unjust acts today are moved to work for reconciliation.”

Lynelle said she hopes her books will be read “long after my demise.” But, in the meantime, there’s another book to write. **NFJ**

# Reflections of a first-time protestor

LARRY HOVIS

Having been born in the '60s, I was not old enough to understand the most active phase of the Civil Rights Movement marches and protests. In my teens and twenties, I was focused on education and then starting my career and family. So any protests during the '70s and '80s seemed remote and disconnected to my life.

Therefore, the event I participated in on June 6, 2020, was probably my first real protest. Like many cities, my home of Winston-Salem, N.C., was the site of many protests in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer.



I received an email on Friday, June 5, explaining that a march would take place the following day and would go directly in front of the sanctuary of First Baptist Church, where my wife and I are members. The weather forecast called for a hot day, so the pastor and deacons were organizing a water bottle distribution. We decided to help.

Upon arrival, we learned the march had been rerouted and would travel down a different street on the way to a downtown park. The water distribution would take place there, so we walked the two blocks to the park to help.

When everything was set up I walked a few more blocks to find the march in progress and joined the marchers en route. The march ended at the park with a series of speeches by various speakers. Here are my reflections on that experience.

## *The protesters are young.*

Protesters were primarily young folks in their teens and twenties. This one was sponsored by an organization recently started by a high school student. I said to our pastor's husband, who is 39, "You are

one of the old guys here!" That made me feel ancient.

## *The protesters are diverse.*

While the majority of protesters were people of color, I would estimate 30-40 percent were white. Not only black and brown people, but a significant number of white people have supported this summer's protests with shouts of "Black Lives Matter."

## *The protesters are passionate and focused.*

Entering the stream of marchers, I could feel the energy of this movement. As they chanted protest slogans, I couldn't help but be caught up in their passion and join in. That energy intensified at the park as speaker after speaker urged us not only to remember those who had been killed, but also called us to action to make the world a better place.

## *I have also observed . . .*

Unlike images I had seen of violence in other cities, this experience was extremely peaceful. Police were there to block traffic and ensure everyone's safety, but they stayed in the background. There were no confrontations between protesters and law enforcement, only cooperation.

There was no damage to property. We had trash bags ready to pick up litter in the park after the protest concluded, but the final speaker asked everyone to pick up after themselves, and they complied. The protesters left the park cleaner than they found it.

As best I could tell, all 1,500 in attendance wore masks, though we were much closer together than six feet. Social distancing was impossible. That was the only part of the day that made me uncomfortable. I wondered how many people may have contracted the coronavirus as a result of that event?

Near the end, one of the speakers led the crowd in reciting the Lord's Prayer. A retired minister friend noted there was no singing, unlike the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that was based in the church and led by clergy.

Today's Black Lives Matter movement, while having the support of some clergy, is by and large not a church-based movement. But I believe the church today could learn much from these young, diverse, passionate, focused protesters.

I love history and have made pilgrimages to major civil rights locations in the South. This summer, I've been asking myself: If I had been a southern, middle-aged, white clergyperson in the 1960s, would I have gone to Selma to march with King or signed the letter of the moderate Birmingham clergy asking him to slow down?

I hope I would have done the former, but honesty compels me to admit I might have done the latter. Either way, I'm glad to finally participate in a protest — because black lives really do matter, and it's never too late to do the right thing. **NFJ**

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





*“May we recognize that the occurrences of recent days are not new.”*

# REALITIES & responses

*Systemic racism in America must be acknowledged and addressed*

BY CHRIS SMITH

Matt. 23:23 offers a glimpse of Jesus’ righteous indignation regarding injustice:

“**W**oe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”

How should we respond? That is the question our local clergy group began discussing following the horrific death of an unarmed, nonviolent African-American man named George Floyd at the knee of a Minneapolis police officer.

As a first step, we decided to organize a peaceful protest near city hall. We also determined to craft a statement, declaring our collective pain, righteous indignation and frustration over unchecked police brutality and the systems that allow for repeated offenses by police against people of color.

Our statement included the phrase, “Black Lives Matter.” Almost immediately, one of our well-meaning white clergy brothers responded, “Why not say, ‘All lives matter?’”

One by one, we responded, emphasizing while all lives do matter, black lives continue to be disproportionately terrorized, oppressed, disenfranchised and murdered figuratively and literally by police.

To his credit, our clergy brother apologized, agreed to our using the phrase, and then transparently shared that in his life he had “dismissed” the words. He never really thought about them or took the time to

understand why people were using them.

He has since committed not only to repenting of his insensitivities but also to engaging in dialogue and actions to help address racism in our community and beyond.

Since then, I have reflected deeply upon the idea that many of our white sisters and brothers, like our colleague in ministry, have dismissed not only the phrase, but also what necessitated the phrase, “Black Lives Matter.”

What were they thinking when video after video emerged with unarmed, non-violent African-American individuals shot in the back, strangled with a baton, beat unmercifully and shot to death in their own homes as police officers in plain clothes with no warrant, no warning and no justifiable reason broke down their door and burst into their living space spraying them with bullets?

What were they thinking as conspiracy theories about our first African-American president arose, naming him a terrorist with a fake U.S. birth certificate? What were they thinking as white evangelicals spread the notion that President Obama was the anti-Christ?

(I literally had several of my former church members — white members — ask me if I thought this could be true.)

Why did it have to take a modern-day “Emmett Till experience” with the horrific murder of Mr. Floyd on camera before they saw the everyday reality of African Americans in America?

What has produced this level of indifference and insensitivity to our tormented,

oppressed condition? If the answer is (as I have heard said) that since it is not happening to them, it was not something they thought about, what does that say about their humanity?

Does it have to happen to you, your son, your daughter, your family, your neighborhood or your sphere before you care?

Our nation seems to be on the verge of a breakthrough. Like never before, people of all racial backgrounds are joining together by the thousands, demanding change and declaring, “Black Lives Matter.” We are at the door.

May we recognize that the occurrences of recent days are not new. May we emerge from the pit with new understandings and patterns of thinking that refuse to dismiss the pain of others.

May we continue to do what we know to be right and not leave undone the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faithfulness.

May we recognize that the problem is not just “a few bad apples” on the police force, but rather an institutionalized, systemic, pervasive, historic inculcation of privilege, power, abuse, control and subjugation of African Americans, tied to the long shadow of slavery.

May we do all we can to break down the door of racism, inequality, injustice and indifference.

Like you, “I too sing, America...” **NFJ**

—Chris Smith is pastor of Restoration Ministries of Greater Cleveland and author of *Beyond the Stained Glass Ceiling: Equipping and Encouraging Female Pastors*. This column first appeared at [ethicsdaily.com](http://ethicsdaily.com), now a part of Good Faith Media.

# Storm comin'

*Treat racial crises with same preparation and engagement as natural disasters, says author*

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

“**T**o solve any problem, one must recognize that a problem exists,” writes Harold Dorrell Briscoe Jr., in his new, independently published book *There’s a Storm Comin’—How the American Church Can Lead Through Times of Racial Crisis*.

Therefore, *realization* is the first step in the four-fold “Racial Crisis Framework” he offers congregations for addressing this challenge.

“The realization phase is to help the congregation grow in their awareness of deteriorating race relations in America,” said Briscoe. He identifies the other steps as *readiness, responsiveness* and *renewal*.

## DISASTERS

Briscoe, a pastor in Durham, N.C., earlier trained in public administration — with an emphasis on urban revitalization and disaster resilience. In graduate studies at Texas A&M, his final project focused on climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies in the Houston-Galveston region.

His interest was stirred by the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and the continuing threats to coastal areas.

Following a call to pastoral ministry, Briscoe saw parallels between natural disaster preparation and relief strategies and addressing the crisis of racial injustice. His book fleshes out this unique approach to mitigating such crises — hence the word “storm” in the title.

“The parallels between actual global climate change and sociopolitical climate



change are strikingly similar,” said Briscoe. “Both consist of man-made elements that contribute to their exacerbation. Both, if left unchecked, can have enormous consequences on their respective landscapes.”

## FACTORS

Briscoe, an African-American minister who was raised in the Black church but spent much of his life in predominantly-white churches, identified eight political and social factors contributing to the current racial justice crisis in America.

These include changing racial demographics, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and the impact of social media platforms — along with, of course, politics around these issues.

“The concern of impending shifts in American racial demographics and the subsequent resentment and fear that have been produced is one of the reasons behind the rise of the ideology of white nationalism,” he writes.

Regarding the impact of social media,

he notes: “It is important to recognize how vulnerable churches are in the 21st-century era of globalization and digital interconnection.”

Few would argue with his assertion that “the technological advances America has seen in the past 10 years present enormous opportunities, but also significant challenges.”

Seeing how these eight factors impact the current racial crisis is part of the needed awareness to address the crisis at hand. There is urgency, said Briscoe, because “there is a storm coming, and taking the necessary precautions to prepare your staff and churches is imperative.”

The author is not naïve about the realities that doing this crucial work is hard and not always welcomed. But he insists that it is necessary.

“This is a journey, an educative process, that exposes church leaders to the painful issues that comprise our present-day racial inequalities,” he writes. “It is imperative that contemporary Christian leaders ascertain the extent of America’s history of racial injustices, present-day structural inequalities, and racial disparities.”

“Many white Christian pastors simply do not know what to say during these times because they have not committed to learn about the cultural issues that Black and brown people deal with,” he adds. “They have no context to draw from, no knowledge to utilize, and thus remain silent during times of racial unrest.”

While silence from a white pastor in times of racial crisis offends people of color, Briscoe admits speaking out will offend



others. He rightly notes the embedded risks in fulfilling the prophetic role of a pastor.

“There is a strong chance that church leaders will offend white racists, or whites who simply desire not to bring ‘politics’ into the pulpit when they speak out about the gross inequities and disparities we see in America today,” he writes.

Briscoe offers biblical and historical context for assuming the prophetic role.

“[Martin Luther] King was adamant that the Civil Rights Movement was a Word of God movement,” he writes. “... America needs new Martin Luther Kings who dare to use the Word of God to speak out against racial, economic and societal ills of our day; to communicate with substance and civility on the problems American culture faces.”

Briscoe even includes a sermon for illustration.

## RESPONSES

Congregations can and should prepare for social crises in the same way agencies prepare for natural disasters, said Briscoe, making the connection between his current and previous vocations.

“I realized that if the church is to respond to these racially charged tragedies in a way that brings healing and hope to individuals, communities and cities plagued with despair, it must prepare for them,” he writes.

“The church is meant to proclaim salvation, reconciliation and equality,” Briscoe continued. “Scripture is full of stories and passages that communicate God’s heart for justice.”

Many religious leaders, Briscoe suggests, desire to help create racial healing but are unsure where to start — because the crisis is complex and daunting. Rather than proposing an overall strategy for solving structural racism, he is more specific in his seven-step process to help congregations become ready for the disruption from a racialized crisis.

“The focus here is narrower: it seeks to



lay out a strategy to enable faith leaders to reduce the severity and disruption of highly publicized and polarized racial tragedies within their churches and communities.”

One obstacle, he notes, is the ideology of colorblindness that “seeks to downplay the significance of race in the American consciousness.”

“Pastors and faith leaders need an alternative to colorblindness to properly address racialized crises,” he writes. “... Appreciating cultural differences and the belief that diversity and inclusion make an institution — especially a church — stronger is paramount to rejecting colorblindness and situates white churches in a better position to respond to racial uproar.”

## HOPE

“It is paramount to understand that anyone can engage in the work of resilience through mitigation and adaptation,” Briscoe writes. “This concept is not restricted to public policy officials or emergency managers.”

His book outlines ways to bring all hands on deck. He doesn’t chastise. Rather, he provides helpful information in a

comprehensible way.

His section on readiness reminds congregational leaders that “the key is to become proactive rather than reactive.”

“A pastor whose church has taken proactive measures to prepare for racialized crises and is actively engaged in racial reconciliation will be far more adept at navigating sociopolitical distress generated by a crisis,” he writes, “than a pastor who has done nothing to combat the prejudice and bigotry that reside in his/her congregation and community.”

The final stage of renewal provides the needed hope for those who might be discouraged by seeing the challenges of racial injustice as insurmountable.

“Church leaders must harness the energy these crises bring and use it to their advantage,” he writes. “... [T]hey have a small window of time to respond to these events.”

Briscoe makes a distinction between seeking “technical solutions” and the needed “adaptive work” of congregational leadership.

“Adaptive leadership compels people to tackle tough challenges,” he writes, “to change as new circumstances and problems arise, and to tackle those issues with new strategies and abilities.”

It involves “telling people what they don’t want to hear to engage in the work that they desperately need in their lives and organizations.”

This is not some side project for church leaders to consider if they have time or feel secure enough, he notes. It is what has been assigned to a community committed to be followers of Jesus — making it “unlike any institution in America.”

“The church has been entrusted with the task of communicating the glorious news of Jesus Christ’s mission to redeem all of creation,” writes Briscoe. “... I believe in the church as a conduit for God’s mercy, love, compassion and justice to flow to a broken and dark world.” **NFJ**

*“Appreciating cultural differences and the belief that diversity and inclusion make an institution — especially a church — stronger is paramount to rejecting colorblindness and situates white churches in a better position to respond to racial uproar.”*

# Discovery may give new meaning to 'high priests'

STORY AND PHOTO  
BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

**W**e have heard of “high church” worship, the kind of liturgy that includes robes and processions and formal hymns with no one directing the music, maybe even the occasional scent of incense.

In a surprise finding, archaeologists have learned that some ancient Hebrews had their own version of “high shrine” worship.

The southern fortress town of Arad was an important military outpost guarding Judah’s southern border from the 9th into the 6th centuries BCE. The site was excavated from 1962–1967 under the primary leadership of Yohanan Ahironi.

Unfortunately, there has never been a full excavation report, but a number of significant finds have been publicized. These include several brief letters between military commanders written on potsherds (ostraca), and a well-preserved shrine.

The shrine, about 13x20 meters, consisted of a courtyard, a storage area, a main hall and a small cella (or “holy of holies”) containing two small limestone altars and a carefully shaped “standing stone” (*massebah*) thought to represent the deity.

A large altar of undressed stone, used for animal sacrifices, stood in the courtyard.

The shrine (sometimes called a temple in the literature) is of special interest because it existed during the same period as the first temple in Jerusalem, but wasn’t kosher.

During the reign of Hezekiah, when the book of Deuteronomy was most likely written, there was an effort to centralize worship in Jerusalem and eliminate other shrines. There’s evidence that the shrine in Arad was dismantled about that time, with its two altars carefully laid down and buried, though it’s not certain whether this was due to Hezekiah’s reforms or to preserve it from advancing Assyrian troops.

Since Arad was a Judahite fortress,



The reconstructed shrine from Arad at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

evidence suggests the shrine was dedicated to Yahweh, despite the presence of the standing stone as a representative of deity. It was probably in use for about 50 years, around 760/750 to ca. 715 BCE.

The two small altars, along with two stone monoliths found in the cella, were transported to the newly constructed Israel Museum in Jerusalem, where they were reconstructed for a popular exhibit in the archaeology wing.

At first, both of the monoliths stood as twin representations of deity, perhaps male and female. When the shrine was relocated to a new wing during renovations from 2007–2010, the smaller monolith was built into the back wall in keeping with a more current interpretation of the finds.

But that’s boring for most readers, right? Well, here’s the interesting part: the two smaller limestone altars, generally thought to be incense altars, were shaped with a shallow depression on the top.

Both had a mound of dark residue in the center. Aharoni reported that a chemical analysis was done in 1967, but with inconclusive results.

Now, with better methods available, researchers took sterile samples of the dark material from both altars and sent them

to two independent labs for analysis. Gas chromatography and mass spectrometry were used to determine the chemical composition of the organic residue on the altars.

The findings were recently reported in *Tel Aviv: Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* (Vol. 47, 2020, Issue 1). And what did they find?

Without going into the detailed chemical analysis, what they found on the larger altar was consistent with frankincense mixed with animal fat, precisely the sort of incense you’d expect to find in a shrine.

The smaller altar brought the surprise: cannabinoids were prominent in the residue, along with compounds expected from burning dried animal dung. The only natural source of cannabinoids is — cannabis.

Nobody uses marijuana because it smells good. That means the priests in Arad were not only burning marijuana — probably in the form of a dried resin from the cannabis plant (hashish) that was imported along with the frankincense — but they also knew how to mix the resin with dried dung so it would burn at the lower temperature necessary to release its psychoactive compounds and have the desired effect.

I guess that gives new meaning to “high priest.” Who knew? **NFJ**





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# This moment in time has great potential for racial justice

By R. Mitch Randall

The world approaches a social revolution regarding racial justice after George Floyd, a 46-year-old African-American male, died from a police officer kneeling on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds.

Prior to Floyd's death, other high-profile killings of young black citizens fueled flames of outrage. Three white males in Georgia confronted Ammaud Arbery after seeing the young black man running in the neighborhood. After a scuffle, Arbery was shot and killed.

In Louisville, Ky., Breonna Taylor and her boyfriend lay asleep in bed. Taylor needed rest after a long day as an emergency room technician. Shortly after midnight, with a no-knock search warrant, police battered in the front door.

Taylor's boyfriend fired his gun. Police responded by shooting Taylor eight times.

These incidents and others enraged much of the country. People of faith and other concerned citizens took to the streets, calling for an end to police brutality and systemic racism and seeking justice for victims.

More than any time since the Civil Rights Movement, the public is talking about the evils of racism and the nature of white supremacy. Monuments paying tribute to America's racist past are being removed from public squares.

For Christians, the New Testament provides numerous examples of Jesus confronting the evils of systemic racism. When Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman in John 4, he left over a racist barrier that Jews had erected.

Jews had a deep-seated hatred for the Samaritans, dating back to the Divided Kingdom and the Assyrian invasion. There-

*At Good Faith Media, we are marching forward in faith while striving for racial justice. Numerous resources addressing racial justice from an inclusive faith perspective — including recently produced "Good Faith Forums" — are available at [goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org). Please visit the new site to check out the forums, podcasts, columns, videos and books on this important topic.*

fore, when Jesus initiated a kind and gentle conversation with the Samaritan woman, he exposed the lunacy of this systemic racism.

After being asked how to inherit eternal life, Jesus declared that loving God and neighbor were at the heart of eternal fullness. But the question of a neighbor's identity lingered. Surely Jesus did not mean that Jews should love Samaritans. He did.

Jesus went on to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan, making a Samaritan man the hero of the story while making pious Jews the villains. His point was clear: systemic racial barriers must come down in order for freedom, justice and relationships to prevail.

With Jesus' example, we too need to combat systemic racism and break down barriers that prevent freedom, justice and relationships. The very foundation of America is built upon systemic racism, as our country was formed through the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans.

This shaky foundation provided a misappropriated rationale for Western

expansionism, the escalation of slavery, the Trail of Tears, the Civil War, Jim Crow laws, redlining, mass incarceration and many more instances of systemic racism.

This current awakening offers an honest assessment of America's racist past, with an acknowledgment that the country was built so that white Americans benefited from being the "supreme" class — economically, educationally and legally.

White supremacy does not always wear white hoods and burn crosses; it can be ingrained in the institutions born and built for white males.

If we can get a majority of Americans to recognize the history of systemic racism and its existence today, then we have the potential for significant societal transformation in regards to racial justice.

Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream that "One day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'" While he never made it to the promised land of equality, he set the stage for where we stand today.

While this is only one moment in time, it has the potential to be very significant for the future of racial justice in America. People seeking to live out good faith should lead the effort toward finding forgiveness from our racist past, working hard for reconciliation, and striving to fulfill King's dream of racial equality.

The winds of change are blowing, while the feet of the people are on the march. May we put our feet forward, striding toward a better future that promises equality and justice for all. **NFJ**

—R. Mitch Randall is CEO of Good Faith Media.



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*This column is provided in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches ([chchurches.org](http://chchurches.org))*

## Congregations come together to put ‘Christ First’

**BY JENNIFER B. CAMPBELL**

**L**ike many traditional churches, the size and upkeep costs of the First Baptist Church of High Point, N.C., facilities do not match the size and budget of the current congregation.

For several years, the ministerial staff has tried to think outside the box, literally and figuratively, to find ways to use the facility to fulfill the church’s mission: “Living the Gospel Everyday, Everywhere and to Everyone.”

That thinking has evolved into some beautiful expressions of ministry and mission. Although the first partnerships with community organizations did not bring revenue to the church, relationships began to form and attitudes about the use of the facility began to change.

“Cover the City” found a home at First Baptist in 2016. It is a small nonprofit that supports the homeless population in shelters and also those who do not use the shelters during the coldest times of the year.

Each October and November, Cover the City collects new and gently used blankets for those in need. The executive director had run out of space in her home to collect and distribute those blankets.

In response to a social media post, I reached out and offered First Baptist as a collection center. Soon a partnership began, and it made sense for Cover the City to have a home at no cost at the church. Why wouldn’t the church want to use its space for ministry, mission and community outreach?

A second community partnership was with “Reading Connections,” an organization that supports adult literacy. Joining that group’s advisory committee, I learned

that more classroom space was needed.

Classes were being held at a library near the church. Our offering classroom space for reading classes made perfect sense.

Now people from various backgrounds, ethnicities and religions come to First Baptist to learn to read. Several church members have become involved. One member, Abby Williams, has become a tutor.

The first partnership to bring in revenue started as a joke. The building and property of Christ United Methodist Church and its preschool, Christ’s Little Acorns, were sold to High Point University. The two entities were looking for a new home.

First Baptist member Libby McGaha, whose granddaughter attends the preschool, and Preschool Co-Director Carol Briley had taught school together for many years. Last year, they were joking that Carol’s school needed a place to go, and Libby’s church had plenty of available space.

They soon realized that maybe it wasn’t a joke; perhaps the two could work together. The partnership would not only benefit First Baptist financially from rental income, but also have the blessing of life in the church during the week with children and teachers occupying the building.

After hearing that First Baptist had offered such a warm welcome to the preschool, the pastor of Christ UMC reached out to his pastoral colleague at First Baptist, Joel Campbell. Their conversation quickly turned to how the two congregations might share space.

On Sunday, Dec. 8, 2019, following worship at the two churches, the congregations came together to share a meal, filling the dining room at First Baptist. By Sunday,

Jan. 5, 2020 both congregations were worshipping in the First Baptist facilities.

Much behind-the-scenes work took place for this space sharing to happen in such a short time. The members of Christ UMC needed to grieve the loss of their church home, which is an ongoing process. And the congregation was willing to make changes in order to share space.

First Baptist members cleaned out of a large, former nursery to provide ample educational space for their United Methodist neighbors. Christ UMC moved its worship time to 9:45 a.m., followed by Sunday school, while First Baptist worshipped at 11:00 a.m.

This partnership has been a win-win situation. Christ UMC members got involved with “Night to Shine,” a special needs ministry event that First Baptist hosted.

Christ UMC invited First Baptist members to a lunch fundraiser to support a mission effort with the Appalachian Service Project, and to participate in a chili cook-off fundraiser with proceeds being equally divided between the missions committees of both churches.

Also, Christ UMC members invited First Baptist to help serve a meal offered free to the community every Thursday. Both churches are excited and hopeful that this partnership will be a wonderful opportunity for mission and ministry for as long as it is beneficial to both churches.

As Pastor Keith Sexton of Christ UMC put it: “Christ UMC and First Baptist, when we put the two together, we are putting ‘Christ First.’” **NFJ**

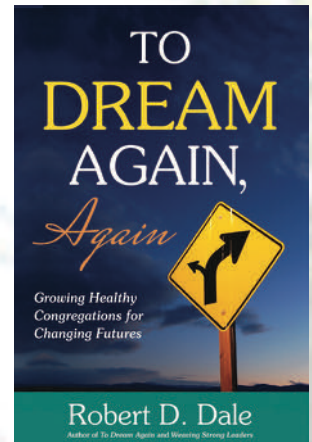
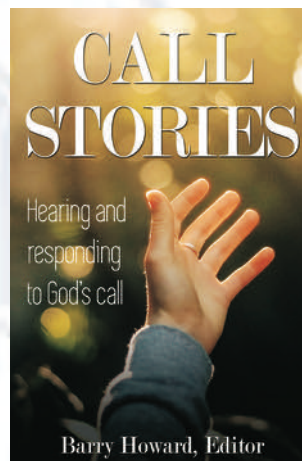
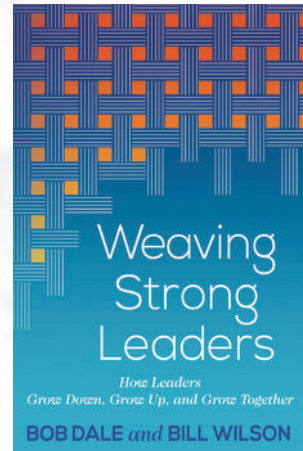
*—Jennifer B. Campbell is associate pastor at First Baptist Church of High Point, N.C.*





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# Anti-racist witness

By John R. Franke

Our country is in the midst of another moment of reckoning concerning our long history of racial inequity. It goes without saying, or at least it should, that this inequity — along with the fear, poverty and injustice it produces — is contrary to the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus in the Gospels.

Jesus announced the coming of a world where everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid. He sent the church into the world as a sign, instrument and foretaste of that intended reality. The implication of this calling requires the church to be intentionally anti-racist in its witness to the gospel.

Tragically, the church has failed in its calling to bear such witness. In fact, the expansion of the church has frequently been an exercise in the extension of empire and its will to dominate.

Rome did not make Christianity its official religion in the fourth century to enable the church to critique and challenge its practices concerning the use and manifestation of power and privilege. Rather, it shaped the church to underwrite its own ends and to give it divine sanction.

This arrangement is known as Christendom, and its intuitions remain with us in the present time. It has become increasingly clear that Western mission has traditionally been an Anglo-European church-centered enterprise and that the gospel has been passed on in the cultural shape of the Western church.

One of the continuing manifestations of this tradition is the common assumption of a universal approach to theology — one right set of sources, one right method, and

one right system of thought or doctrine.

However, theology is not a universal language. It is always a particular interpretation of revelation, scripture and tradition that reflects the goals, aspirations and beliefs of a particular people, a particular community.

As such, it cannot speak for all. When it insists on doing so — and is coupled with cultural and societal power — it becomes oppressive to those who do not share its values and outlooks, leaving them painfully disenfranchised.

In this way the dominant theologies of North American history have contributed to the racism that permeates society. As many scholars have pointed out, theology in the U.S. did not arise from the experiences and social realities of Black people.

Rather, its character was determined by those who were so committed to its European and Enlightenment presumptions that they failed to question its conclusions of cultural supremacy that led to colonization, extermination and slavery for non-white people.

White American theologians across the ideological spectrum interpreted the gospel and the Christian faith from the perspective of the dominant cultural group. They did theology in support of the political and social status quo, in spite of the voices crying out for more just and equitable treatment.

They neglected these voices and failed to recognize that other people, specifically non-white people, also had thoughts about God, Jesus and the Bible that mattered.



If the church is to fulfill its obligation to bear an anti-racist witness in the world, we must begin by surrendering the pretensions of a universally normative theology. Where we are unwilling to do this, we propagate forms of cultural, ethnic and racial imperialism under the guise of Christian faith.

The failure to surrender these pretensions will continually undermine attempts at a truly anti-racist witness in the church. This is because Christian faith will continue to be defined in ways that are governed by the outlooks characteristic of the white experience and its cultural dominance.

If a faithfully anti-racist witness is to take hold and flourish in the church, we must be willing to subject the theological traditions of the white church to greater scrutiny and to intentionally de-center them. Only then will we be in a position to take seriously the voices and experiences of others who have been marginalized for far too long.

While de-centering the white theological tradition will be difficult and often painful to those of us who have been formed and privileged by it, such a process is necessary for the anti-racist witness of the church.

For the sake of the gospel and the community called to bear living witness to it, we must in humility consider the interests and concerns of others before our own in keeping with the example of the Lord of the church, “who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Phil. 2:6-8). **NFJ**

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

# With skill and care, Hardy Clemons' pastoral touch was deep and wide

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

**A**s word spread of Hardy Clemons' death on July 1 there was a common refrain: that he was "pastor to me."

That identification came from beyond those in congregations Hardy served, which included First Baptist Church of Georgetown, Texas; Second Baptist Church in his hometown of Lubbock, Texas; and First Baptist Church of Greenville, S.C., where he was deemed pastor emeritus.

In 2012, I invited Hardy to join me during a board of directors meeting in San Antonio for a conversation about grief. He had written and revised a book on the subject, spoke and taught frequently about grief, and spent his pastoral career at the side of those who grieved.

But this was different. It was a few months after the death of his beloved wife of 57 years, Ardelle.

"It's much easier to advise other people on how to deal with their grief than it is to deal with your own," he confessed.

So Hardy brought raw personal experience along with his professional expertise stirred by pastoral care pioneer Wayne Oates, who taught him "to take grief and grief study seriously."

The setting for our conversation was a simple hotel conference room near the Riverwalk. But it became holy space and time.

Hardy, in his remarkable yet natural pastoral way, opened his heart, mind and life before us. There was no pretense, no simple solutions — but loads of mercy and realistic hope.

Pastors and others charged with grief ministry often fail to recognize and address their own needs to grieve, Hardy noted,

confessing he fell into that trap as a young minister.

"I thought I was supposed to be the strong one," he said. "So I let the grief stack up, then when the dam broke it really, really broke."

A pastor needs a pastor, said Hardy, "a designated counselor, supervisor, mentor, or whatever you want to call that person." Just call on them.

In his own current grief, Hardy said people stopped talking about Ardelle before he was ready. And he found it hard to answer the common question, "How are you doing?"



"I wish somebody would invent a thermometer that would give you an emotional, spiritual reading on how you are doing," said Hardy in his familiar drawl. "I'm pretty good at reading that in other people, but I'm not worth a flip at reading it in myself."

Although he knew dreams accompanied grief, Hardy said he was surprised by how important such dramatic dreams and visions were to the healing process.

Due to digestive problems, Ardelle could not enjoy certain foods for the last five or six years of her life. Those included chocolate, coffee and chips.

"I know I wasn't asleep when I had the neatest picture of Ardelle — about a week after her death — sitting at this kitchen table with Formica on top," he recalled. "And here was a big bowl of chips, and a big bowl of chocolate, and a big urn of coffee."

Hardy smiled and added: "And I thought: 'She's going to get to the spiritual stuff later.'"

That snapshot as well as "some really elaborate dreams," he said, aided his grief journey.

Hardy identified two major challenges he and others face following the loss of a life partner or another very significant person.

"One is to make sure I am honest with myself about my need to do the valid grief work," he said. "I'm trying to do that."

"The other is to figure out what I'm going to do with the rest of my life without Ardelle in it," he added. "I think I'm doing better with the first one than the second one."

Hardy spoke of the importance of being in a caring community.

During Ardelle's extended struggle with Alzheimer's, more than 60 persons — organized by the women deacons at San Antonio's Trinity Baptist Church — provided scheduled, faithful care.

This group of women and men became known as "Ardelle's Angels" and carried on such caring for others in need. Being a part of a compassionate community is vital to the grief journey, he said.

"Every place I have ever been pastor has been a caring church," said Hardy. "I am grateful for that."

Now, Hardy's care-full life remains impactful through the many who benefited from his pastoral touch. **NFJ**



# Michael Scott's Guide to Ministry

By Brett Younger

**M**ichael Scott is, as his coffee cup proclaims, “The World’s Best Boss.” Michael’s words of wisdom on how to be a good boss can inspire ministers to be good.

Good ministers love the church like Michael loves *The Office*. “Nobody should have to go to work thinking, ‘Oh, this is the place that I might die today.’ That’s what a hospital is for. An office is for not dying. An office is a place to live life to the fullest. To the max. An office is a place where dreams come true.”

Good ministers feel compassion: “When the son of the deposed king of Nigeria emails you directly, asking for help, you help!”

Good ministers provide thoughtful pastoral care: “I’m not going to tell them about the downsizing. If a patient has cancer, you don’t tell them.”

Good ministers offer encouragement: “Whether you’re scared of dying, or dying alone, or dying drunk in a ditch, don’t be. It’s going to be OK.”

Good ministers allow others to grieve: “Society teaches us that having feelings and crying is bad and wrong. Well, that’s baloney, because grief isn’t wrong. There’s such a thing as good grief. Just ask Charlie Brown.”

Good ministers understand the extemporaneous approach to preaching: “Sometimes I’ll start a sentence and I don’t even know where it’s going. I just hope I find it along the way.”

Michael’s toast at Phyllis’ wedding would make a fine introduction to a wedding homily: “Webster’s Dictionary defines wedding as the fusing of two metals with a hot torch.”

This will preach: “My philosophy is basically this. And this is something that I live by. And I always have. And I always will. Don’t, ever, for any reason, do anything, to anyone, for any reason, ever, no matter what, no matter where, or who you are with, or where you are going, or where you’ve been. Ever. For any reason. Whatsoever.”

Good ministers are open to truth beyond the facts: “I’m not superstitious, but I am a little stitious.”

Good ministers exhibit strong leadership: “Would I rather be feared or loved?”

when you’re within sight of the car gets the front seat. That’s how the game’s played. There are no exceptions for someone with a concussion.”

Good ministers make sacrifices: “I’m not a millionaire. I thought I would be by the time I was 30, but I wasn’t even close. Then I thought maybe by 40, but by 40 I had less money than I did when I was 30.”

Good ministers can get too busy: “I guess I’ve been working so hard, I forgot what it’s like to be hardly working.”

Good ministers recognize the importance of Sabbath: “I am running away from my responsibilities. And it feels good.”

Good ministers admit they are human: “Guess what? I have flaws. What are they? Oh, I don’t know. I sing in the shower. Sometimes I spend too much time volunteering. Occasionally I’ll hit somebody with my car. So, sue me.”

Good ministers recognize their own needs: “Do I need to be liked? Absolutely not. I like to be liked. I enjoy being liked. I have to be liked, but it’s not like this compulsive need to be liked, like my need to be praised.”

Good ministers are shrewd: “You know what they say. ‘Fool me once, strike one. But fool me twice ... strike three.’”

Good ministers are honest: “I knew exactly what to do. But in a much more real sense, I had no idea what to do.”

Good ministers know who they are: “I am Beyoncé, always.”

Good ministers can say: “I am Michael Scott, sometimes.” **NFJ**



Easy. Both. I want people to be afraid of how much they love me.”

Good ministers engender community: “I love inside jokes. I’d love to be a part of one someday.”

Good ministers keep believing: “This is a dream that I’ve had since lunch, and I’m not giving it up now.”

Good ministers laugh: “I’m not usually the butt of the joke. I’m usually the face of the joke.”

Good ministers respect authority: “The rules of shotgun are very simple and very clear. The first person to shout ‘shotgun’

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



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

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Adult teaching plans by **David Woody**, associate pastor of French Huguenot Church in Charleston, S.C.



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

**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!

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

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# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 6, 2020

Psalm 119:33-40

## Teach Me, Lord

Once I knew a minister who was famed for his long prayers. L-o-n-g prayers. Prayers that could start in the a's and b's but leave me in the z's, as in snoozing. At first, I cringed when he got up to pray, but after a while I welcomed the naps.

That says nothing good about my personal spirituality, but it does suggest something about the wisdom of stretching public prayer to the limit.

The Old Testament's longest prayer is found in Psalm 119, a full 176 verses that would literally go from a to z except the Hebrew alphabet ends in a different letter, so it goes from *alef* to *tav*.


The psalm contains some elements of lament, but it's mainly a wisdom psalm, designed to display an absolute love for God's *torah* – not so much God's law, as often translated, but the sum total of God's teaching.

In some ways, the psalm is like a long-play rap song, filled with wordplay and repetition, a paean of praise for God's teaching and a plea that divine instruction might be embedded in the psalmist's heart.

The psalmist built his prolonged prayer on the skeleton of the Hebrew "alefbet" so that it consisted of 22 stanzas of eight verses each. Adding

*Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. (Ps. 119:34)*

to the psalm's over-the-top complexity, each of the eight verses in each stanza begin with the same letter. That is, the first eight verses each begin with the letter *alef*, the next eight with *bet*, the next with *gimel*, and so on to the final eight verses, each of which begin with *tav*.

The psalmist furthermore interweaves eight thematic allusions to God's commandments or teachings into the psalm so that all of the 22 sections include at least six of the eight terms, along with a few others. 

Tackling all 176 verses of Psalm 119 would be quite a chore, and with its repetitive themes, unnecessary. This week's lesson, the fifth of the 22 stanzas (vv. 33-40), provides an excellent summary of the psalmist's concern.

In this section, all of the verses begin with the letter *hē* (pronounced "hay"). This made the alliteration easy, because the causative form of the Hebrew verb system adds the letter *hē* to the beginning of the word. Verses 33-39 all begin with verbs in that form, and v. 40 begins with the interjection *hinē*, which means "look," "behold," or "see."

### A whole heart (vv. 33-35)

The verbs that begin vv. 33-35 also have first-person pronoun suffixes attached: "teach me," "give me," "lead me." This gives the verses a very personal appeal: the psalmist

recognizes his lack and asks God to guide him in a closer walk.

The poet wants to follow God's way, but he knows that staying on the path is not easy. "Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end" (v. 33). He appeals to Yahweh as the ultimate guide, and pledges to remain faithfully on the road of obedience.

Memorizing precepts and understanding them are two different things, so the psalmist asks to go deeper. He doesn't want to know just the content of the divine *torah*; he wants to truly grasp its meaning and make it a part of his life: "Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart" (v. 34).

For the Hebrews, the heart encompassed one's thought and decision-making as well as one's emotions. To observe the law with one's whole heart was to do so with all of one's being. No doubt the psalmist was familiar with the command of Deut. 6:4 to "love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Verse 35 appeals again for divine assistance in remaining true: "Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it." Note the psalmist's thematic words "statutes," "law," and "commandments." He does not define the terms or draw any fine distinctions between them. His concern is that God's teachings, in whatever form, help him to walk in the way that pleases God, "for I delight in it."

The skilled sage recognized that God's teachings are far more than rules people could recite and think they have arrived. Rather, life with

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God is a journey in which we are to be constantly engaged with learning about and living out God's way.

Do the psalmist's words resonate with us? How often do we give even the least thought to seeking God's way as we go through the day? Consider how it would profit our spiritual lives if we began each morning with a prayer that God would teach us, touch our hearts, and guide us through the hours. These verses would be a good place to begin.

### A divided heart (vv. 36-37)

The psalmist's desire to live faithfully was genuine, but he recognized his human weakness and the allure of going off track. Thus, he prayed that when tempted to stray, God would direct him back to the right way.

Would any of us deny that we live in a materialistic, self-driven culture – and that it affects us? Our natural tendency is to be more concerned with financial prosperity than with spiritual growth. Perhaps we need to pray with the psalmist “Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain. Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways” (vv. 36-37).

Notice the difference: the psalmist asked God to turn his heart *toward* a life in keeping with God's teaching, and to turn his eyes *away from* “selfish gain” and “vanities.” The word translated as “vanities” refers to things that are worthless, vain, or empty. We can't model divine lovingkindness if our lives are ruled by selfishness.

In our quest for success, do we pursue things that are truly worthwhile, or things that have little value in the ultimate scheme of things? What the psalmist wanted was not the comforts of life, but life in its deepest meaning: “give me life in your ways.”

What are some ways in which a

life focused on God-inspired justice and kindness might be different from the self-directed and materialistic life taught by our culture?

### A devoted life (vv. 38-40)

In the final section, the poet pleads that God will be true: “Confirm to your servant your promise, which is for those who fear you” (v. 38). Hebrew has no word that specifically means “promise.” The assumption was that one's words should be followed and therefore constituted a promise. Often, however, the term *imrah*, which can mean “word” or “saying,” seemed to carry the sense of “promise,” especially if the words came from God.

But what promise does the psalmist have in mind? It is clear that the writer was familiar with the book of Deuteronomy, which taught that God and Israel lived in a covenantal relationship. As long as the people were faithful, God promised blessings, but if they turned after other gods (including self), God would punish them. Deuteronomy 28 is a prime example of the teaching: the first 14 verses promise prosperity to those who obey the commandments, while the vv. 15-58 take three times the space in threatening punishment to those who disobey.

Thus, it is likely that the psalmist believed God would recognize his desire to follow God's teachings by granting security, prosperity, and long life, and he asked God to confirm the covenant promise.

Here we should point out that the covenant in question was taught as binding upon the ancient Israelites, but it is not the covenant under which Christians live. Even for the Hebrews, it did not always play out as expected: the books of Job and Ecclesiastes were both written in large

part to deal with the question of why the righteous often suffered while the wicked prospered.

God has not promised that health and wealth will follow faithful Christians wherever they go. Indeed, the New Testament contains many passages encouraging believers to be strong in the face of suffering.

That does not mean, however, that there are no promises. Through Christ we have the promise of the Spirit's presence with us through all the trials as well as joys of life. Through Christ we have a mission to love others in a way that brings true purpose to life. And, through Christ we have the hope of being in God's presence even beyond the grave.

Through Christ we also have the promise of forgiveness for our shortcomings. The psalmist knew something of this, too. “Turn away the disgrace that I dread” could be a roundabout way of asking for forgiveness (v. 39). The word translated “turn away” could more literally be read as “cause to pass by.” The psalmist hoped for God to bless his obedience and forgive or pass over the dreaded reality of his failures.

Verse 40 closes the section with a declaration of the psalmist's deep desire to be so devoted to God's way that he could experience the fullness of God's life: “See, I have longed for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life.”<sup>u</sup>

The psalmist knows that God is the author of life, and he wants to know life to the fullest. That is the kind of life the prophet Micah described much more succinctly: one that finds its meaning in the rich joy of faithfully pursuing justice, displaying kindness, and walking humbly with God. That, Micah said, is what God wants from us (Mic. 6:8).

What kind of life do we want? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 13, 2020

Psalm 103:1-22

## Forgive Me, Lord

All scripture is a gift, but Psalm 103 is a jewel befitting a crown of honor. It is a gift of praise to God from one who personally experienced God's unchanging love and forgiveness. It is also a gift to readers who have found the inspiration and encouragement to seek that divine relationship for themselves.

Students through the years have been uniformly impressed by the enthusiasm and the poetic artistry of the psalm which, as John Durham describes it, "rolls forth in a great flood of hymnic eloquence, rushing from a soul too jubilant and rapt and full of God to contain it."

The psalm also has an elegant structure. To Claus Westermann, it "was planned, down to each individual clause, to be a pellucid and carefully formed work of art."

We can read the psalm as an individual prayer of devotion, as the payment of a vow to publicly praise God, or as an evangelistic testimony. The song includes significant elements of praise for God's beneficence toward the poet and towards Israel, so it is appropriate for either private prayer or corporate expressions of worship.

*The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (Ps. 103:8)*

### Bless the LORD! (vv. 1-7)

The careful structure begins and ends with a call to bless God (vv. 1-2, 20-22), who had blessed the Israelites both personally (vv. 3-5) and corporately (vv. 6-7). The heart of the psalm (vv. 8-18) magnifies God's gracious compassion toward persons who are both fallible (vv. 8-13), and finite (vv. 14-18). After praising God's goodness, the psalmist exalts the Lord's majesty (v. 19) before closing with a call for all heavenly and earthly beings to praise God (vv. 20-22).

The psalm begins with the writer calling himself to an attitude of worship (compare Psalms 104, 146): "Bless the LORD, O my soul!" We are accustomed to thinking of how God blesses people, but how can humans bless God? One approach is to note that the word can also mean "praise" or "salute." Thus, the NIV 11 and NET avoid the issue by translating with "praise," but the word for "bless" has a distinctive feel.

*Barak* (bless) is closely related to the word for knee (*berek*), and may also be translated as "kneel." When God's people kneel or come humbly to offer their heartfelt praise, God receives it as a blessing.

True praise involves the totality of one's being. "O my soul" translates the word *nefesh*, which means more than the Greek concept of a miasmatic spirit. It is the Hebrew word for self,

life, or one's entire being. This single word is amplified by the phrase "all that is within me" (literally, "all my insides").

Verse 2 continues the call to praise and serves as a bridge to the next verses, which explain why the psalmist feels impelled to offer such effusive praise to God and to "forget not all his benefits." Church marketing consultants insist that if churches want to appeal to contemporary society, they must emphasize the personal benefits of church attendance, not just the number of church programs. This poet certainly knew the benefits of knowing God.

The immediate advantage of trusting God is seen in one's personal life. In vv. 3-5, a string of participles describes what the LORD could do. God not only "forgives all your iniquity," "heals all your diseases," and "redeems your life from the Pit," but also "crowns you with steadfast love and mercy" and "satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."

Who wouldn't want such benefits as those? We can forgive the psalmist for the hyperbole of his waxed eloquence, for God never promised the perfect health and consistent prosperity he seems to imply. The psalmist believed that God had the power to forgive, to heal, to save, and to bless with the kind of loving presence that rejuvenates the soul.

This broad sequence of verbs elucidates the psalmist's desire to praise God with all his being. He was not speaking of some abstract idea, but of personally experienced renewal.

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## Trust the LORD (vv. 8-18)


What God has done for the psalmist, he has also done “for all who are oppressed,” most notably for the people of Israel (v. 6). The loving character that inspires God to forgive, heal, and redeem also motivates divine justice for the oppressed and vindication for downtrodden.

Israel could know about God’s love and character because “he made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel” (v. 7). The law of God was not given as a burden but as a gift – not to bind the people, but to free them to experience security and joy. The law is one of God’s greatest gifts, because it is based in liberating love.

The main body of the psalm (vv. 8-18) is a reflection on the compassionate grace of a consistent God who knows Israel and still holds a love that does not rise and fall with the people’s erratic behavior. The poet emphasizes God’s compassionate understanding of human fallibility (vv. 8-13) and finitude (vv. 14-18).

The writer begins this section with a remembrance of God’s self-revelation of divine attributes to Moses as one who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (v. 8, quoting Exod. 34:6-7). This does not mean that God never grows angry over the sin and corruption that threaten humankind. Yet, while God’s love is unbounded, there are limits to the divine wrath: “He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever” (v. 9).

If we all got what we deserved, there would be little reason for hope, but God “does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities” (v. 10). The psalmist’s position seems at odds with the tit-for-tat covenant stipulations of Deuteronomy, which promise bless-

ings for human faithfulness and cursing for disobedience (for example, see Deuteronomy 28 and 30).  How do we explain this?

The psalmist holds a more compassionate view of God, believing that divine forgiveness may override the punishment people deserve. He illustrates this through three comparative statements.

The first is vertical: as high as the heavens are above the earth, such is the measure of God’s infinite love toward those who hold him in awe (v. 11). The second runs horizontally: “as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us” (v. 12).

Why would God forgive so freely? A third simile makes it clear: “as a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him” (v. 13). Loving parents place reasonable limits on their children’s behavior, but their love does not cease when children fail to obey.

This thought provides the transition to vv. 14-18, which celebrate God’s compassionate understanding of our human nature. “For he knows how we are made; he remembers that we are dust” (v. 14). Since God made us, the psalmist reasons, God understands our nature from the inside out.

God also knows that we are finite and limited. As a dainty flower may spring up only to wither before the hot desert wind, so our days are short (vv. 15-16). When humans die, they may be forgotten on earth (“its place knows it no more,” v. 16b), but God does not forget.

No, God remembers: “the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments” (vv. 17-18).

We note the psalmist’s belief that

God’s love is eternal, but not unconditional. It is promised only to “those who fear him,” that is, who worship God in reverence and awe (vv. 11, 13).

God’s love is available to all, but forced upon none. While v. 18 suggests that God’s eternal love is limited to those “who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments,” it does not imply perfection. The whole point of the psalm is that God understands human fallibility and offers forgiveness to the penitent. Still, those who don’t acknowledge either God or their sins can hardly expect to experience forgiveness.

## Praise the LORD (vv. 19-22)

Having praised Yahweh’s expansive and everlasting love and goodness, the psalmist concludes by extolling God’s majesty: “The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all” (v. 19). God’s pervasive power and infinite love is worthy of universal praise. So, like the author of Psalm 96, the poet frames the psalm with an appeal to bless the LORD at both the beginning and the end.

The psalmist began with a gradual movement from the individual outward to all people, and then to the heavens. Now he reverses the order, calling first on God’s mighty angels (messengers, v. 20) to sing praise, then the “heavenly host” (a lower order of heavenly attendants, v. 21), and then the created order (v. 22). Finally, the psalm returns to where it began in one ebullient, forgiven heart – “Bless the LORD, O my soul!”

Christian believers do not live under the same covenant as the psalmist, but we worship the same God, one whose steadfast love and graciousness has been expressed most beautifully through Christ.

Bless the LORD, indeed! **NFJ**



# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 20, 2020

Psalm 78:1-8, 32-39

## Convict Me, Lord

No doubt we have all heard some version of the saying that “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Commonly quoted and variously attributed, the aphorism probably originated with philosopher George Santayana, whose original wording was “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Surely we could agree that those who are wise will seek to learn from the past, avoid former pitfalls, and live toward a better future.

That’s the theory, but human nature is a stubborn thing and people often repeat the same destructive behaviors or strategies that have caused misery countless times over.

The author of our text — actually assigned to this week’s Holy Cross Day — was convinced of this. Psalm 78 is a lengthy review of sordid moments from Israel’s history. It belongs to the larger category of wisdom teachings and is one of several “historical psalms” that seek to encourage present and future generations to learn from the nation’s previous blunders. 🇺🇸

The text has strong theological and political overtones — and in Israel the two were rarely separate. The psalm’s primary purpose is to challenge hearers

*We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.*  
(Ps. 78:4)

to learn positive lessons from multiple reminders of Israel’s up and down relationship with God.

Thus, the psalmist — who presents himself as a teacher — recounts stories of God’s deliverance and provision, Israel’s stubborn rebellion, and God’s response with both judgment and grace. As a secondary function, the psalm concludes with an affirmation of the Davidic dynasty as God’s choice to rule over the Hebrews, though that is beyond our present concern. 🇺🇸

One who reads through the entire psalm cannot help but join the psalmist in frustration over Israel’s historical pattern of divine deliverance followed by human rebellion and the suffering of punishment, giving rise to repentance and a new deliverance — but inevitably repeated again.

The psalmist recalled how God gave the people covenant rules to live by, worked miracles on their behalf, delivered them from Egypt, provided food and water in the wilderness, showed grace and patience beyond measure — and was perpetually thanked with forgetfulness, complaints, sinfulness, and rebellion.

In keeping with the covenant rules set out in the law, God was compelled to judge the people for their shortcomings, though the judgment was always tempered with grace and hope that the people would yet learn their lessons.

The song is, without question, a royal downer. Despite God’s best efforts, nothing goes right and the only hope that remains is in David’s descendants. This constant theme of human stubbornness leaves the impression that God is singing the blues over Israel. 🇺🇸

## A historical puzzle (vv. 1-4)

The psalm begins in the fashion of typical wisdom writings, with the teacher calling for people to listen and learn from his words, which he describes as a “parable” or “dark sayings from of old” (vv. 1-2). 🇺🇸


The word translated as “parable” (*mashal*) is typically used for proverbial statements that are usually much shorter than Psalm 78, but both are stories told with an intent to teach.

The parable, however, is a paradox. The word behind “dark sayings” commonly means “riddle.” Wisdom teachers of the ancient Near East often used riddles as teaching methods, and the Hebrews were no different. In this case, the writer doesn’t claim to ask a question with a trick answer. The riddle he tells is an unsolved question, a puzzle for pondering: how is it that Israel could persistently respond to God’s grace and goodness with rebellion rather than repentance, with sin instead of obedience?

The call to learn from the past for the sake of the present and the hope of the future is a common theme in the Old Testament. The psalmist emphasizes the deep roots of the story he is about to tell in a variety of ways. His riddles are “of old,” (v. 2), things “that our ancestors have told us” (v. 3).

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The teacher declares his determination to keep the traditions alive, even when they are painful. Echoing Moses' command from Deut. 6:4-9, he insisted "We will not hide them from their children," but "We will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done" (v. 4). 

### An ongoing challenge (vv. 5-8)

So what deeds does he relate? The psalmist begins with the covenant Israel had willingly entered with God – a covenant with clear expectations for both parties. Note how he includes both the southern (Jacob) and northern (Israel) tribes in v. 5: "He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel."

"Decree" and "law" were among many synonymous terms used to describe God's commandments or teachings designed to guide Israel's behavior and make them a distinctive people.

God's teachings were not for the Exodus generation alone, however, but for future generations as well. For the people to remain faithful to their special relationship with God, they must not only live by it, but pass it on to their children, who would teach it to the next generation, not yet born (v. 6).

The psalmist understood that Israel was always just one generation from paganism: if the current generation did not both practice and preach the law that bound them in covenant with God, there would be little hope for Israel's future.

If they faithfully passed on their faith, however, future Hebrews would understand that they were to "set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments" (v. 7). This describes the ideal scenario: faith propagating faith from generation

to generation.

The lectionary text stops at v. 7, but the psalmist's introductory thought is not complete if we do not continue through v. 8. There we learn the sad truth that many in Israel had not lived up to their calling. They had not remembered their responsibilities to God, but had chosen to follow other paths and worship other gods. Thus, the writer speaks of ancestral Hebrews as "a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God" (v. 8).

The psalmist apparently has in mind the very first generation of Israel, the very people who had been delivered from Egypt and who solemnly entered a binding covenant with God at Sinai. The remainder of the psalm recounts in graphic detail the many ways in which that generation ignored or forgot God's many displays of grace and provision, choosing to complain about what they didn't have rather than appreciating what God had provided.

### One example (vv. 32-39)

While the psalm provides several examples of past misbehavior, the lectionary text focuses on the wilderness period, when the people had complained about hunger and thirst, and God provided them with water from a rock, with "the bread of angels" (manna), and with countless quail (vv. 17-31).

The psalmist writes as if he cannot believe it. "In spite of all this they still sinned; they did not believe in his wonders" (v. 32). As a result, God punished them and many died, a likely reference to plagues described in Numbers 11.

The plagues led to periods of repentance, the psalmist said, in which the people "sought God earnestly," remembering "that God was their

Rock, the Most High their redeemer" (vv. 34-35).

But their repentance was shallow and self-serving: the people "flattered him with their mouths" and "lied to him with their tongues," according to the teacher (v. 36). "Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not true to this covenant" (v. 37).

Don't we know what this is like? How many of us have turned to God in true earnestness when facing hardships or trials, only to turn away and resume our selfish ways when things got better?

We wonder how God could remain patient and compassionate toward people who are so inconsistent, but the psalmist believed it was so: "Yet he, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them; often he restrained his anger, and did not stir up all his wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again" (vv. 38-39).

This text may seem foreign to Christian readers who are far removed from Israel's stubborn days in the wilderness. Believers in Christ do not relate to God based on the same covenant under which Israel lived. Still, do we not share similar characteristics of a fickle faithfulness that goes hot and cold?

Israel could not have survived apart from God's grace, and neither can we. Our relationship with God is based entirely on the grace God has shown through Christ, and the way we have responded to it. Our generation is likewise responsible for teaching our children the ways of God in order that they, too, may find their hope in God.

The teacher who composed Psalm 78 was convinced that Israel's people were poor students of history, failing to learn from the past for the sake of the future. We've heard the same lessons, and more beside. Will we respond any better? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Sept. 27, 2020

Psalm 25:1-10

## Deliver Me, Lord

How many ways can you say “sin”? Hebrew has three primary words for it, usually translated as “sin,” “iniquity,” and “transgression.” It also has terms commonly translated as “evil,” “offense,” or “wrong-doing.”

English has all of those, plus wickedness, unrighteousness, immorality, vice, impiety, impiousness, and more.

We also have a variety of words related to repentance for sin: contrition, regret, remorse, sorrow, self-reproach, shame, guilt. None of those words are particularly pleasant, but we’ve felt them all. We’ve disappointed God, disappointed others, and disappointed ourselves. We’ve made bad choices, taken wrong turns, and generally messed up.

Unless we’re one of those rare sociopaths who believe they never do wrong, we’ve felt the sting of shame, and we long to be forgiven by those we have hurt, and forgiven by God, as well.

That’s what today’s text is about: Psalm 25 is a prayer for forgiveness, offered in trust to a gracious God. It’s the sort of prayer we all need to pray from time to time. 🙏🙏

*Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness’ sake, O LORD!” (Ps. 25:7)*

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

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

The psalmist seeks forgiveness, but offers no clue as to what sins he has committed. That works to the reader’s advantage: the poem’s lack of specifics makes it easier to put ourselves in the psalm, thinking of the sins that plague our conscience.

The psalmist knew that repentance involves baring our souls to God, so he begins: “To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.” The psalmist’s use of God’s covenant name “Yahweh” (LORD) reflects the intimate, personal nature of the prayer. The word translated as “soul” (*nefesh*) describes one’s essential being, the source of life and identity. To lay our *nefesh* before God is to go as deep as we can go.

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

worthy friends may let us down, but God can be trusted to hear and understand our innermost fears, thoughts, or confessions – even our doubts.

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

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

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

The psalmist prayed for God’s guidance in no less than four different ways, asking Yahweh to “make me to know your ways,” to “teach me your paths,” to “lead me in your truth,” and, simply, to “teach me” (vv. 4-5a).

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

One could learn the commandments and other rules of community

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living from a human teacher, but the psalmist seeks more. He longs for God's guidance as he deals with everyday situations or makes life decisions that aren't covered by written laws.

We are constantly faced with choices as we go through life: where (or whether) to attend college, what job to pursue, who (or whether) we will marry, whether we want to have or adopt children.

We make daily choices about how we will spend our time, our money, and our energy. Do we run through these choices without a thought beyond our personal preferences, or do we stop to ask God's guidance? God may not care what we have for dinner, but larger decisions or moral judgments call for deeper reflection. If we want our choices and our lives to honor God, and if we want to be known as upright and faithful people, we need to consider what God might have us do.

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

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

This is not to suggest that we will get immediate answers. The psalmist expressed his trust in Yahweh as "the God of my salvation," for whom he was willing to "wait all day long" (v. 5b). As we read the psalm through the lens of the New Testament, we naturally think of God's salvation as being an eternal pardon through Jesus Christ. The psalmist's idea of "salvation," however, would

likely have involved deliverance from some difficult situation or person.

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

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

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

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

Thus, the psalmist appeals to God's faithfulness rather than his own worthiness: he asks for grace rather than with what he deserves. 📖

The poet's request that Yahweh would not remember his past failures but "remember" him according to the divine nature of steadfast love and goodness involves more than just hoping God will keep him in mind. In texts such as this, "to remember" is an internal act

that has external consequences: God might remember someone because punishment is in order, or remember the obedient by bestowing blessings. The psalmist knows he has not earned God's favor. That's why he appeals to God's mercy, love, and goodness.

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

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

Such guidance is offered to those who respectfully seek it, for "He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way" (v. 9). This reflects the poet's own reverent approach.

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

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

There's a good reason why "Amazing Grace" is a perennially favorite hymn. The more we understand the demands of following Jesus' call, the more we know that we need it. 📖

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Oct. 4, 2020

Psalm 80:1-19

## Restore Us, Lord

The summer of 2020 will be remembered by many as the summer of lament. The persistent COVID-19 pandemic lingered on, putting many people out of work, making travel difficult, and shutting down popular sports and entertainment venues. Political polarities mounted in the tension between those who were more concerned with public health and those more focused on the economy.

With the nation already under stress, George Floyd was mercilessly killed by a rogue policeman in Minneapolis, sparking a season of protests for racial justice that occasionally grew violent, along with divisive presidential threats of even more violence.

As ministers and others sought to deal with their own grief and offer comfort to others, the perfect storm of misery drove many to the psalms of lament to join the poets of Israel in crying “How long?”

Israel’s hymnbook contained many laments, including Psalm 80. We can’t be sure what particular situation led to this mournful prayer, but it clearly emerged from a perspective of deep loss and frustration on a national level. The psalmist wrote in behalf of a people who had fallen far from their ideals and were in danger of losing their identity.

*Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. (Ps. 80:7)*

Psalm 80 is preceded by a lengthy superscription that probably has to do with the song’s tune, which seems to be something like “Lilies of the Testimony.” If the psalmist had written Psalm 80 today, it probably would have sounded like a sad country song.

### Restore us, O God ... (vv. 1-3)

The psalm is a prime example of a communal lament in which a leader either sang in behalf of the community or led the congregation in a plaintive prayer to God. Laments typically contain an address to God, a complaint about the present plight, a plea for help, and often an expression of trust.

A threefold appeal for Yahweh to save (vv. 3, 7, 19) divides the psalm into an invocation and appeal (vv. 1-3), a complaint (vv. 4-7), and a melancholy plea comparing Israel to a ruined vine and asking God to restore it, concluding with a vow (vv. 8-19).

The psalmist plaintively addresses God as “Shepherd of Israel,” “you who lead Joseph like a flock,” and “you who are enthroned upon the cherubim” (v. 1). These epithets recall the tradition of God visibly leading Israel through the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt.

The psalmist pleads for the exalted God who had led Israel in the past to “shine forth” before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, to “stir up” divine power, and to come with salvation.

Did you wonder why he mentions only three of the twelve tribes?

The account of Israel’s wilderness journey in Num. 2:17-24 says that each time the Israelites set out, the first three tribes to follow the Ark of the Covenant were Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh: the same order as Ps. 80:2. It is as if the psalmist is praying for God to come again and lead the tribes through their present trial.

Those three tribes were also the most influential tribes in the northern kingdom of Israel, after the split from the southern kingdom of Judah. This may suggest that the psalm has its roots in a time of crisis in the northern kingdom, which was conquered by Assyria in 722 BCE.

The psalmist’s imaginative prayer asked God to “shine forth” and come to save Israel. The plea is repeated three times: “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved” (v. 3, see also vv. 7 and 20).

Hebrew tradition held that God’s face glowed with glory, so much that ordinary humans could not bear a direct view and live. Moses’ face was said to have shone after being in God’s presence, as if reflecting the divine glory or radiating sacred energy he may have absorbed (Exod. 34:29).

Readers may also contemplate a connection with the Aaronic blessing of Num. 6:24-26: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

Calling upon God to “shine forth” was a poetic way of asking God to show favor toward Israel and come with saving power.


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Let your face shine upon us ...  
(vv. 4-6)

Why would this request be appropriate? Because the people seemed convinced that God was furious with them and no longer listened to their prayers. God's face, rather than beaming with beneficence, was wreathed in the smoke of smoldering anger (v. 4).

The people had been praying, the psalmist implies, but God had responded with fumes rather than favor. How long (literally, "until when?") would God allow this state of affairs to continue?

The psalmist laments that God had not only allowed their troubles to occur, but had caused them, giving the people "the bread of tears" to eat and buckets of tears to drink (v. 5). 

"You have made us a source of contention to our neighbors," the psalmist cried, "and our enemies mock us" (v. 6).

The belief that God would bless or curse the people in keeping with their behavior lies behind the contention of the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings that God used foreign nations as divine agents to punish the Hebrews when they chose to reject God's leadership and follow other gods.

The books of Job and Ecclesiastes questioned the adequacy of such a *quid pro quo* theology, and the New Testament introduced a new covenant in which salvation comes by grace rather than works. Even so, the notion that "you get what you deserve" remains a popular belief.

In the psalmist's mind, good or bad fortune was always divinely determined. We may not hold to the same theology, but we still have a tendency to blame our troubles on God rather than accepting responsibility for our own actions. As a result, we sometimes think of God more as a cosmic repairman we call on to fix things rather than a loving shepherd we follow every day.

Restore this vine  
(vv. 7-16)

A second plea for God to "restore us" is followed by an extended metaphor in which the psalmist pictures God as a planter who took a grape vine from Egypt, cleared out the promised land, and transplanted it in a new home (vv. 8-9). The verdant vine then spread from the mountains of the southern Negev to the cedars of Lebanon, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates River – borders reportedly promised in Deut. 11:22-25 and approximately realized under David's rule (vv. 10-11).

But that was in the past. The psalmist mourns that God had broken down the protective walls of the vineyard, allowing anyone to pick its fruit and wild animals to ravage it (vv. 12-13, compare Isa. 5:1-7). He cries for the community as the personified vine, pleading for God to have pity on it as "the stock that your right hand planted" (v. 15), but which had been cut and burned (v. 16).

The psalm would be particularly appropriate if expressed near the time when the Assyrian armies devastated the area, scattering the population of the northern kingdom while subjugating Judah as a vassal forced to pay tribute.

The request of favor for "the one at your right hand" (v. 17) parallels "the stock that your right hand planted" in v. 15. The straightforward allusion is to Israel, the vine that God had initially blessed and later cursed.

Our national grief is not the same. We are in no immediate danger of being conquered by a foreign foe – but we have felt what it is like to be weakened by internal division, torn by persistent injustice, and threatened by a deadly virus.

How long, O Lord?

That we may be saved  
(vv. 17-19)

How might the psalmist persuade God to show favor on the desolate nation? In times of extremity, ancient peoples often resorted to making vows to the gods, and the Hebrews were no exception. Such "vows" were actually conditional promises that asked God for a favor and promised something in return.

Thus, the prayer for the hand of God's blessing in v. 17 is followed by the promise "then we will never turn back from you" (v. 18a). The vow is then repeated, in different words: "give us life, and we will call on your name" (v. 18b).

The closing verse repeats the refrain found in vv. 3 and 7, asking God to come with shining face to deliver the people from their trouble.

Does this psalm reflect the way we sometimes pray? Have we ever prayed: "Oh God, if you will get me out of this mess, I promise to straighten up" – or "I promise to get back in church," or "I'll do whatever you want me to do"?

It's not that easy, is it? We cannot blame God for national unrest provoked by centuries of systemic racism, decades of growing wealth disparity, and the failure of political leaders to work for the good of all people. Nor can we blame God for the coronavirus.

But we can take the psalmist's prayer to heart. We can grieve over what we have lost and what we have become. We can pray for God to turn our hearts from selfish goals to mutual care and a more just society. We can ask God to show us the world through Jesus' eyes by listening to our neighbors, even those who don't live in our neighborhoods, and by rebuilding community one relationship at a time.

Perhaps God is asking us, "How long?" **NFJ**



# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 11, 2020

## Psalm 23

### Lead Us, Lord

When you're really struggling and open your Bible in search of a comforting passage, chances are you'll end up in the Psalms, with Psalm 23 one of the most likely choices, and for good reason.

Few biblical pictures are more pleasing than the image of God as a shepherd caring for a flock of beloved sheep. The psalm was probably written at least 2,500 years ago, but its story of trust can also be *our* story. Whether we find ourselves at rest beside the still water, following in the paths of righteousness, or struggling through valleys of deep shadow, this psalm has a word for us.

### In the pasture (vv. 1-3)

Israel's pastoral background made it only natural for a Hebrew poet to picture God as a shepherd. The metaphor identifies the worshiper with the sheep and implies a willingness to follow the shepherd's leading.

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

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. (Ps. 23:4)*

The psalmist knew that we all have work to do, for God does not rain manna from heaven when grain fields are available. But he also believed it was God who brought the sun and the rain to bear upon the grain. The Good Shepherd is concerned with our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

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

Smart shepherds periodically direct the animals to lie down to chew their cud and promote complete digestion. It would be a stretch to suggest that God brings disease or tragedy to "make us lie down" and take stock of our lives. Still, God can use difficult times to help us reflect on or "digest" what has been happening in our lives, making us stronger and better people.

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

Sheep are among the world's most stress-prone animals, often in need of reassurance and encouragement. When a shepherd scratches the animal or calls

it by name, the sheep's sense of security and belonging increases. In such cases, the shepherd "refreshes the spirit" of the sheep.

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

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

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

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

### In the dark valley (v. 4)

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

The author appears to know what a deep, dark valley looks like. This verse

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may be a personal testimony of bleak times he had known, and of the Good Shepherd's comforting presence.

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

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

Some interpreters make a great deal of the word "through" in the translation "Even though I walk *through* the darkest valley. . ." (NRSV). The prepositional prefix used can indicate "through," but far more commonly means "in" or "into." There will be at least one valley we will walk *into* but not out from. The psalmist, after all, is talking about "the valley of the shadow of death." 📖

The important thing about this valley is not how deep or dark or dangerous it is. The significant thing is that *in the midst* of the dark valley, God is with us. "I fear no evil, *for you are with me.*" This is a strong, intensive phrase in Hebrew, reflecting God's promises to the patriarchs. As Jacob undertook the dangerous journey to Haran, for example, Yahweh appeared to him and made this promise: "Know that *I am with you* and will keep you wherever you go . . ." (Gen. 28:15, see also the promise to Isaac in Gen. 26:3).

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

To describe his sense of security, the psalmist says "I will fear no evil."

The psalm does not promise that we will face no harm in this life, only that we need not *fear* it. The Lord who is present with us has ultimate power over all that is evil.

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

The "staff" calls to mind a tall walking stick the shepherd might use to guide a sheep's direction, or to scratch its stomach in a show of affection.

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

#### At the table (vv. 5-6)

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

The poet paints a remarkable picture. God has not only "set in order" a table before him, but has done so in the very presence of hostile opponents. While the image is different, the verse carries forward the same *themes* found in the previous verses: God provides not only food and rest, but protection.

The joy of this special fellowship is indicated by the reference to anointing with scented oil, a ceremony used for the anointing of kings or the welcoming of honored visitors. 📖 The final picture also echoes the theme: the psalmist's

joy, symbolized by an overflowing cup of wine, has filled him to the point of spiritual satiation.

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 23 begins and ends on a note of confident joy in the presence of God. This joy is not fleeting or temporary, like a butterfly that we see and delight in for a short time. We know the joy of God's presence through the Spirit of Christ, who called himself "the Good Shepherd." God's caring pursuit of the beloved flock will last as long as time itself. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 18, 2020

Psalm 96:1-13

## Be Honored, Lord

Have you ever noticed how the music we listened to as teenagers imprints itself as the playlist of our lives? Though some enjoy discovering new artists and new music, others figure there's no point in learning to appreciate Maroon 5 when we can still listen to the Four Seasons, or in cultivating a taste for rap or reggae when we're perfectly happy with rhythm & blues or rock & roll.

But sometimes a new song catches our ear, and we can't help humming the tune, even if we don't know who's singing it.

When the songwriter/theologian who penned Psalm 96 composed a new song, he had high hopes that it would catch on, and it did, for it remains popular at least 2,500 years after its debut.

Christians most commonly hear it read in services on Christmas Eve, and for good reason: the psalm looks joyfully to the day when the God who reigns over all will come to set things right.

**Sing, earth!**  
(vv. 1-6)

The psalm falls into three "verses," as it were, each beginning with a call to praise God, followed by the reasons why praise is due. ↓

*Sing to the LORD, bless his name;  
tell of his salvation from day to day.  
(Ps. 96:2)*

The first verse begins with a repetitive call to "sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD all the earth. Sing to the LORD, bless his name" (vv. 1-2a).

The purpose of singing to the LORD was to "bless his name," "tell of his salvation," and to "declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples" (v. 3). ↓ The choral testimony of God's delivering power was to be persistent, "from day to day."

It's easier to sing praise on some days than on others, but many people find that the very act of singing praise – especially in the company of fellow believers – can lift their spirits in a significant and lasting way.

One reason worship in predominantly black churches tends to last two hours or more, and to feature joyful songs with victorious themes, is that people who have felt oppressed and downtrodden during the week can find in such worship strength and encouragement to help them face another week.

Singing praise is good for the soul, but not its primary purpose. We tell of God's greatness because God is worthy of our acclaim, as we learn in vv. 4-6, which begin: "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised."

Why? Because Yahweh is "to be revered above all gods."

"The gods of the peoples are idols," the psalmist said – mere constructs of stone or wood or bronze combined

with the human imagination. While popular gods were human projections of themselves, "the LORD made the heavens" (v. 5).

In other words, gods like Baal and Asherah, Dagon and Mot were powerful in imagination but impotent in reality. They might be thought of as gods of rain and fertility and grain and death, but Yahweh reigned above all. "Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary" (v. 6). ↓

This is one of the reasons church architects – especially those who designed the great cathedrals – have sought to create a large space that exhibits both beauty and grandeur while making the worshiper feel small before the greatness of God, symbolized by the sanctuary.

**Praise, people!**  
(vv. 7-10)

The second verse switches the active verb from "sing" to "ascribe," again repeating it three times: "Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name" (vv. 7-8a). ↓

The psalmist is calling for a verbal offering of praise in addition to the material offerings (*minhā*) to be brought into the place of worship. The reference to physical offerings of grain or flour, wine or money was a reminder that our worship includes costly elements as tangible demonstrations of our faith and gratitude.

The word for "worship" in v. 9 literally means "to bow down" or "to prostrate oneself." Some mainline churches have "kneeling benches" attached to

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the back of the pews, but many modern worshipers would never think of kneeling as a part of public worship, much less stretching out on the floor. 🇺🇸

The psalmist calls us to bow before Yahweh “in holy splendor,” which may relate to the impressive sanctuary, the attire of the worshipers, or an awareness of worship’s sacred nature. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more on this.)

The second half of v. 9 seems to echo the abject humility of the call to “bow before the LORD” in the first half. Most modern versions have “tremble before him, all the earth.” The word translated as “tremble” means “to whirl,” “to dance,” or “to writhe.” It could be used of joyful dance, of writhing in pain, or of anxious waiting. While “tremble” is a reasonable reading, it’s possible that the psalmist had in mind a joyful dance, for he is singing a joyful song and calling others to join the celebration.

And what was there to celebrate? “Say among the nations, ‘The LORD is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity’” (v. 10).

The message is not for Israel alone, but for all the nations – indeed, for “all the earth,” as in v. 9 and in the following verses. And the message is that “The LORD is king!” *God reigns*.

What was the central message of Jesus when he went about preaching? “The kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15). Jesus constantly taught of God’s rule or reign, and his teachings were peppered with references to what the kingdom of God is like, or what it means to belong to the kingdom of God.

The psalmist did not know the extent of God’s gracious love that we have come to know in Jesus, but he fully believed that God ruled over the earth and was coming to “judge the

peoples with equity.”

The root meaning of the word translated “equity” is “evenness.” In an ethical sense, it refers to fairness: God will judge all people fairly and justly. This is a helpful reminder, in a world marred by many injustices and in which the level of privilege often depends on the color of one’s skin, that God is a God of justice for all peoples.

### Rejoice, all! (vv. 11-13)

When God rules, humans are not the only ones to rejoice: the psalmist imagined all of creation expressing euphoric glee to be part of God’s universal kingdom. He called for the heavens to be glad and the earth to rejoice as the sea shouted along with all creatures within it. “Let the field exult,” he sang, “and everything in it,” while “the trees of the forest sing for joy” (vv. 11-12). 🇺🇸

The earth itself joins humans in singing joyously in anticipation that God “is coming to judge the earth.” Again the psalmist emphasized that, unlike humans who are subject to error or partiality, God “will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth” (v. 13).

It is hard for us to appreciate the notion of judgment as a time for rejoicing, we typically picture judgment as a guilty defendant standing to be condemned and sentenced.

For the psalmist, God’s coming judgment was more than that: it would be a time when God would restore a proper order and put all things right.

We know that many things are out of order in our world; many things are not right. There is endemic injustice in an economic system that allows the top one-hundredth of the top one percent to own more than 11 percent of the nation’s wealth. In 2016, the top one percent owned about 40 percent

of America’s wealth and the top ten percent owned 77 percent, leaving 90 percent of the people to share just 23 percent of the nation’s wealth. 🇺🇸

Rampant injustice marks our penal system, where people of color are far more likely to be convicted of crimes and to have longer sentences than whites. The U.S. locks up far more of its population than any other country. A 2018 report to the United Nations showed that African Americans were 5.9 times more likely to be incarcerated than whites, and Latinos were 3.1 times as likely to see jail from the inside. 🇺🇸

Disparities in convictions and sentencing are due not only to racial bias, but to wealth disparities: those who can afford high-priced lawyers are much more likely to walk free than those who rely on public defenders.

We could all name other areas of injustice based on gender or gender preference, ethnicity, age, social status, or other factors.

Many of us fail completely to recognize the privilege we have, or to appreciate the obstacles that others face.

When Jesus came to proclaim the kingdom of God, he equated it to doing justice: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus said, “because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18).

Jesus’ teaching focused on ways in which those who live under God’s reign and live with a Christ-like point of view are called to be people of justice who do the Lord’s work of setting things right in a world gone wrong.

This raises a question for each of us: “What have I done this week to make this world a more just and equitable place?” Or perhaps, more importantly, “What will I do *next* week?” **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Oct. 25, 2020

Matthew 22:23-46

## The Right Questions

Has anyone ever asked you a trick question? Some trick questions either don't have an answer, or the way they are asked does not allow for a correct answer.

Sometimes questions are designed for no other purpose than to get someone into trouble. You've heard the old standard: "Answer yes or no: Have you stopped cheating on your wife?" Within the framework of the question, there's no way to answer without self-incrimination.

Jesus often ran into such dicey questions. Our text for today finds Jesus teaching in the temple, drawing ever closer to the end of his earthly ministry. He had become so popular that his religious opponents were working overtime in an effort to discredit him. It's unfortunate that even religious people often lack the ability to make a case *for* their own view without casting aspersions on others' beliefs.

## The God of the Living (vv. 23-33)

A bit of background before we get to the main text: two main groups provided leadership for first century Judaism. The Sadducees were the fundamentalists of early Judaism. They relied mainly on the Torah as authoritative and had little

*Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? (Matt. 22:36)*

truck with the prophets, the writings, and revolutionary notions like resurrection. Their counterparts were the Pharisees, who not only accepted the writings and the prophets as scripture, but had come to believe that faithful Jews would not live forever in shadowy *Sheol* after death, but would one day rise from the dead and find new life.

The Sadducees and Pharisees appear to have enjoyed baiting each other with trick questions designed to cast doubt on the others' beliefs. In this chapter, however, the two groups turn their attention from each other and focus their attacks on Jesus, who was leading a new movement that threatened them both.

As Matthew tells it, the Sadducees took the first shot at Jesus, and they came out with tongues blazing. They used their best trick question, based on the tradition of levirate marriage described in Deut. 25:5-10. The admittedly sexist practice was designed to ensure that every man would have a son to inherit his goods and to carry on his name. Thus, if a man were to die before his wife gave birth to a son, one of his brothers (even if already married) was expected to marry the widow and have relations with her until she produced the desired son, who would be regarded as the child of the deceased. ↓

The Sadducees stretched the odd custom to extremes in their efforts to trip up the Pharisees. What if a man with seven brothers died without begetting a son, and every brother who

married the widow suffered the same fate, until all of them had married her? In the resurrection (if such a thing existed), they asked, whose wife would she be? ↓

The Pharisees had no answer, which delighted the Sadducees. But when they posed the same question to Jesus, they got a surprise. He had an answer for them, and they didn't want to hear it. Jesus recognized the Sadducees' hostile intent, and quickly pointed to some gaps in their understanding. The implication was that, since they didn't know anything about the resurrection, they didn't have the right to ask smug questions about it.

In the resurrection, Jesus taught, human relationships such as marriage would give way to a different reality, something that we cannot now begin to understand, where earthly customs no longer apply. He gave no details, only that the resurrected would be "like angels."

While he was on a roll, Jesus called their bluff on another point. He quoted a recurring text from the Pentateuch (Exod. 3:6, 15-16; 4:5, etc.) in which God reportedly said "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," even after those patriarchs were dead and buried. Jesus asked how such a thing could be if there were no resurrection. Otherwise, the scriptures should have said "I *was* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Jesus' response was more semantic than logical, but it was enough to silence the Sadducees, who went away remembering Jesus' last words to them: "He is God not of the dead, but of the living." Following God is all about *living* – now, as well as later.

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## The God of the Loving (vv. 34-40)

When Jesus silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees grinned and stepped in as if to say “Move aside and let some real men tackle this problem.” They posed for Jesus a question that could embroil any group of rabbinic students in endless debate.

The Torah contained many commandments and the rabbis had added many others, so there were literally hundreds of directives that faithful Jews were expected to understand and to obey. All the commandments were deemed important, but the rabbis delighted in debating which ones were the most important, and they did not all agree.

So, they submitted the conundrum to Jesus. “What is the greatest commandment?” (vv. 34-36). Jesus never blinked, but quickly quoted two Old Testament texts. He sided with the popular view that Deut. 6:4-5 was the most important. Called the “Shema,” it was to be recited three times every day: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Jesus quoted the text, and in keeping with contemporary Greek thought that had introduced the mind as the source of decision making, he added “and with all your mind” (v. 37).<sup>u</sup>

That was the first and greatest commandment, Jesus said, but he then went a step beyond to insist that the second most important commandment could not be separated from the first. From Lev. 19:8, he quoted the injunction that God’s people should love their neighbors as themselves.

It doesn’t take much thought to recognize that the two commands are like two sides of the same coin. If we claim to love God but don’t show love to our neighbors, we’re lying. Those who truly love God will express it in

love to other people. The cross is not complete unless it has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. God is the God of the loving.

Here it is, then — in two short answers to two trick questions, Jesus taught two very important theological truths: God is the God of the living, and God of the loving.

## The God of . . . you? (vv. 41-46)

Jesus was not satisfied to leave it there, for the truth of the gospel always calls for a response to the gospel. While his silenced inquisitors were still gathered about, Jesus turned the tables and asked a question of his own.

“What do you think about the Messiah?” Jesus asked. “Whose son is he?” (vv. 41-42a). The Pharisees responded confidently because the answer seemed obvious. Everybody knew that the Messiah would be descended of David. So, they smugly answered, as if the question was too elementary to ask, “The son of David” (v. 42b).<sup>u</sup>

“Ha!” Jesus said. “Ha!”

No, that’s not in the text, but we can imagine Jesus offering such a retort. “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying ‘The Lord says to my lord, sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet?’ If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” (vv. 43-45).

The Pharisees would have known Jesus was quoting from Psalm 110:1, which was traditionally attributed to David, and begins “The LORD (Yahweh) says to my lord . . .”<sup>u</sup>

Jesus interpreted “my lord” as a reference to the messiah, The Pharisees thought of the Messiah as an ordinary man who would be empowered by the Spirit to deliver Israel, not as someone David would call “lord.” Would David refer to his descendant as “lord” if he was an ordinary man?

Thinking of the Messiah as divine was not a category of thought for the

Pharisees.

Jesus pressed them for a response. What did they believe about the Messiah? Would they stick with their traditional beliefs, even though they led only to bickering within their own faith? Or would they dare to risk trusting that Jesus really was the Messiah, and that he was not the kind of Messiah they expected?

We would like to think that some, at least, would have declared their faith, that *one* of them, perhaps, would have seen the light and trusted in Jesus as the one who could lead them to the God who is God of the living and God of the loving.

Unfortunately, the response was silence. “No one was able to give him an answer,” the text says, “nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions” (v. 46).

We may find some delight in the ancient inquisitors’ discomfiture, but can we really do so comfortably? Today we are faced with the same question.

God has come to us in Christ as the God of the living and the God of the loving. Do we want to live? Are we willing to love? Can we believe what Jesus taught, or do we require more data? How long will we remain silent?

We are an educated society. We like to discuss things and argue and debate, to send things out to a committee to gather more information, to consider and reflect and run opinion polls before we make a decision. Jesus calls us to stop evading the issue and ducking the question. He calls us to respond.

I’ve attended a lot of Baptist meetings in my life, and many of them include resolutions that tend to be debated *ad infinitum*. I’m always happy when someone has had enough, and they stand up to say “*Call for the question!*”

In essence, that is where Jesus leaves us at the end of today’s text. He calls for the question. He challenges us to respond. What do *we* think about the Messiah? **NFJ**



# Dealing with the Devil

Popular concepts of Satan shaped by influences beyond the Bible

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

**M**any Christians — laypersons and preachers alike — focus considerable attention on the devil and his supernatural minions. Blaming sin on the devil is a convenient way to explain why the world has so much systemic evil — and serves as a way to avoid accepting personal responsibility for such continuing evil.

To borrow from Shakespeare, our “giving the devil his due” allows for shifting all blame to evil or satanic forces. And it often creates a dualistic system — with dueling gods — clearly at odds with the Christian concept of monotheism.

## CONCEPTS

Visions of Satan presiding over an eternal sinner roast provide evangelists with material for scaring people into the kingdom.

But should we call people to discipleship in the same way someone sells fire insurance? Should we trust Jesus because we're afraid not to?

It can be helpful to recognize how stories about Satan or evil forces are culturally shaped through time, and how they have often been misrepresented by the human imagination and desire to both explain the presence of evil and to avoid responsibility for our own negative choices.

First, we should recognize that the concept of Satan as portrayed in the New Testament and in popular theology is simply not present in the Old Testament.

In a variety of texts, the word *sâtân* is used of humans in the sense of “adversary” or “accuser,”

the word's basic meaning (see 1 Sam. 29:4; 2 Sam. 19:22; 1 Kgs. 5:4 [Heb. 5:18]; 1 Kgs. 11:14, 23, 25; Ps. 71:13; Ps. 109:6, 20, 29). But are there more powerful adversaries?

In Numbers 22, the “angel of the LORD (Yahweh),” appeared three times to bar Balaam's way, and said he had come “as an adversary” (*le-sâtân*) sent by God to hinder the pagan prophet (Num. 22:22, 32). The term again portrays an angelic adversary sent by God to do God's bidding.

## ACCUSER

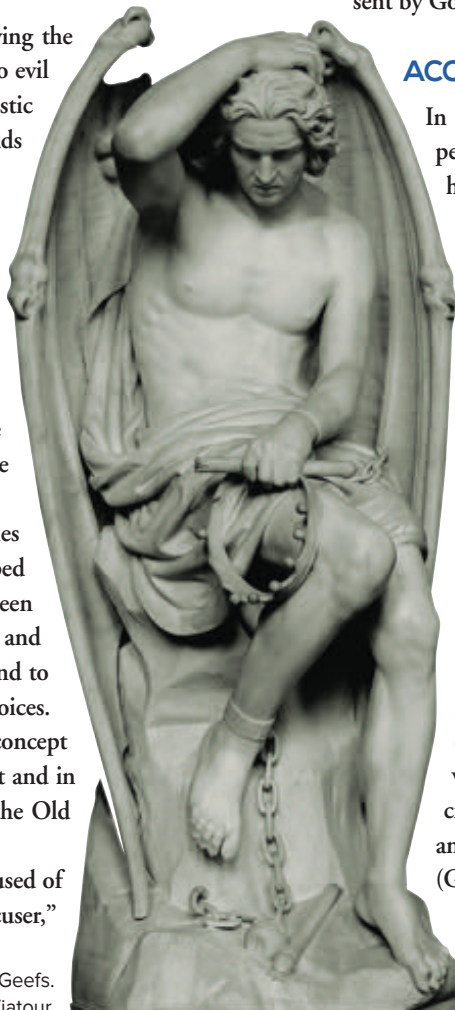
In Zechariah, which dates from the post-exilic period, the prophet spoke of a vision in which he saw the high priest Joshua wearing filthy clothes, with the heavenly accuser (*ha-sâtân*) standing by his side, ready to accuse him.

Yahweh, however, rebuked the overzealous angel, instructing him not to bring charges against Joshua, for God had forgiven his guilt (Zech. 3:1-5).

Unfortunately, in both Job and Zechariah, the NRSV and some other modern translations render the title “the accuser” (*ha-sâtân*) with the proper name “Satan,” which is both incorrect and highly misleading.

We should note that the “tempter” portrayed in the etiological story of Genesis 3 is clearly not portrayed as an adversary and certainly not as Satan, but as a serpent that was part of God's good earthly creation — a creature who happened to be “more crafty than any other wild animal the LORD God had made” (Gen. 3:1).

In the story, the serpent plays the literary role of planting a question in Eve's mind — a question anyone could have come up with



*The Lucifer of Liège*, 1848, by Guillaume Geefs.  
Photo by Luc Viatour.



*Eve Tempted by the Serpent*, 1799, by William Blake

on one's own. Do we think that Eve (or one of us) is incapable of tempting thoughts without satanic help?

And consider this: in the book of Job, the adversary who wanted God to test Job was not called by a personal name, despite the misleading translations of modern Bibles. Again, he has a title: *ha-sâtân* ("the accuser" or "the adversary" — pronounced *ha-sabtahn*).

This character was clearly portrayed as one of the "sons of God," a member of God's inner council who served as a sort of heavenly district attorney. His job was colorfully depicted as going to and fro on the earth, identifying wicked people and reporting them to God.

Though the author portrayed the heavenly accuser as overly anxious to see Job fall from his "blameless and upright" perch, he did not depict the accuser as evil. He *was not* the devil.

## CHRONICLES

The only time in the Old Testament that the word *sâtân* possibly appears as a proper name, not prefaced by the direct article or a preposition, is in the late post-exilic book of 1 Chron. 21:1, which reads: "Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel."

This was a much-revised version of an earlier story from 2 Samuel 24, which says

clearly that Yahweh inspired David to take a census as a pretext for punishing Israel: "Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying 'Go, count the people of Israel and Judah'" (2 Sam. 24:1).

The author of Chronicles, writing many years later, was no longer comfortable saying that God had inspired David to do wrong, and so transferred the act from Yahweh to "Satan."

It is unclear whether he still thought of this *sâtân* as a member of God's council sent to do the job, or whether he thought of *sâtân* as a human who had misled David, or whether he had begun to think of "Satan" as a separate being inimical to God.



*The Devil on Horseback*, Nuremberg Chronicle, 1493.

## DEVELOPMENT

So how did that thought develop?

The Jews who returned from Babylonian exile lived within the Persian Empire for 200 years, and would have been exposed to Zoroastrianism, the religion of their overlords.

Zoroastrianism taught that a supreme god, Ahura Mazda, had created six lesser gods. One, named Spenta Mainyu, chose to do good, while another, known as Angra Mainyu (later known as Ahriman, or the "devil") chose to do evil.

In Zoroastrianism, people would cross a balancing bridge of judgment when they died, and those who followed Spenta Mainyu would enter Paradise, while those who followed Angra Mainyu's evil ways would be thrown into a place of punishment and deprivation presided over by Angra Mainyu.

Zoroastrianism also included the notion of a savior (Soshyant, or Soashyant) who would usher in a new age, raise the dead, and destroy Angra Mainyu.

It is difficult to trace straight lines of influence from Persian beliefs to late Judaism, but the Jews lived in friendly relations as Persian subjects from 538 BCE until Alexander the Great defeated the Persians in 334 BCE.

Persian thought was bound to have entered their thinking.

## RECAST STORIES

In late Judaism, after centuries of living under Persian, Greek and Roman rule — all of which featured gods that were good and not so good — and after enduring persecutions that led many to wonder how God could allow such evil — some Jewish writings began to recast biblical stories and embellish them with mythic but evil characters.

First Enoch, for example, expands the brief mention of angels having sex with human women in Genesis 6 into a full-fledged myth about the so-called "Watchers," angels who supposedly had been assigned to watch over the earth but sinned and were cast from heaven.

A leader among these was called Azazel, who reportedly taught humans how to use metal and make weapons to promote





*The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, 1562, by Peter Bruegel the Elder.

violence on the earth.

The final chapters of *Enoch*, written during the dark years of Antiochus Epiphanes' rule (around 168 BCE), had Enoch predict fiery destruction for the wicked: "Woe to you, ye sinners, on account of the words of your mouth, And on account of the deeds of your hands which your godlessness as wrought, In blazing flames burning worse than fire shall ye burn" (*Enoch* 100:9).

This helped satisfy the yearning for justice: even if cruel people were not punished in this life, they would be punished in the next.

## SCOUNDRELS

The Sibylline Oracles, probably a Jewish document written around 100–200 BCE, connected the Jewish Sheol with the Greek myth of Tartarus as an underground place of punishment.

The *Book of Jubilees*, which rewrites and expands on much of *Genesis* and *Exodus* 1–14, was probably written during the difficult time when two priestly factions were fighting over the temple and Antiochus Epiphanes IV was trying to stamp out Judaism altogether, often by excessively cruel means.

*Jubilees* blames the flood on the "Watchers" and uses other personal names for the personification of evil. These include

Mastemah (a Hebrew word that means "animosity" or "hatred") and Belial (also spelled Beliar), from a word that means "worthlessness."

The expression describing corrupt people as "sons of Belial," usually translated as "scoundrels" or "worthless fellows" (1 Sam. 2:12, 10:27), was transformed so that wicked worthlessness was personified as an evil being. The Greek word *diabolos*, translated as "devil," also began to make its way into some Jewish writings.

Note that none of these writings were accepted as scripture. They were no less speculative and no more authoritative than the *Left Behind* series is today — but they had considerable influence on popular Jewish thinking.

For further reading, see Mitchell Reddish, *Revelation, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 240–248; Edgar W. Conrad, "Satan," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible S-Z* (Abingdon, 2009), or V. Donald Emmel, *Eliminating Satan and Hell: Affirming a Compassionate Creator God* (Wipf & Stock, 2013), among others. Citations from the *Book of Enoch* are from the translation by R.H. Charles, 1906, available at <http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/ethiopian/enoch/index.html>.

## IMAGERY

By the first century CE, it had become common for some within Judaism to think of Satan as an evil power separate from God who ruled over the underworld and who was served by his own angelic underlings, called demons, although many Jews held to the traditional understanding that *ha-sātān* was an angel who assisted God in various (and sometimes unsavory) ways, and that Sheol was simply the land of the dead, where all people went.

The concept of Satan became so widespread that New Testament writers also adopted Satan terminology, but most often within the traditional Jewish concept of the embodiment of temptation.

Jesus used the term "Satan" quite often, but it is possible that he chose to speak in terms and concepts that communicated best to his audience, employing metaphors of Satan and hell (which remained a symbol of death and assignment to the garbage dump of *Gebenna*) without necessarily assuming a literal interpretation of them.

The satanic imagery widely known today emerged much later. Here is one particularly egregious example: the erroneous idea that Satan is an angel named "Lucifer" who went rogue, was cast out of heaven, and grew in power to rival God.

Nothing about that story is biblical.

## LUCIFER

The misguided belief grows from an obvious misinterpretation of *Isaiah* 14, a taunt song in which *Isaiah* clearly celebrated the death of a Babylonian king who had proudly depicted himself as a god associated with the morning star.

The Hebrew term is composed of three words, and could be translated literally as "shining one, son of the dawn," a title the king may have attributed to himself: Mesopotamian rulers were famous for adopting grandiose titles.

An early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX) rendered the Hebrew phrase with the term *heōsphoros*, which could mean "morning star."

In the late 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Catholic church father Jerome was commissioned





The Torch of Venus by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon

to translate the Bible into Latin. When he came to Isa. 14:12, he translated “morning star” as *lucifer*, a Latin combination from *lux*, “light,” and *ferous*, “to bear” or “to carry.”

Classical Roman thought called Venus “Lucifer” when it appeared in the morning, and “Vesper” when it appeared in the evening. Roman art often portrayed Venus as a man carrying a torch.

Over time, a word that meant “light bearer” came to be capitalized and treated as the personal name “Lucifer” — far from the intent of Isaiah, who would have had no concept of a personal devil, and who was taunting a Babylonian king who had fallen from power.

## MILTON

The unfortunately popular notion of Lucifer/Satan as a prideful angel who was cast out of heaven owes its existence almost entirely to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, written in 1667. Milton’s imaginative account is in Book 1, lines 34-49 (1674 version, poetryfoundation.org):

Th’ infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile  
Stird up with Envy and Revenge, deceiv’d  
The Mother of Mankind, what time his Pride  
Had cast him out from Heav’n, with all his Host  
Of Rebel Angels, by whose aid aspiring  
To set himself in Glory above his Peers,  
He trusted to have equal’d the most High,  
If he oppos’d; and with ambitious aim  
Against the Throne and Monarchy of God  
Rais’d impious War in Heav’n and Battel proud  
With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power  
Hurl’d headlong flaming from th’ Ethereal Skie  
With hideous ruine and combustion down  
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell  
In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire,  
Who durst defie th’ Omnipotent to Arms.

Many who read Milton’s highly imaginative and fictional work appear to have taken it as gospel and continued to promote an erroneous understanding of scripture.

## PERSONAL?

Knowing this, should we still talk about “Satan” in personal terms? Mitchell Reddish, author of *Revelation* in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series, suggests several reasons why imagining a personal, demonic Satan could still be helpful — or not.

First, he suggests, speaking of Satan in personal terms may help us to remember that evil is serious business, and not overlook the pervasiveness, power and attraction of evil in society.

Second, Reddish points out, Satan language reminds us that there is a systemic dimension of evil that affects organizational, political, or even religious systems, turning them from positive to negative forces.

Even so, there are decided downsides to imagining Satan as an evil, powerful, supernatural being. In my view, this sets up a dualistic system of dueling gods. To speak of Satan as a supernatural rival to God steps backward from biblical monotheism.

Another risk, as we noted in the beginning, is that identifying evil with a personal Satan tempts us to blame the devil for our wrongdoing rather than accepting personal responsibility for our own bad choices.

The much-practiced art of “passing the buck” has been around as long as humans have lived on the earth.

## BLAME GAME

The Bible’s story of “original sin” has the man blaming his actions on “the woman that you gave me,” implicating both the woman and God as more guilty than he. The woman, in turn, blamed the serpent.

We cannot blame our own harmful choices on our parents, our peers, our culture — or on Satan. As long as we can point an accusing finger at Satan to evade culpability for our own doings, we see no need to change our ways or behave more responsibly — or to demand that corporations or culture as a whole should own up to institutional sins.

Blaming Satan is a step backward from

maturity and growth for both individuals and society.

Another troubling aspect of holding to an incarnate Satan is that such an approach may lead us to trivialize evil. When we think of Satan as a pitchfork-toting devil or a cartoonish demon whispering temptations into our ears, we’re less likely to recognize how dangerous evil really is.

Consider systemic evils such as racism or Nazism or terrorism or economic elitism. Humankind doesn’t need any supernatural help in concocting evil on a broad and pervasive scale.

Using Satan language may help some people to visualize the reality and dangers of evils in our world, but it’s quite possible to recognize humanity’s failures without blaming them on an external force.

As Reddish concludes: “Belief in a personal, metaphysical being called Satan is not a required doctrine of the Christian faith.”

The devil didn’t make us do it. **NFJ**



Illustrations to John Milton—Paradise Lost, 1807, William Blake

# Jimmy Carter (1977–1981): Part one

By Bruce Gourley

For years one major crisis after another had left many Americans feeling vulnerable and despondent:

**J**FK's assassination. The threat of nuclear war. White supremacist violence. MLK Jr.'s assassination. Bobby Kennedy's assassination. Race riots. The Vietnam War. Economic hardships. Middle East conflicts. Skyrocketing oil prices. Watergate. Impeachment.

## VISION

In May 1976, persistently high unemployment also troubled the hundreds of Ohio AFL-CIO convention delegates assembled in Cincinnati. Weary and restless from uninspiring political speeches, they anticipated more of the same from the next presidential candidate stepping up to the podium.

Reading the crowd, the man who would be president began in a low, conversational tone, as if talking with friends. Then his tone changed and his voice rose.

"I am running for president," he announced, "because I have a vision of a new America, a different America, a better America. I have a vision of an America that is, in Bob Dylan's phrase, busy being born — not dying!"

He continued: "I see an America that has turned her back on scandals and corruption and official cynicism and finally demanded a government that deserves the trust and respect of her people."

The crowd grew more attentive.

"I see an America with a tax system that does not cheat the average wage earner

and with a government that is responsive to its people and with a system of justice that is evenhanded to all," he declared. A nation "in which 'law and order' is not a slogan, but a way of life, because our people have chosen to bind up our wounds and live in harmony."

Now his audience was captivated.

"I see an America in which your child and my child and every child, regardless of its background, receives an education that will permit full development of talents and abilities ... an America which has a job for every man and woman who wants to work ... that will reconcile its need for new energy sources with its need for clean air, clean water and an environment we can pass on with pride to our children and their children.

"I see an American foreign policy that is as consistent and generous as the American people and can once again be a beacon for the hopes of the whole world ... an America on the move again, united, its wounds healed, its head high ... with confidence and competence and compassion, an America that lives up to the nobility of its Constitution and the decency of its people."

Then he closed: "This is my vision for America." The crowd rose as one and gave Jimmy Carter a sustained, standing ovation.

## ROOTS

Where does a road to the nation's highest office begin? Leading men into battle? From birth into a political dynasty? Cutting a deal with party bosses? Amid hubris and deceit?

Or, perhaps, while praying under a pine tree with one's Pentecostal evangelist sister in the remote woods of South Georgia?

On the campaign trail Carter repeatedly pointed to his 1967 transformative

religious experience as a pivotal turning point in his life. Haunted by his failure in politics and his superficial Christian faith, on that day a despairing Carter talked and prayed with his sister Ruth, and then walked away a changed man.

No longer a mere Christian, he committed himself to following the will of God wherever the road might lead, often saying: "Jesus Christ comes first in my life, even before politics."

The oldest of four siblings, James Earl Carter Jr., known as Jimmy, was born Oct. 1, 1924 in Plains in southwest Georgia. He grew up in the nearby tiny rural community of Archery. Of the 27 families in Archery, 25 were African American.

A World War I veteran, entrepreneur and farmer, James Earl Carter Sr. raised a diverse array of crops and livestock and sold various goods to nearby grocery stores. His wife Lillian was a community nurse.

Jimmy and his three siblings — sisters Gloria and Ruth, and brother Billy, the youngest — helped their father in the family's agriculture business. In their rural, southern world the family lived in relative social and economic comfort.

In his childhood Jimmy learned the value of hard work, fished and hunted, and spent much of his time in the homes of Archery's black families. He observed the respect the white and black communities afforded his politically and culturally conservative father.

He also watched his more liberal mother, against the wishes of her husband, violate racist southern codes by treating African Americans as equals. Carter Sr. quietly ignored his wife's social radicalism. Less polite whites mocked her inclusiveness.

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*This is the 39<sup>th</sup> article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, managing editor for Nurturing Faith Journal, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.*





The Carter family store (part of Carter's Boyhood Farm) in Plains, Georgia

## BAPTISTS

In Plains as throughout the South, white and black Christians attended their own churches, reflective of racial segregation in a world of white supremacy. Carter Sr. served as a deacon and taught Sunday school in the Plains Baptist Church, a Southern Baptist congregation.

From their father's congregational commitment Carter and his siblings learned a love of the Bible and of church. Sunday school and sermons steered the church's children toward God. Like many near his age, 11-year-old Jimmy followed the Southern Baptist prescription to "salvation."

First came a confession of his sins and asking God for forgiveness. A "public profession of faith" in Christ as savior came next, followed by baptism by immersion.

Emerging from the symbolic waters, young Jimmy's sins were forgiven and he was spiritually "born again" as a Christian and welcomed into church membership. No longer a sinner condemned to hell, thanks to the grace of Christ he received assurance of eternal life in heaven after death.

Profession and baptism also included a commitment to live according to Jesus'

teachings. Many who claimed faith in Jesus and parted the baptismal waters, however, focused more on their heavenly future than daily following Christ on earth.

Although young Jimmy took his conversion seriously, his faith did not mature right away. Much later he would speak of his 1967 religious experience as the zenith of a "born again" journey.

Meanwhile, Jimmy's mother rarely attended church but was religious in her own way. To her family she read biblical stories about strong women. In her children Lillian Carter instilled compassion, color-blindness, women's rights and a love of reading.

Of his rural childhood Carter later recalled, "We felt close to nature, close to members of our family, and close to God."



Carter (around age 13) with his dog, Bozo, in 1937

## INFLUENCES

There were others who deeply influenced young Jimmy. Neighboring African-American day laborers Jack and Rachel Clark became like family. From Rachel, with whom he spent much time, Jimmy learned lifelong lessons about nature, religion and racial discrimination.

Julia Coleman, Jimmy's schoolteacher, encouraged students to achieve great things. So Jimmy, who at a young age was enamored with the U.S. Naval Academy, determined to one day attend the school and serve in the Navy.

Graduating from high school and following stints at nearby Georgia Southwestern College and Georgia Tech in Atlanta, Carter transferred to the Naval Academy, graduating in 1946. As a student he began teaching Sunday school, a practice he would continue in various venues for most of his life.

In 1946 Carter also married Rosalynn Smith, a childhood acquaintance and a Methodist, and joined the Navy. The Carter family in short order lived in Virginia, Hawaii, Connecticut, New York and California.

During this time Rosalynn gave birth to sons Jack, Chip and Jeff (Amy, the last of the couple's four children, was born in 1967). Enrolling in the officer training program for submarine duty, Carter rose to the rank of lieutenant and served as executive officer of the USS *K-1*.

For weeks at a time underneath the ocean's surface in cramped quarters with crewmen white and black, Carter came to more openly reject the segregated society of his childhood.

Assigned in 1952 to the Navy's emerging nuclear submarine program, Carter served under Capt. Hyman G. Rickover, first director of the United States' naval nuclear propulsion efforts. Renowned for demanding the best from his subordinates, Rickover, according to Carter, became the most influential individual in the future president's life other than his parents.

## PLAINS

As Carter prepared for service on the USS *Seawolf*, one of the nation's earliest nuclear submarines, he received unexpected news from home: his father was dying from terminal cancer.

Obtaining a leave of absence from naval duty, the younger Carter returned to Plains and spent several weeks in his parents' home at his father's bedside. The two had many meaningful conversations



*After his father's death Carter resigned his naval commission and moved his family back home to Plains. He returned to "grow seed peanuts, buy and sell farm products to the farmers in the community, and assume some of the responsibilities that had made daddy's life so admirable."*

about family, business and life. Carter also gained new respect for his father.

"A steady stream of visitors came to the front or back door," he later recounted, "depending on whether they were white or black, to bring a gift of food or flowers, and I listened repeatedly as they recounted how their lives had been blessed by my father. Even my mother was surprised to learn of many of his secret acts of kindness and generosity."

After his father's death Carter resigned his naval commission and moved his family back home to Plains. He returned to "grow seed peanuts, buy and sell farm products to the farmers in the community, and assume some of the responsibilities that had made Daddy's life so admirable."

With Rosalynn's help, Carter took over his father's business and became a successful businessman in his own right — establishing himself as a community leader in the mold of his father. Carter served on local boards and the family worshiped at Carter's home church, where he soon became a Sunday school teacher and deacon, as had been his father.

But unlike his father, Jimmy, along with Rosalynn and Lillian, stood out in Plains for their progressive and inclusive views. While most of the county's merchants boycotted the nearby and racially inclusive Koinonia Farms, the Carters did business with the integrated Christian community. As a member of the Sumter County Board of Education, Carter "did everything possible to guarantee school services to the Koinonia students in the public school system."

Repeatedly he deflected efforts by friends to convince him to join the White Citizens Council that opposed the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision annulling public school segregation. For a period of time the family

business suffered from the Carters' inclusive stance. At one point they contemplated leaving Plains.

## POLITICS

Brushing aside such thoughts, the family remained, their stance against racism gradually accepted, if not altogether appreciated, by friends and customers. In time Carter, elected as school board chair, took the lead in openly advocating for integrated public schools.

Eventually, another inclusive Supreme Court decision jump-started Carter's entry into politics. For more than six decades the neighboring state of Tennessee had refused to redraw political districts, ignoring a state constitutional mandate to redistrict every 10 years based on census records and for the purpose of an equitable distribution of voters.

As a result of population shifts, by the 1960s a number of rural counties had acquired far more representative power per person than some urban counties. The *Baker v. Carr* decision in March 1962 overturned the Tennessee practice of non-redistricting and established federal court jurisdiction over the process.

Shortly thereafter complainants in Georgia successfully challenged their state's county unit system, an electoral-like voting method that selected state representatives not by direct vote, but by a ratio of votes allocated to individual counties. Weighted toward rural counties, the system had for years allowed a minority of rural white voters, and thus white supremacy, to control state politics.

Encouraged by the arrival of "one man, one vote" in Georgia, Carter — following in the footsteps of his father who had briefly served as a state legislator — ran for the state senate. He lost due to overt ballot

stuffing, a common occurrence in southwest Georgia politics at the time. Undaunted, Carter contested the outcome. Eventually the tainted election was annulled, and Carter won the senate seat in a new election.

Over the course of two terms as a state senator, Carter carved out a largely moderate to progressive political identity. He supported conservation efforts, civil rights legislation, affordable and equal access to education and health care for all citizens, and the transformation of Georgia Southwestern College in nearby Americus, Ga., into a four-year institution.

At the same time he maintained a conservative fiscal stance, calling for government efficiency and opposing tax increases. And from his Baptist convictions of church-state separation Carter opposed efforts by the state senate to mandate by law the worship of God.

## JUSTICE

In 1965 the Carters unsuccessfully advocated for the admission of African Americans and other minorities into the membership of Plains Baptist Church. "[E]very pew was filled" the day the church voted on the issue," Carter noted.

The Carter family "and one other person" voted to open membership beyond whites only. Some 50 opposed, and "almost 200 others abstained."

As a state senator during a time of national and local civil rights unrest, Carter expanded his reading to include theologians such as Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Søren Kierkegaard, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. Niebuhr's understanding of politics particularly struck a chord.

With increasing frequency Carter declared: "The sad duty of politics is to establish justice in a sinful world," a quote he attributed to Niebuhr. In reality Carter's

attribution approximated Niebuhr's actual words, written in 1937 during the Great Depression era: "To establish justice in a sinful world is the whole sad duty of the political order."

A Christian realist living in the theological middle, much of Niebuhr's work focused on the intersection of religion, politics and public policy. In the 1930s he dismissed the Social Gospel — a religiously liberal movement striving to rescue humanity from poverty and oppression — as hopelessly Utopian.

Neither religion nor politics could secure full justice in an evil world, Niebuhr concluded. Nonetheless, politics provided the opportunity to overcome some of the world's ills.

Previously Carter had not voiced a systematic political philosophy, but from Niebuhr's influence he came to theologically understand society as inherently sinful and perpetually in need of redemption. Having honed his political ideology, he shortly thereafter suffered defeat in the 1966 Georgia governor's race.

An intense period of despair followed, concluding with his equally intense and transformative "born again" experience the following year. Placing his trust fully in God and feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Sunday school teacher from Plains, seeking political redemption, began a journey to the White House unique among American presidents to the present day.

## ON MISSION

Away from political office and following God's perceived will, Carter in 1968 traveled to Pennsylvania on a Southern Baptist "pioneer mission" witnessing trip. Tasked with sharing his religious faith to unchurched families open to religious conversation, a nervous Carter teamed up with Milo Pennington, a farmer and veteran missionary from Texas.

Some historians point to the civil rights era as the beginning of the decline of the once-powerful, white and largely racist Southern Baptist Convention. Most Southern Baptist congregations, including Carter's church in Plains, resisted social justice for black citizens while focusing on personal piety.

A progressive young generation noticed the moral and ethical failures of the denomination. In the decades following, the SBC steadily declined numerically.

Carter and his missions partner traveled to Pennsylvania not to address social injustice, but rather to spread the traditional Southern Baptist, evangelical gospel of personal conversion, church attendance and pious living. What transpired reflected a religious subculture increasingly at odds with the 1960s-era of social justice activism.

Far from racial turmoil in large urban areas, Carter and Pennington rented a cheap room at the YMCA in the small town of Lock Haven. With a local Christian as their "host and advisor," the paired missionaries, equipped with names on 3x5 index cards, "went from one home to another and offered a prayer before knocking on each door." Most families invited them into their homes.

Pennington took the lead, explaining the evangelical "plan of salvation" to inquisitive listeners: "All of us fall short of the glory or perfection of God, and all deserve punishment. But God loves us, and through his grace, not because we have earned it, he offers us complete forgiveness. Jesus has taken on our punishment, and through repenting and accepting his forgiveness we are reconciled with God and can now have eternal life, with the Holy Spirit now dwelling within us."

Carter — the former naval officer, successful businessman and recent politician — felt uncomfortable. Pennington's religious message seemed earnest but "fumbling." Yet Pennington, speaking from his personal experiences, often connected with his listeners.

Carter watched in amazement as Milo's words frequently evoked tears, and "many pledged to change their lives and to accept the faith we offered them. I knew the Holy Spirit was in the room," said Carter.

Whereas Carter's "born again" experience in the piney woods of Georgia re-oriented his life, the mission trip in Lock Haven, Penn., became his "first encounter with the miraculous power of the Christian faith." From their missionary efforts Carter

and Pennington reached "more than 40 people" who agreed to start a new church.

The missionary pair assisted in starting the church, their missions sojourn in Pennsylvania measured as a success both in souls saved and the birth of a new congregation. Later the same year Carter returned north for a second evangelistic mission trip.

In Springfield, Mass., the mission team rented a room at the local YMCA, knocked on doors, shared the plan of salvation, led converts in prayer, and rejoiced over their successes. Returning to Georgia afterward, Carter continued the practice of door-to-door witnessing. Within a few years, "I had witnessed successfully to 140 people," he later recalled.

## SIGHTS SET

Buttressed by newfound personal evangelistic convictions and missionary witnessing alongside his Niebuhr-inspired commitment to seek justice through politics, Carter again set his sights on the governor's mansion. Victory would not come easy.

Former Georgia Gov. Carl Sanders (1962–66), a centrist, was favored by most Democratic primary voters. C.B. King, an African-American lawyer from Albany, garnered support from the black community.

Unable to again count on white moderate and progressive voters or African-American support, Carter devised a pragmatic strategy of appealing to lower class, rural whites — politically and religiously conservative and typically racist — while not permanently alienating prior supporters.

On his small town credentials and as a political outsider, Carter ran to the right of Sanders by portraying the former governor as an urban, liberal elite supportive of equal rights for African Americans. For his part, Sanders' own television ads often appeared elitist to many voters.

Seeking the votes of white Georgians previously supportive of segregationist Lester Maddox (the sitting governor) and George Wallace (a 1968 presidential candidate), Carter as a "populist" positioned himself against high taxes, integration, and the welfare system. In the city of Augusta in 1970 he voiced his support of aggressive law

enforcement tactics against black citizens rioting in the face of racial injustice.

At the same time, Carter quietly reached out to black voters. “You won’t like my campaign,” he confided to Georgia civil rights leader Vernon Jordan, “but you will like my administration.”

African Methodist Episcopal Church Bishop William D. Johnson of Plains, a longtime friend, advocated on his behalf. In black communities Carter visited churches and filling stations. In some white-owned businesses he shook hands with black janitors.

Through tireless personal campaigning the candidate from Plains spent up to 18 hours a day on the campaign trail. He visited hundreds of towns, delivered nearly 2,000 talks, and shook hands with an estimated 600,000 Georgians. Atlanta journalists covering the campaign conceded the effectiveness of Carter’s efforts.

“It is a peculiar thing, involving human warmth, and not relating at all to issues,” wrote the *Atlanta Journal’s* Steve Ball. Reg Murphy of the *Atlanta Constitution* summed up Carter’s appeal: “One-on-one, he’s probably as convincing as anyone I’ve ever seen.”

A “brilliant campaign,” a staff memo stated after Carter defeated Carl Sanders in the Democratic primary by winning some 75 percent of the white vote and few black votes. But “in retrospect, I do not believe the conservatism of Jimmy Carter was a vital issue...,” the memo continued. “The main issue of the campaign was personality ... we can’t move Jimmy any further to the right.”

Instead, the strategy memo invoked Franklin D. Roosevelt in arguing that populism “can best be described as ‘unperverted liberalism.’”

## GOVERNOR

In the general election against a weak Republican opponent Carter transitioned toward a more racially inclusive tone. Reframing conservatism as an ideology absent “hatred of another person because he is different from us,” he expressed sympathy for black rioters, admitting that in their situation he too “might break a car window or steal.”

He also promised to appoint blacks to state positions and end discrimination in state government. Having appealed to both poles of the state’s political landscape and ending to the left of Georgia’s conservative center, Carter easily defeated his Republican opponent and secured his dream of becoming the governor of Georgia.

With victory came misgivings, however. Carter called Carl Sanders to apologize for personally attacking the former governor on the campaign trail. He also confessed “to the Lord” and “prayed for forgiveness.”

Inaugurated on Jan. 12, 1971, Carter delivered a shocking inaugural address.

“This is a time for truth and frankness,” he declared. With former governor — now lieutenant governor — and segregationist Lester Maddox standing behind him, Carter continued: “At the end of a long campaign, I believe I know our people as well as anyone. Based on this knowledge of Georgians north and south, rural and urban, liberal and conservative, I say to you quite frankly that the time for racial discrimination is over.”

Many gasped at the latter words, perhaps the most progressive ever uttered by a Georgia governor. Having everyone’s rapt attention, Carter invoked the good will of the people:

“Our inherent human charity and our religious beliefs will be taxed to the limit. No poor, rural, weak, or black person should ever have to bear the additional burden of being deprived of the opportunity of an education, a job or simple justice.”

Other sober challenges followed, including the need for an orderly society. “Police officers must have our appreciation and complete support,” but at the same time “crime and lack of justice are especially cruel to those who are least able to protect themselves.”

Then the Christian evangelical and Niebuhr admirer offered glimpses of a philosophy of government that one day he would carry to the nation’s highest office.

“The proper function of a government is to make it easy for man to do good and difficult for him to do evil,” he declared. “Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants ... The test of a government is not how popular it is with the powerful and privileged few, but how honestly and fairly it deals with the many who must depend upon it.”

Conveying imagery at odds with his conviction of the sinfulness of the world, Carter continued: “In a democracy no government can be stronger, or wiser, or more just than its people.”

Although called of God to use politics to bring justice to a habitually evil world, a just government first required good and noble people. Was America a nation of injustice,

or a country of good people? Carter would frequently return to both images, never clearly resolving the inherent tension.



Carter’s official portrait as governor of Georgia

## TENSIONS

Other tensions marked Carter’s politics. Even as Christian convictions steered his political agenda, he believed in church-state separation. As governor he personally prayed regularly for God’s guidance, but also discontinued his predecessor’s practice of holding daily religious services in the state house.

*Time* recognized that Governor Carter represented a changing South. Featuring Carter on the cover of the May 31, 1971 edition, the magazine quoted his stunning inaugural declaration that “the time for racial discrimination is over.”

A new South is emerging, the article enthused. Racial conciliation was the new order of the day, a path to revitalizing the region.

Beyond the glowing rhetoric from afar, Carter worked hard for change. Fiscally he balanced the budget and avoided raising taxes by consolidating numerous agencies into far fewer and more efficient departments.

At the same time prison reforms, peaceful public school integration and the



*Collectively Carter appointed more women and minorities throughout state government than all his predecessors combined. Some black leaders praised his governorship as among the best in state history.*

unveiling of a portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. in the state capitol eased racial tensions. His support of the Equal Rights Amendment elevated the voices of women.

Collectively Carter appointed more women and minorities throughout state government than all his predecessors combined. Some black leaders praised his governorship as among the best in state history.

Governor Carter often framed his social justice convictions in the context of Jesus' gospel teachings to care for the disadvantaged, oppressed and imprisoned. Many evangelical Christians, including fellow Southern Baptist Billy Graham, noticed Carter's biblical commitment.

In 1971 Graham, a loyal supporter of conservative Republicans, invited Carter to his Atlanta evangelistic crusade. The governor agreed, sitting on the podium.

The next year Graham was invited to speak at the annual Governor's Prayer Breakfast, where he "got to know" Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, thereafter expressing "respect" for, if not outright friendship with, the progressive Georgia politician.

Invited to address the General Assembly of the United Methodist Church in Atlanta in 1972, Carter spoke of his faith-informed inclusive politics and received a standing ovation. Not all audiences, however, respected or approved of Carter's moralistic agenda.

## LEGAL REFORM

Speaking at the University of Georgia's Law Day on May 4, 1974, in a room full of prominent lawyers and politicians, the governor took the gloves off.

Hunter S. Thompson of *Rolling Stone* had come South to cover Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, the headline speaker. Carter, unfamiliar to Thompson, stood up alleg-

edly to introduce Kennedy for the day's concluding speech. Dismissing Carter as a lightweight, the journalist paid little attention.

"I am still not sure when I began listening to what Carter was saying," Thompson later confessed, "but at some point about 10 minutes into his remarks .... I found myself listening" as the governor addressed the criminal justice system.

To the lawyers Carter quoted Niebuhr's view that the "sad duty of the political system is to establish justice in a sinful world." He spoke of his deep personal "concern about the inadequacies of a system [of law] of which it is obvious that you're so patently proud."

The "tension in the room kept increasing," Thompson recalled. "Very few if any of them had supported Carter when he won the governorship, and now that he was just about finished with his four-year term and barred by law from running again, they expected him to bow out gracefully and go back to raising peanuts."

Speaking extemporaneously to a squirming audience, Carter reviewed the many judicial reforms enacted during his first three years in the governor's mansion. Condemning the state's prisons as "a disgrace to Georgia," he noted his success in passing a compassionate and just "law that removes alcoholism or drunkenness as a criminal offense."

Turning his criticism to the law profession, he spoke from the depth of his religious beliefs.

"I'm a Sunday school teacher and I've always known that the structure of law is founded on the Christian ethic that you shall love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself — a very high and perfect standard," said Carter. "We all know the fallibility of man, and the contentions in

society, as described by Reinhold Niebuhr and many others, don't permit us to achieve perfection."

Carter lamented that "the powerful and influential in our society" shaped laws and influenced legislation and politics in ways beneficial to themselves at the expense of others. He spoke of his personal embarrassment at Georgia's racist voting system of the past and of the "horror" with which the bar associations of Georgia and Alabama greeted Martin Luther King Jr.'s calls for racial equality.

He observed that ongoing judicial and legal inequalities and injustices intentionally disadvantaged black citizens. He blamed lawyers for stymieing his efforts to pass political campaign ethics reforms, and lobbyists for writing Washington, D.C.'s unjust regulatory legislation.

Having castigated the shortcomings of lawyers and lobbyists, Carter closed his blunt speech with a final moral admonition: "I believe that everyone in this room who is in a position of responsibility as a preserver of the law in its purest form ought to remember the oath that Thomas Jefferson and others took when they practically signed their own death warrant, writing the Declaration of Independence — to preserve justice and equity and freedom and fairness, they pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor."

## JIMMY WHO?

Calling it a "rare piece of oratorical artwork," Thompson wrote that Carter's speech "rung every bell in the room. Nobody seemed to know exactly what to make of it, but they knew it was sure as hell not what they'd come there to hear."

"I have heard hundreds of speeches by all kinds of candidates and politicians," the journalist acknowledged, "but I have never

heard a sustained piece of political oratory that impressed me any more than the speech Jimmy Carter made on that Saturday afternoon in May 1974.”

More than mere venting, Governor Carter’s open frustrations with the state establishment represented the voice of a progressive evangelical Christian struggling to enact social justice through state government while simultaneously and quietly planning for a higher office.

Carter’s first step toward the White House began in November 1972 with the encouragement of his aides and from deep personal convictions about the proper role of government.

From the intersection of his evangelical convictions and social justice theology, Carter spoke of “the feeling that the government ... was not measuring up to the honesty, integrity, the idealism, the compassion, the love, and expectations of the American people” as the major factor in his decision to pursue the White House.

Seven months following his memorable 1974 Law Day speech Jimmy Carter announced his presidential candidacy on December 12 of that year. His press release advocated for “honest and competent” government as an instrument of justice, equity, compassion, fairness, environmental protections and “full participation” by citizens in the political process through universal voter registration.

He positioned himself as a national healer. “With the shame of Watergate still with us and our 200<sup>th</sup> birthday just ahead, it is time for us to reaffirm and to strengthen our ethical and spiritual and political beliefs,” he continued. “Our people are hungry for integrity and competence in government.”

In a field crowded with professed and potential presidential candidates, however, few voters hungered for Carter. Of those who noticed him, “Jimmy who?” became a refrain.

An exception was Georgia U.S. Representative Andrew Young, former ally of the late Martin Luther King Jr. and a pioneer African-American politician. Young and other African American leaders noticed Carter’s ease among black people and

respected his progressive faith.

“I’ll help him wherever he asks me to,” the congressman told a reporter. More converts followed.

A year later and still registering in the low single digits in national polls, Carter caught the attention of the *New York Times*. A “surprise” candidate the newspaper said of Carter, due to his “260 relentless days of campaigning in some 40 states and 250 cities” and his groundwork in Iowa.

One month later in January 1976 Carter surprised all of America by winning the Iowa caucuses. Aided by the “Peanut Brigade” — family and friends from Georgia who traveled north to assist in primary campaigns — victories in additional states followed.

## ‘BORN AGAIN’

Journalists and reporters struggled to understand Carter’s political success and his religious identity alike. A March 1976 *Washington Post* article explored the mysterious “born again” dimension of the now-prominent evangelical.

To reporters unfamiliar with evangelicalism Carter often spoke of his desire to do the “will of God.” Did he believe God wanted him to be president?

“I’ve never asked God to make me president of the United States. I pray only that God will help me to do the right thing,” the candidate responded.

Do you pray? “I spent more time on my knees the four years I was governor ... than I did in all the rest of my life put together,” came the reply.

His answers to religious questions sometimes puzzled journalists, but most evangelicals readily understood. What was your born-again experience like?

“It wasn’t the voice of God from heaven,” the peanut farmer from South Georgia noted. “It might have been the same kind of experience as millions of people have who become Christians in a deeply personal way.”

For the man who declared “my religion is as natural to me as breathing,” faith and politics co-existed hand-in-hand. His use of insider evangelical language and practice of regular Bible reading elicited scoffing from

some but resonated with many evangelical Christians.

Critics contended that Carter would improperly mingle church and state. He denied the charge while insisting his personal faith would make him a better president. Seeking to understand his religion, journalists tagged along as Carter took time off from the campaign trail to teach Sunday school in his home church in Plains.

One journalist in particular understood Carter better than most. Formerly Lyndon Johnson’s White House press secretary, Bill Moyers was also a Southern Baptist. In May 1976 and as part of the public television series *USA: People and Politics*, Moyers interviewed Carter, honing in on the intersection of the candidate’s religious convictions and politics.

“Do you think this is a just society?” Moyers asked.

“No, no, I don’t,” Carter responded. “I think one of the major responsibilities I have as a leader and as a potential leader is to establish justice. And that applies to a broad gamut of things — international affairs, peace, equality, elimination of injustice in racial discrimination, elimination of injustice in tax programs, elimination of injustice in our criminal justice system, and so forth. And it’s not a crusade. It’s just common sense.”

“What do you think the purpose of government is?” Moyers followed up.

“To provide legitimate services to our people; to help preserve peace; to provide a mechanism by which people’s character can be expressed in international affairs,” Carter asserted. “I think the purpose of government is to alleviate inequities. I think the purpose of government is to provide for things that we can’t provide ourselves.”

## NOMINATION

Soon thereafter Carter secured enough delegates to capture the Democratic nomination. At a New Jersey rally and with his eye on the general election, he reiterated his commitment to racial equality by calling the 1965 Civil Rights Act “the best thing that ever happened to the South in my lifetime.”

In July 1976 Jimmy Carter accepted the Democratic nomination for the presidency. In his acceptance speech he focused on America's "Past and Future." Wars, scandals, broken promises, disillusionment and failed presidential leadership marked by "boasting and belligerence" littered the nation's recent past. Carter promised to lead America "back to greatness."

He spoke to the injustices of America's system of government, calling for a rebirth of "compassion and progress" beneficial to ordinary citizens. "It is now a time for healing," the Democratic nominee proclaimed. "We want to have faith again. We want to be proud again. We just want the truth again."

"It is the time," he continued, "to honor and strengthen our families and our neighborhoods and our diverse cultures and customs."

He used simple language. "Love must be translated into simple justice," he said. "The test of any government is not how popular it is with the powerful but how honestly and fairly it deals with those who must depend on it."

He called for equitable tax reform, health care for all citizens, quality education for all, criminal justice reforms, "strong safeguards for consumers" within America's "free economic system," international peace, and the eradication of nuclear weapons.

Following Carter's acceptance speech void of overt religious language, retired Atlanta pastor Martin Luther King Sr. closed the Democratic Convention with impromptu comments followed by prayer.

"Surely the Lord is in this place," declared the man known by many as "Daddy King," father of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. "Surely the Lord has sent Jimmy Carter to come out and bring America back to where it belongs."

## CAMPAIGN

Afterward the first Deep South presidential nominee since Zachary Taylor of Louisiana in 1848 returned to his hometown of Plains and taught Sunday school. Focusing on the need for love, justice and humility, Carter spoke of the need to "make our own societal structure a better demonstration of what Christ is."

Favored 53 to 36 percent over sitting President Gerald R. Ford according to Gallup polling, Carter rode high into the general election season. Journalists followed him everywhere, still striving to understand the man from Plains.

In trademark fashion, day after day, the candidate shook hands and hugged people. The *New York Times*' Gary Wills took notice.

"Carter himself, though naturally undemonstrative, is the huggiest candidate since Lyndon Johnson, another Southerner," he wrote. "Evangelicals are intimate to the point of folksiness."

Carter's ascendancy led some observers to look beyond evangelicals' personal warmth. Those who looked closely saw changing religious currents in America. Gerald Strober, co-author of *Religion and the New Majority*, predicted the arrival of a new era of evangelicalism.

"Every indication is that evangelicalism is skyrocketing," he declared, pointing to the prominence of conservative Billy Graham and the growing sales of evangelical books. Now, at least for the moment, a progressive evangelical peanut farmer and Sunday school teacher from rural southwest Georgia had eclipsed the iconic Graham.

Carter's progressive convictions widely appealed to African Americans. Across the South, civil rights icon John Lewis through the Voter Education Project oversaw the plastering of thousands of posters in black neighborhoods bearing the message, "Hands that pick cotton ... now can pick our public officials."

*Time* magazine marveled that the "phenomenon of blacks backing a Southern white reared in the Georgia backwoods" was "one of the most intriguing aspects" of the Carter campaign. And white progressive evangelicals, often at odds with their spiritually conservative kin, likewise gravitated toward Carter.

Newly emerging in the early 1970s following the cultural foment of the 1960s and embodying the liberal social justice legacy of the earlier northern abolitionist and women's rights movements, the progressive evangelical community largely aligned with Carter's own commitment to transformative social justice.

At the same time many conservative evangelicals, although uneasy with Carter's social progressiveness, warmed up to the "born again" politician who freely spoke of his personal relationship with God.

## COALITION

Carter's diverse religious coalition reflected his simple yet complex faith. At times he effectively sided with and won over conservatives with born-again language and an affirmation of literal biblical beliefs. In other instances he demonstrated moderate theology by interpreting the Bible metaphorically and quoting from liberal theologians and thinkers.

His proclamation of homosexuality as a sin echoed conservative religion, while his campaign's commitment to "opposing all forms of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation" appealed to liberal Christians. Simultaneously he personally opposed abortion, politically supported *Roe v. Wade* as established law, and publicly favored restrictions on federal funds for abortion services.

Nonetheless, many white Christian nationalists, a subset of the conservative evangelical community, remained unconvinced. Critical of Carter's commitment to maintain the "wall of separation between church and state," Christian nationalists through a religionizing of politics hoped to turn America into a biblical nation.

Evangelist Billy Graham remained the most visible spokesperson of Christian nationalism. Ascendant groups including Campus Crusade, the Christian Freedom Foundation, the Christian Embassy, and Here's Life America did much of the groundwork.

Demanding "more overt Christianity in candidates and office holders" than Carter offered and using slogans such as "bring America back to God" and "turn America around," they rejected social justice while calling for the legislation of Old Testament morality and laws.

While Christians variously applauded or grappled with Carter's faith-infused politics, some analysts looked further afield. Religion historian Martin Marty of the University of Chicago, putting his finger



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on a larger dynamic at work, identified Carter's inclusive theology as key to the candidate tapping into "a huge constituency" appealing to all but "a small minority of 'semi-secularized' voters."

The *Time's* Gary Will agreed. Surveying more than a decade of American unrest, he argued that "Jimmy Carter answers a national, not merely an evangelical need" of "men whose personal morality one can trust."

Following "fads like the death of God and secular religion" of the 1960s, he perceived a "pell-mell resanctifying is in process" and the "natural home for such feelings is the evangelical tradition that affects all of American religiosity."

## REACTION

Some Democratic leaders, however, feared their candidate was too pious. In an effort to alleviate such concerns, late in the campaign season Jimmy Carter agreed to an interview with *Playboy* magazine.

Published mere weeks before election day, one statement in the interview shocked many Americans. Frequently on the campaign trail Carter had promised Americans he would never lie to them. Acknowledging faithfulness to his wife, Carter also openly confessed to something true of many Christian men.

"I've looked on a lot of women with lust," he admitted. "I've committed adultery in my heart many times."

Infuriated at Carter's frankness, many conservative evangelicals vocally retracted their support of the candidate. Seizing the moment, Republican Gerald R. Ford, an Episcopalian appropriating now-popular "born again" language and touting the sudden support of several prominent conservative evangelical leaders, closed the polling gap with Carter.

As the candidates battled to the finish line, the Oct. 15 issue of *Newsweek* proclaimed 1976 as the "Year of the Evangelical."

Fortunately for Carter, his broad appeal beyond white evangelicals proved a deciding factor in securing a narrow victory on November 2. Virginia excepted, Carter became the first Democrat since FDR to

sweep the South. He also did well in the North and split the Midwest.

Many analysts attributed his victory not to the white evangelical vote nor whites in general — both constituencies of which he garnered roughly one-half — but rather primarily to overwhelming support from black and other minority voters in the South and urban North.

## REJOICING

Celebrations erupted in Plains. The *American Times-Recorder* in big bold letters proudly announced "Carter Wins: Sumter Countian Fulfills Goal to Hold Nation's Highest Office."

Black Americans rejoiced in newfound hope. "I wish — Lord, how I wish — Martin [Luther King Jr.] were alive today," said civil rights activist John Lewis, rejoicing in Carter's victory. "He would be very, very happy. Through it all, the lunch counter sit-ins, the bus strike, the marches and everything, the bottom line was voting."

Backed by a once-unlikely winning coalition of black voters and just enough white evangelicals — particularly among his denomination of Southern Baptists — Carter ascended to the presidency with an agenda of reforming government, advancing human rights and waging peace in a nuclearized world.

Deep-seated evangelical Christian convictions had shaped Jimmy Carter's political trajectory since his 1967 born again experience in rural southwest Georgia. He unabashedly carried his personal, evangelical religious faith front and center to the White House.

On the nation's 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary America faced a watershed moment. Years of division, fear and turmoil lay in the past. Visions of a more just society shimmered on the horizon. A new era of inclusiveness and compassion in government, society and religion suddenly seemed possible.

But questions remained: Was America truly ready to part with centuries of systemic racism and decades of war-mongering? What did ascendant, conservative white evangelicals really want? And could the Baptist Sunday school teacher live up to his lofty campaign promises? **NFJ**

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*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.*

EDITOR'S NOTE: Babs Baugh's vibrant earthly journey ended June 14.  
Her impact on numerous organizations and individuals is immeasurable.

# Remembering Babs

*Revisiting a conversation with one who brightened  
life and shaped a hopeful future*

**STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY JOHN D. PIERCE**

**S**AN ANTONIO, Texas — She sang; she traveled; she collected art. She was an active member of San Antonio's Woodland Baptist Church and a strong supporter of causes that advance the cherished Baptist principles of freedom.

Barbara (Babs) Baugh's maternal grandfather was a Baptist preacher, a church planter, whose six children were all born in different states. Her late parents, Eula Mae and John Baugh of Houston, were active Baptist lay leaders and generous contributors to Baptist educational institutions and other entities.

Babs carried on the family legacy of generosity and influence — along with her daughters, Jackie and Julie — through a family foundation.

To honor her memory, we revisit an adapted conversation from 2011 that reflects her adventure-filled, quick-witted life.

**NFJ: What are some of your favorite childhood memories?**

**BB:** Going to my grandmother's house and playing Canasta — with her as my partner. Our opponents were a friend of hers and her daughter.

Mama Nell and I won every hand of Canasta forever because we cheated — and they never saw us. My grandmother used to slip cards to me under the table.

I was named after her. On that side of the family I was the only girl. On the other side of the family, my mother's side, I was the first grandchild. So I had the best of both worlds.

Another happy, happy memory is my mother took me on the bus to the library every Saturday and we read books. And I guess my happiest memories are with my dad. He always introduced me as: "This is my son, Barbara."

He and I used to play baseball. He was a really good baseball player. He would waste his time playing baseball with me. When he got tired of pitching, he'd make me switch and then he'd hit the ball two or three blocks down the road so he could sit down and rest while I ran after it.

He left every morning for work at 4 o'clock and came home about 8 or 8:30. After he had dinner, he would come in and wake me up and we'd play for about an hour. Then I'd go back to sleep.

Mother had to discipline me. He and I would play together unless it was really serious.

At school, if I did not make the grades that he thought I was capable of making, he would write a letter. Once he wrote a very formal letter to me about how he must have failed me in some way because I was not achieving what he knew I was capable of achieving — which was about in the third or fourth grade. I had to take the letter to school and let the teacher read it and sign it.

The next time that happened, I had

made all A's except for conduct. I got a C in conduct. So I got another letter about how anybody can keep their mouth shut.

This time I wrote him a letter back saying that if I didn't talk to the other kids, they would think I'm a snob and I wouldn't have any friends. And that I thought it was more important to have friends than to make an A in conduct.

So we stopped letter writing after that.

**NFJ: When did music come into your life — and what role has that taken?**

**BB:** That's been my whole life. My mother sang in the choir, and our choir director was also our organist: Joseph Evans. Mother took piano lessons from Mr. Evans, and I went with her.

For some reason — Mother was probably a horrible student — he told her that if she would give up her slot for me, he would teach me for free. And I took lessons from him from the time I was 4 until I was 14.

Unfortunately, I have not kept my piano up and can't play a thing. But all through school I participated in choral things.

I always had a girls' trio going no matter where we were: junior high, senior high, wherever. At Baylor, we had a trio that performed a lot during the year. We also worked in the Southern Palace (Theater) at Six Flags (over Texas) during the summer. That was a great deal of fun.

So I majored in music — music education. I wanted to teach but quickly found





Babs Baugh in her art-filled home in 2011 with “Curby,” a penguin made of items that otherwise would be taken to the curb for disposal.

out that I’m not a teacher. I like to sing, to make people happy, to make people laugh. And I love choral participation, but I cannot teach.

I’m a great admirer of teachers. Every time I drive by a school I say: “Thank you, Lord, that I’m not in there.” And I’m sure the kids are saying: “Thank you, Lord.”

But music has been a huge part of my life. It’s the way I worship. Randy Edwards, I think, is the finest church musician I have ever known. Our church’s music creates worship for a lot of people.

It also inspired me to give scholarship

help to students who are real musicians. A lot of that has been at Baylor, but at other places as well.

I have a wonderful young friend from Costa Rica who is a fabulous pianist. We helped him through Baylor and then put him through North Texas to get his master’s in jazz piano.

He is just like having another kid. He was a physics major for a while but realized that music is what he really cared about.

He’s really funny. He will walk into a restaurant and ask if he can play the piano. They’ll say, “I guess so.” And he’ll

say, “Then will you turn down the music coming over the loud speaker?” They say, “I guess so.”

Then he will sit down and play, and the whole restaurant becomes his. People love to hear him play. The girls come over and line up to sit on the bench with him. He’s a showman, too.

**NFJ: What are the best things you learned from your parents?**

BB: To love God; to laugh whenever possible; and to love as many people as possible. To be aware of things happening around you. To always be curious.

It’s funny the things you pick up from your parents that, at the time, you think, “I’ll never say that.” But years later you are saying the same things to your kids.

One of the things I noticed about my parents — that was a little different — was who their friends were. My dad worked with a lot of people he thought a lot of. They were very fine, wonderful people, but they were friends Monday through Friday at the office.

The real friends, the ones you went on trips with or went out to dinner with or had over to your house, they were all church friends. That’s pretty much the same way my life has turned out as well. The people we know at church are our real friends — the ones you can depend on.

Friendships have been really important in our lives. I have a group of women friends we call the “chicken shirts” — you have to be careful when you say that — because we all have black T-shirts with red-and-white, polka-dot chickens on them.

We travel together, and we laugh together a lot. And we cry together when necessary. It’s really wonderful to have friends like that.

But my dad had a lot of friends at the church. When Tom Kennedy was interviewing people to write the book (*From Waco to Wall Street: The Story of John Baugh, ‘The Sysco Kid’*), it was so funny. I gave him the names of 10-20 people to start with.

He’d go to them and ask: “Do you know John Baugh?” Everybody responded, “Johnny Baugh, he’s my best friend.”



Babe Baugh signs copies of *Lessons for Living from 60 Years of Faithful Bible Teaching*, a tribute to her mother, Eula Mae Baugh, published by Nurturing Faith in 2018 in collaboration with Daniel Vestal (looking on) of Mercer University's Baugh Center for Baptist Leadership. Jackie Baugh Moore talks with Bruce Gourley, now Managing Editor/Experiences Director for Good Faith Media.

My dad hitchhiked from Waco to Houston when he was 16 — after graduating from high school — because it was the Depression and there was a job there. He had started Baylor but didn't have enough money to stay.

A&P had a job available. It took him three days of hitchhiking. He went to Second Baptist Church the first Sunday he was there because the pastor, Dr. F.B. Thorne, had been his pastor one time at Columbus Avenue Baptist in Waco.

A man came up and said: "Son, I haven't seen you here before. Are you visiting?" My dad said, "Yes sir, I am."

The man asked: "Do you have any friends here?" My dad said, "No, sir. I know the preacher, but I don't have any friends here."

The man said: "May I be your friend?"

It was Earl Hankamer. They were fast, fast friends.

Mr. Hankamer taught him philanthropy. He also saved his business, but that's another whole story. If you walk the Baylor campus, you'll see his name on buildings. He was an oilman and a real sweetheart.

My dad had another good friend named Harold Calhoun, who was an architect. They were about the same age. Mr. Hankamer would do anonymous gifts and have my dad or Mr. Calhoun do them for him.

One of the things he did was when a deacon in our church died and left a widow, he'd send one of these guys down to see how much was owed on the house and he'd pay off the mortgage. Then my dad or Harold would go and tell the widow: "You don't have to move. The house is yours." He was unbelievable. He really was.

**NFJ: Did your dad get the job with A&P?**

BB: Yes. He worked at A&P for quite some time. Then he started his own company. He was not quite 30 and told mother he

thought frozen foods was the wave of the future. He said, "If it's not, I can get another job because I'm still young enough."

So he rented [frozen foods] locker space. He made sales calls in the morning and delivered in the afternoon. Mother did all the bookkeeping and answered the phone in their bedroom. When I was out of school for holidays I got to make sales calls with him. We always took poinsettias to the dieticians and those he sold things to.

He represented Pictsweet Frozen Foods, and Birds Eye was the competitor. So in the grocery stores, while Mother was shopping, I would go stand by the freezer.

If somebody picked up a package of Birds Eye green beans, I'd say: "Wouldn't you really rather have Pictsweet? It tastes a lot better." Mother was kind of horrified when she found out I was doing that.

My mother always took care of people who were having emotional problems. They gravitated toward Mother, and she wanted



to solve every one of them. Sometimes she could, and sometimes she couldn't. But she tried.

And, oh, she tried to convince people that Christianity was the only way to live. She even tried to convince a Red Chinese border guard. "Popo" finally yanked her away. The guy was getting ready to arrest her.

She said, "Let me tell you about the Bible," and had a Bible to give him. She was always the missionary.

She made me work in Bible school when I was a teenager. We worked in the Mexican Bible school, the Chinese Bible school and our Bible school.

We always had projects going on. We called her "Dottie Do-Good."

I started bringing home people with problems, people whose parents were alcoholics or their father had left them. I just went through a phase where everybody I brought home was somebody who had a terrible problem.

**NFJ: You are known as a generous person. What is your philosophy of generosity?**

BB: First if all, you can't out-give God — or anybody. Secondly, "to whom much is given, much is required."

That isn't necessarily just money. That's caring and it's time — very important. It's love. But you do have to give money if you have it.

But you give what you have in abundance to help other people. Because no matter how much you try to help other people, you get more out of it than they do. That's not a good reason to do it. It's simply a result.

You can't out-love anybody. So you give what you have to give. If it's money, that's great. If it's not, it's something.

My daughters are equal partners with me in the (Eula Mae and John Baugh) Foundation. It is a job — but I really should say a joy. It is a job because you need to make good decisions. But it's a real joy.

Of the many wonderful things my dad did for me, this is probably the most wonderful thing. To allow me to try to maintain what he started. Not with SYSCO, at all. But to maintain the Foundation and to have

the joy of calling somebody and saying we can grant their wish for monetary help this year.

I got to do that to a professor of religion who is probably in his late 80s. He wanted to build a scholarship program for Ph.D. students in religion who need to travel to finish their dissertations.

When I called him and told him we were able to finish the scholarship fund, he talked for a few minutes and then said, "You'll have to excuse me; I have to wipe the tears away." That's a big joy.

**NFJ: Why is being a Baptist and helping advance Baptist causes so important to you?**

BB: I often wonder had I been born in Afghanistan, to Muslim parents, would I feel about Islam the way I feel about Baptist doctrine. And what does that mean to me?

If I'm really honest with myself, maybe I would be just as defensive about Islam as I am about Baptists. Maybe God works with different people in different ways.

But being Baptist is so dear to me because I see it as a way of being free within my worship. And there is a connection a lot of my friends don't seem to have.

The need for separation of church and state and religious liberty for everyone is so obvious to me. It's a practical thing and what this country was based upon.

What I didn't mention, when we were talking about music, is how important hymns are. All the praise-and-worship stuff I understand. I get it.

I get they like the rhythm and all of that. But in addition to that, our young people need to be learning hymns because there's good theology in hymns — really good theology.

"I Know Whom I Have Believed." How much better can you get than that?

"Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." Talk about praise!

I feel real strongly about this. And I feel real strongly about the *Celebrating Grace Hymnal* that's out. There are some new hymns in there that are just dynamite for a person who cares about music.

Also, Baptists haven't always had the reputation we have now. Unfortunately we

have sort of deteriorated in our reputation.

I'd love to be a party to cleaning up what other people think of Baptists. I'd like for us to be known as a loving group that cared about people and actually did what the Bible said to do.

Therefore, when you see people who are trying to keep us from being those kinds of caring Christian people, by diverting our attention, it really kind of grabs you the wrong way. But it makes life interesting.

The problems in our denomination have caused us to be more discerning. They've caused us to read the Bible more; to talk through what we believe more. So maybe it was time for us to ask: "What do we really believe? Who do we really believe?"

It has a lot to do with what our Foundation does. We are much more influenced by knowing who we can trust than anything else.

I think there are times when we do have to stand up for what we believe and point out what, in our opinion, is right and wrong. And we do have to qualify that it is our opinion.

The Lord knows I've made lots of mistakes in my life, and asked for forgiveness lots of times. But haven't we all?

**NFJ: Are there some things you'd like to see happen in Baptist life?**

BB: Sure, there are lots of things. I would love it if we could explain somehow — and let the rest of the world know — what being a real Baptist is.

And why, in my opinion, some people who claim to be Baptist aren't. And why some people who are real Baptists are embarrassed to admit it.

The word "Baptist" should mean people who love God and love each other and are filled with joy and are positive and willing to share that joy with everyone who needs it — which is the rest of the world.

I also wish we could do what the Bible tells us to do — without worrying about who's going to misconstrue our purpose. I think we probably need to honor those who've gone before us more than sometimes we do.

There are a lot of Baptists doing a lot of wonderful things. **NFJ**



# KINGDOM ECONOMICS

A conversation with Hulitt Gloer about ‘things’ as viewed by Jesus

Good Faith Media’s unfolding Jesus Worldview Initiative has resulted in two books, a series of retreats, and several presentations to churches and other organizations.

**S**till in its development stage, the goal is to advance the following of Jesus as the highest Christian priority above any other religious/political ideology. Responses to the initiative have revealed widespread interest.

Among those offering encouragement and insights is W. Hulitt Gloer, who is retired from Baylor University’s Truett Seminary where he served as the David E. Garland Professor of Preaching & Christian Scriptures.



More recently, he was scholar-in-residence at Second Baptist Church of Little Rock, Ark. — where he taught Bible studies often exploring a Jesus worldview — before moving to Liberty, Mo.

*Nurturing Faith Journal* editor John Pierce asked the Bible scholar and minister about how Jesus viewed possessions, as reflected in Luke’s gospel. Here is that conversation.

**NFJ: What is “kingdom economics,” and why do you consider this approach to possessions foundational for Christian living?**

WHG: Kingdom economics emphasizes the fact that the teachings of Jesus about the kingdom of God have to do with every aspect of our lives both individually and corporately. There are religious implications to be sure, but there are also social, political and economic implications.



## JESUS WORLDVIEW INITIATIVE

In my tradition, we have tended to emphasize the religious dimensions, especially the individual’s relationship with Jesus, while attention to the social, political and economic dimensions have, when acknowledged at all, seldom risen to the level of necessity for conversion and faithful discipleship.

Yet to speak of a kingdom — any kingdom — requires attention to social (the ways we perceive and receive others), political (the ways we organize ourselves), and economic (the ways we use our resources) dimensions.

Each of these dimensions focuses on the corporate or communal aspects of salvation, and each represents a fundamental aspect of our salvation.

To speak of kingdom economics is to speak of the way kingdom citizens are called to use our resources — our possessions/money/mammon — for the work of the kingdom, which always means for the sake of others.

Jesus knew that “money talks” and the way we use our money is a direct reflection of the nature of our commitment to his kingdom and an unmistakable witness to the nature and reality of that kingdom.

An unfaithful use of our money and our things will shout louder than our “preachings” about the kingdom. As individuals, our attitudes about kingdom economics are clearly revealed in our bank accounts; and as faith communities, these attitudes are clearly reflected in our church budgets.

**NFJ: Jesus talked a lot about possessions. How would you summarize his message or messages?**

WHG: Jesus understood that the last idol(s) human beings would be willing to surrender would be “self.” That’s why he makes clear in Mark 8:34 that in order to become his followers we must “deny self,” “take up the cross,” and “follow” him.

The order is intentional: Until we are willing to deny self, we will never take up the cross. And until we take up the cross, we will not — indeed never — be able to follow Jesus.

He also understood that this denial of self included a radical reorientation of one’s relationship to possessions/money/mammon, which would become the visible evidence of authentic conversion.

Interestingly, in Luke 14:25-33 there is a similar three-fold description of the cost of following Jesus:

First, “hating” family and even one’s own life (vv. 24-26); second, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (v. 27); and third, “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (v. 33).

Luke has gone one step beyond Mark and given definition in concrete terms to what is included in Mark’s “deny self.” This is not surprising when one remembers that of the four gospels, Luke (and its companion volume Acts) highlights Jesus’ teaching about possessions most clearly.

Indeed, throughout the narrative in sayings, parables and stories, Luke demonstrates the radical nature of Jesus’ teaching on possessions. The sheer volume suggests the Lukan Jesus saw possessions/money/mammon as obstacles to full conversion and faithful discipleship.

Luke bookends the ministry of Jesus prior to his arrival in Jerusalem with two foundational stories that focus on this teaching with regard to possessions: Jesus’



Zacchaeus in the Sycamore Awaiting the Passage of Jesus by James Tissot.

message in the Nazareth synagogue (4:16-30) and Jesus with Zacchaeus (19:1-10).

In the Nazareth synagogue Jesus reads from Isaiah (61:1-2) and announces that his messianic agenda must be understood in light of the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25), which has clear and dramatic economic implications requiring a right relationship with God, with others, *and* with our possessions (4:16-30).

*“An unfaithful use of our money and our things will shout louder than our ‘preachings’ about the kingdom.”*

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector who knew about economics and used it to his own advantage. He espoused an economic policy of “What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is mine,” and had lined his pockets with the money of others.

Strikingly, his response to his encounter with Jesus is to give half of his possessions to the poor and to pay back fourfold those he has wronged. Just as strikingly, Jesus announces that this is the evidence of his salvation (19:10).

In between these two stories, Luke’s narrative is shot through with stories with clear economic implications for both the first century and the 21st century:

- Jesus calls his first disciples who leave “everything” to follow him (5:11, 28).
- He announces *blessings* to the “poor” and “hungry” and *woes* to the “rich” and “full” (6:20-26).
- Women use their resources to support Jesus and those traveling with him (8:1-3).
- There is the feeding of the 5,000 (9:10-17), the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37), the Lord’s Prayer (11:2-4), the Parable of the Rich Fool (12:13-21), and the admonition to “sell your possessions and give alms” (12:33).
- The Parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin and Lost Sons (15:2-32) have significant economic implications.
- The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31), the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:9-14), and the Rich Ruler (18:18-30) whose love for his possessions prevents him from following Jesus, are included as well.
- Finally, just before Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem, there is Zacchaeus whose story becomes the paradigm of authentic conversion (19:1-10).

Each of these texts demands our most careful study, but — individually and cumulatively — these stories make clear that Jesus knew the seductive power of possessions can enslave the owners and become idols taking the place of God.

Later, in the Upper Room, Jesus prepares the disciples for the ultimate expression of kingdom economics defined in word and symbol with the bread and the cup (22:14-23):

“This is my body (*what’s mine*) which is given for you (*is yours*).” “This cup ... is the new covenant in my blood (*what’s mine*) which is poured out for you (*is yours*).”

The next day on the cross, he would demonstrate it in flesh and blood (23:26-49).

There on the cross, hanging between heaven and earth, with nails in wrists and feet and a crown of thorns on his brow and arms outstretched to take the whole world in his embrace, he shouts down the corridors of history: “This is how much I love you, enough to say, *what’s mine is yours*.”

**NFJ: How does Luke’s laying out of Jesus’ view of “things” contrast with our often-preferred approach?**

WHG: To say the Lukan Jesus’ view of “things” runs counter to our often-preferred approach is to be guilty of understatement. As Americans, we are born and bred into an economic system based on private ownership of things and the use of the “things” we have as capital to buy more things and/or to profit from them.

Thus, the more I have, the more I can have. In simple terms, what’s mine is mine and I want what’s yours to be mine and I will do whatever I can to make it mine.

Inevitably, the “haves” get more and the “have-nots” get less. It’s the water we swim in every day, and churches have “bought” right into this and baptized it.

More than the Bible, this system tells us what to do with “things,” and a church that has become accommodated to the prevailing economic system (whatever it may be) cannot speak to money because money has taught it what to say.

In Luke, the contrast between Jesus’ approach and the approach of our culture

*“Part of the problem is that we begin with a worldview that has been shaped by the economic realities of our culture and try to fit the teachings of Jesus into that worldview.”*

can be seen in the contrast between the Rich Ruler (18:18-25) and Zacchaeus (19:1-10).

The Rich Ruler is a good man, obedient to — maybe even zealous for — all the commandments, but his finances are off-limits. His wallet is closed both to Jesus and to others.

Zacchaeus, on the other hand, is willing to open wide his wallet to Jesus and to others, and Jesus immediately affirms that this is the concrete evidence of his conversion.

Zacchaeus is, for Luke, the paradigm of genuine conversion, but too often, we leave his story when he comes down from the sycamore tree and goes home with Jesus.

The real importance of the story is Zacchaeus’ conversion from a life where “things” were his first priority to a life in which Jesus is the first priority — resulting in a totally new understanding of the

“things” he has spent his whole life accumulating.

While the Rich Ruler would be very comfortable in our economic system, Zacchaeus would be seen as a fool — his actions would seem totally unreasonable. And to our way of thinking, they are, and he is a fool!

But Jesus begs to differ. “Today salvation has come to this house....” The question we must ask is, “Are we prepared to risk social and economic disdain by moving toward a posture regarding ‘things’ determined by kingdom economics?”

To put it another way, “Are we prepared to be fools for Christ?”

Part of the problem is that we begin with a worldview that has been shaped by the economic “realities” of our culture and try to “fit” the teachings of Jesus into that worldview.

This is, as we have all experienced, like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

What might happen if we began with a view that the kingdom worldview is, in fact, *the real reality* and that we are to live according to the economics of the kingdom? Would that be fitting a square peg into a square hole?

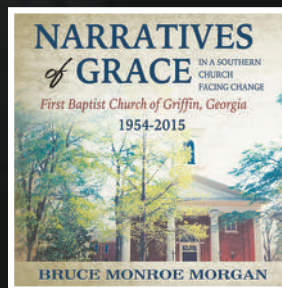
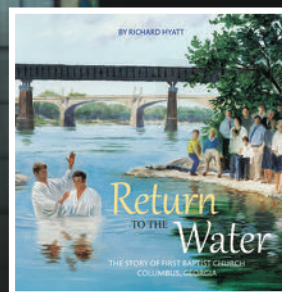
To be sure, there is great risk involved and we probably cannot do this apart from a community. It will be hard.

In fact, it may seem impossible. But as Jesus told the disciples after the Rich Ruler turned away “because he was very rich,” “what is impossible for mortals is possible for God” (Luke 18:27).

Regarding kingdom economics, I fear that G.K. Chesterton might be right. He said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.” **NFJ**

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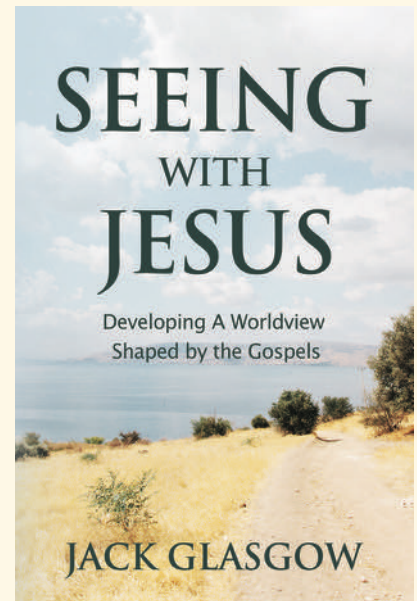
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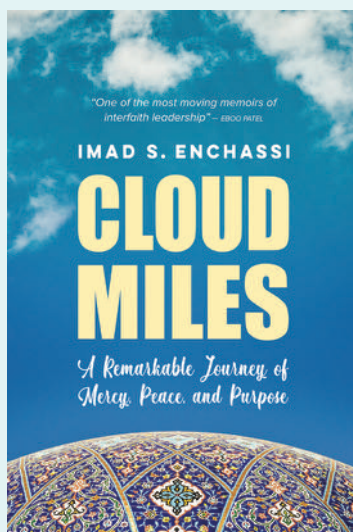
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# Soul Friendship

Q&A with Jeff Mathis on becoming  
'sanctuaries of trust and unconditional love'

SYLVA, N.C. — Jeff Mathis has served as pastor of the First Baptist Church in this small, scenic mountain town since 2012. A graduate of North Carolina State University and Princeton Theological Seminary, he recently completed a Doctor of Ministry degree from Campbell University Divinity School.

**H**is focused study was on the Celtic Christian tradition of “soul friendship.” Executive Editor John Pierce asked him how this study and the related project impacted him personally and professionally, as well as the congregation in Sylva, N.C.

**NFJ: What is “soul friendship,” and how did it gain your interest?**

JM: In recent years, I’ve been drawn to the Celtic Christian tradition. Although I’m not Irish myself (but Scotch-Irish, which represents the Scots who were forcibly relocated to Ireland for shrewd, political purposes several centuries ago), I’ve developed a fondness for Ireland.

My wife Rebecca and I have traveled there several times and are drawn to the green fields, the ruins of the ancient monastic communities, the cliffs and the High Crosses. When I began to share this interest with our congregation, I found that many of the Celtic Christian distinctives are present in our own setting in Western North Carolina.

Of course, there’s a connection as many Scotch-Irish settled in our mountains in the mid- and late-18th century. The folk music, love of storytelling, and the awe-filled reverence for the land (“thin places” where the



Pastor Jeff Mathis of First Baptist Church of Sylva, N.C., on the island of Iona, Scotland, in 2019.

membrane between this world and the next is thin) are directly connected to the Celtic culture from which the people of southern Appalachia hail.

In my studies, I have been especially drawn to the expression of the Church that developed outside the influence of Roman culture. In ways that were unique at the time — and still to this day — the Celtic culture and the Christian faith were woven together in ways that honored their heritage and were authentic to their setting.

One of these Celtic Christian distinctives is the spiritual discipline of soul friendship — known to the Celts, in Gaelic, as *Anam Cara*.

Anam Cara means “friend of the soul.” In ancient Ireland, a soul friend was someone with whom you could share the practical matters of life, reveal life’s deep joys and sorrows, and be for someone a sanctuary of trust and unconditional love.

The ancient Celts believed that people are not created to live in solitude. An Anam

Cara friend provides health for the soul.

A friend who is an Anam Cara can become a surrogate representative of Jesus. Indeed, the Irish Christians believed that practicing Anam Cara struck at the very heart of the gospel, and was instrumental in strengthening the Church.

Historically, Anam Cara friendships were marked by high commitment levels, mutuality and reciprocity. Anam Cara friendships have the maturity and trust to share confessions and to offer prayers for one another.

Anam Cara friendships provide the opportunity for individuals to both model and experience Christ’s unconditional love. Anam Cara friendships are one way to be Christ to one another.

**NFJ: Friendship is a pretty universal concept. What are the spiritual dimensions for followers of Jesus?**

JM: Practically speaking, no *one* person can meet all of our relational, emotional

or spiritual needs. Having a soul friend and practicing Anam Cara can actually strengthen our other relationships.

Just as the story of the two friends who traveled to Emmaus on Easter Day teaches us, it may very well be that we experience Christ's presence when we choose to share our lives with one another.

The path is made more bearable when we travel together, and when we can recognize Christ Jesus along the way.

Friendship is present throughout the scriptures. We see it lived out in the friendships exhibited by David and Jonathan, Jesus and Peter, Ruth and Naomi. Wisdom literature expounds friendship's virtues, and in one of our oldest and most revered stories, we meet a God who wishes to walk with us in creation.

However, an even broader view reveals that the Good News of Jesus Christ is the story of friendship. Jesus chooses to share his life and ministry with friends.

He washes their feet, defines friendship in the context of the love command, calls his followers friends, and ultimately lays down his life for them.

### **NFJ: How is soul friendship practiced within and beyond congregational life?**

JM: Practicing soul friendship requires three things: A willingness to deepen a friendship with someone you already know, a commitment to set aside time to practice friendship, and a readiness to self-disclose and to share one's inner self with someone else.

Practically speaking, it can look like this:

- Ask a friend to commit to practicing Anam Cara with you.
- Agree to meet or talk with your friend once a week for at least six weeks (committing 60-75 minutes for each meeting).
- When meeting, each person should take a turn going through the following four steps.

STEP ONE: Check in.

- Share the things that are holding your attention this week.
- What relationships do you feel particularly tethered to right now?

STEP TWO: Go deeper.

- How is it with the deepest part of you?
- What are the things going on beneath the surface that you haven't shared with anyone else?

STEP THREE: Ask.

- What are you sorry for and wish to seek forgiveness?
- After hearing your friend's confession, share an assurance of God's pardon from the Bible (such as 1 John 1:8).

STEP FOUR: Pray.

- What do you need from God right now?
- Hear a prayer offered on your behalf.

### **NFJ: You took this interest to a deeper level with your recently completed academic pursuits. What did you discover?**

JM: Our fellowship responded enthusiastically when given the opportunity to deepen a friendship with someone in the context of my project — with 20 percent of our worshipping community, along with those outside our congregation, choosing to practice Anam Cara with a friend.

As I would discover, these pairs of friends met more than was asked and visited far longer in each session than I suggested. People wanted to deepen a friendship.

Since the participants could freely choose their friend, it naturally provided the pairs a setting where they were already inclined to spend time together. And, not surprising, the friendships grew stronger.

The individuals became better listeners. They became more willing to share. They grew in their capacity to be empathetic to another's reality and were touched by someone's attention when they shared themselves.

The friends' other relationships improved as well, including relationships with immediate family and their spouse. The friends' relationship with God deepened as they shared how they felt Christ coming up alongside them on the path.

Then there's this: When asked if they were inclined or interested in continuing their soul friendship practice, the pairs responded overwhelmingly that they did.

The church as a whole benefited from

this experience. While there was not a spike in church attendance or giving — the most frequently noted indicators of growth and health for our congregations — the church was marked with a spirit of optimism, contentment and resiliency.

Steady might be the best way to describe it. [Those in] the church became more supportive of one another. They were generous in the time they chose to spend with one another.

They lingered longer in moments of fellowship before and after worship. They were quick to pray for the church's needs, and their laughter felt more sincere.

### **NFJ: How has this practice fit in with the pandemic experience?**

JM: God's people were not created to live in isolation. The early Christians in Ireland may indeed have tried to copy the desert fathers and mothers who had withdrawn from their communities to live in solitude.

The Irish found that the Church's early monastic expression became quite skilled at friendship as it happened in the arid deserts for the monks who had sought silence.

Yes, early Christians revered those who withdrew to live in harsh landscapes. And when they followed them on the path, extraordinary friendships — friendships of the soul — grew out of their overriding sense of call to be in communion with one another.

During the pandemic, churches have been forced to withdraw from our larger fellowships. While technology has enabled us to stay tethered, we still have a natural hunger and impulse to share our lives.

So, when it is not advisable to meet in larger groups, we can still experience the love and presence of Jesus Christ if we choose to walk the path with another.

Two friends, whether walking a path or visiting together on a phone call, can feel Christ coming up alongside them as they share their lives with another. Anam Cara provides a way for friends to both feel, and be, the presence of Christ.

Because of our current realities, Anam Cara may need to be practiced out of a sense of necessity. Yet it may be one of the most faithful ways to practice and be the church at any time. **NFJ**



# Questions Christians ask scientists

*Doesn't it take faith to believe in science?*

**T**he sentiment that it requires faith to believe in certain scientific theories is one I have come across many times in my work as a writer and speaker.

On the surface it does seem that, just as we call on faith to believe the tenets of Christianity, we must also rely on faith to believe things like the big bang, evolution or relativity. But I don't think that's really true.

First, let us look at core Christian beliefs. Orthodox Christianity asks us to believe there exists an all-loving, all-powerful divine being, God, who created the world some time in the past and who is present with us now.

Human beings carry the image of this creator within us. But we have somehow become alienated from this same God, who wants to be reconciled to us.

With this goal God reached out to us again and again throughout history and, about 2,000 years ago, actually became one of us. That is to say, God was incarnated in a working-class Palestinian Jewish man named Jesus, who grew up in a no-name town on a forgotten fringe of the Roman Empire.

Jesus became an itinerant preacher and healer and was ultimately tortured and killed by religious and political authorities. He didn't stay dead; he rose from the grave a few days after he was killed and then ascended into heaven.

Eventually the Holy Spirit, who is also God, fell upon those who had followed Jesus, and is with us still. The upshot of this whole unlikely affair is that we are now reconciled to God.

This seems a little hard to believe, but as Christians we believe it on faith. When we turn to science we find a collection of theories that seem nearly as implausible.

For example, the big bang asks us to believe that, about 13.8 billion years ago, everything that is, somehow exploded out of an infinitesimally small, infinitely hot, infinitely dense point and has been expanding and cooling ever since.

**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 [info@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:info@goodfaithmedia.org).



Evolution states that all life is related, and not in a vague way but according to the exact meaning of the word: long-extinct lizards and fish and worms and single-celled organisms are our *ancestors*; present-day house cats and narwhals and rotifers and *e. coli* and hickory trees are our *relatives*.

And Einstein's theory of relativity proposes that both time and space are flexible and not absolute; that time slows down when you travel at high speeds and as you draw near massive objects; that distances between things vary as your speed changes; and that these effects are not optical illusions or products of poor measurements, but are real actual physical facts.

All of this does seem a little hard to believe, and there's plenty more in science that beggars belief: plate tectonics, quantum mechanics, the mating habits of certain animals, and I could go on.

It would seem that in order to believe in all this strange science, one must possess a degree of faith. Certainly both sets of statements are, on their faces, hard to believe.

But when you dig deeper into either one of them you find rich structure, and a tradition, and a community that holds the pieces together. Both sets of statements, as written, do not reveal their internal consis-

tenency and deep connections to the world around us.

In other words, both the Christian faith and modern science represent deep intellectual traditions that require study and patience to begin to appreciate with any real depth. Believing either one is not as crazy as it seems at first take.

But simply believing things, even if you believe them for perfectly good reasons, is not yet faith. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," writes the author of Hebrews (11:1).

Nearly all Christian theologians at nearly all times have held that faith is not mere intellectual assent. Else, how could it possibly be *evidence* of anything?

Intellectual assent does not act in the world; belief is not itself an outward expression, for, as it is written, faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:17). Which, to me, means that faith without works is no faith at all.

Faith, in other words, comprises both belief *and* action. Faith is *animate*. You believe in something and then you take action in accordance with your belief.

Importantly, it is action, and not mere belief, that carries risk. Jesus was not executed because he believed in the kingdom

of God but because he had the audacity to usher it in. Martin Luther King Jr. was not assassinated because he believed in equality under the law but because he took direct action and advocated for civil disobedience in order to realize it.

Countless Christians have, like King, followed in Jesus' footsteps, taking financial, professional and personal risks for the furtherance of the kingdom of God. You may be one of them.

Science does not normally demand such total commitment. Theories such as the big bang and evolution and relativity do not require us to commit our whole selves to them. They require only intellectual assent.

But they do periodically demand more of certain people, and there are cases, some current, in which people put themselves in great danger because of their scientific beliefs.

Take climate activist Greta Thunberg, for example. She receives daily death threats, not because she believes global warming is the gravest peril facing humanity, but because she has taken concrete steps and inspired millions of people to change the

system.

No one cares what we believe, but many people care very much if we start acting in accordance with our beliefs, whether that belief is religious or not. Such a combination of belief and action comes close to the essence of faith, but it is rare in the scientific world.

But even this is not the same as faith in the Christian sense. The Greek word for faith is *pistis*, which carries meanings not only of belief — which we have already covered, — but also of faithfulness and trust. These last words hint at the true qualitative difference between Christian belief and action and scientific belief and action: the *object* of belief.

What is the object of scientific belief? Ideas, theories, concepts. What is the object of Christian belief? The person of Jesus Christ.

One cannot be faithful to a theory, but one can be faithful to a person. I do not know what it means to trust a theory, but I do know what it means to trust a person.

The simple point I'm trying to make is

that true faith requires the whole person — heart, soul, mind and strength — precisely because it is faith in a person.

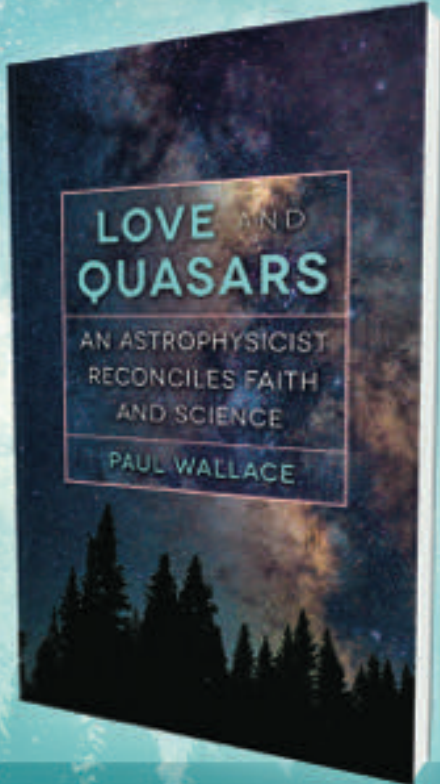
But believing certain scientific theories requires only our minds. We may act on them, as Thunberg does, but this action is not required of us by the object of our belief.

Faith, in the full Christian sense of the word, demands everything we have and everything we are. This is what Jesus means by saying that if we are to be his followers, we are to take up our crosses daily and follow him. Science makes no such demand.

This is reflected in language used by scientists. You will almost never hear scientists say they “believe in” the big bang theory, or evolution, or any other theory.

Instead they will say something like: “I find the big bang to be the best scientific theory we have about the origin and evolution of the universe.” This language carefully cuts out all personal aspects, a move characteristic of science itself.

So within the question, “Doesn't it take faith to believe in science?” lurks a hint of the answer, which is “No.” **NFJ**



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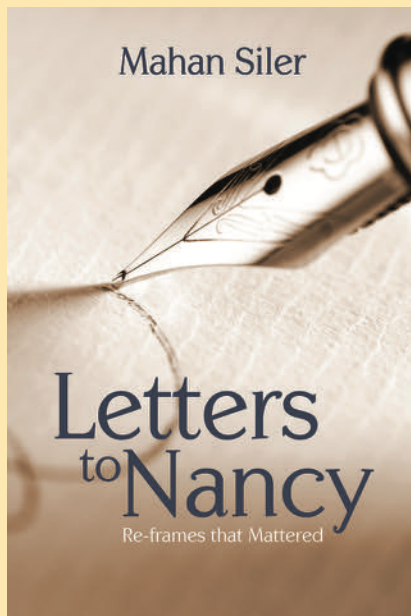
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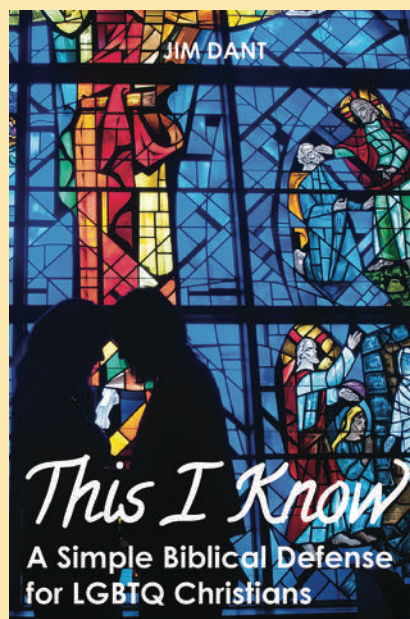
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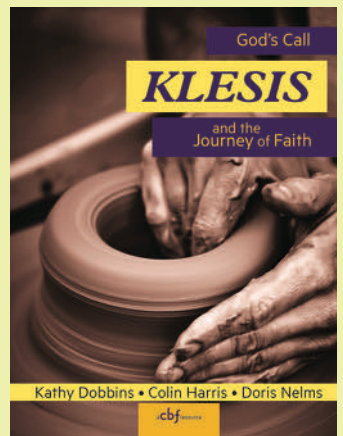
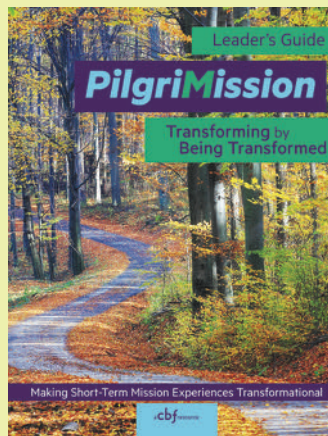
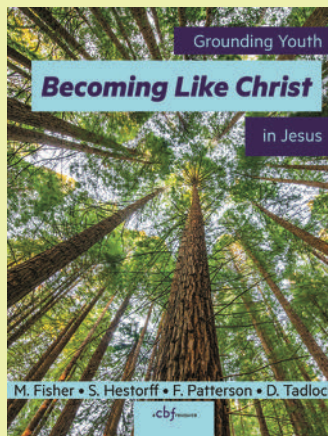
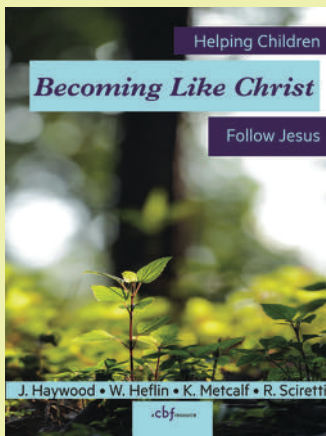
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