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about doing racial justice

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EVEN ON JULY FOURTH**

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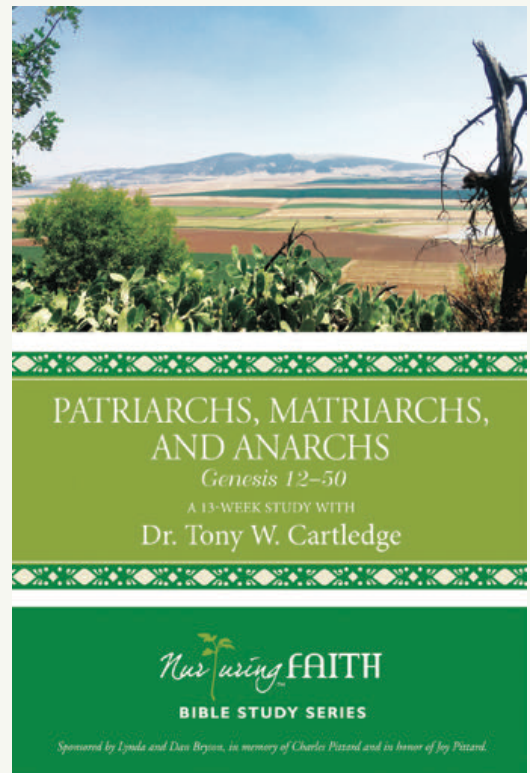
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DIGGIN' IT
 'Cave of Horror'
 or one of wonder?
 By Tony W. Cartledge

48

INSIDE

VOL. 39, ISSUE 4
 JULY / AUGUST 2021

THOUGHTS

- 5** God so loves the world,
 even on July 4
By John D. Pierce
- 12** Rethinking how we do church
By Larry Hovis
- 14** Weeping over your city
By Bill Wilson
- 16** 'Kill the Indian to save America'
By Mitch Randall
- 18** Gospel-shaped freedom is con-
 strained for the sake of others
By John R. Franke
- 19** How do we talk about race?
By Starlette Thomas
- 50** Making an apology for
 apologetics
By Leroy Seat
- 53** Charity is good; justice
 is a good deal more
By John D. Pierce
- 54** Listening in and learning
 from a private conversation
By Jana Peterson
- 60** Friends remembered,
 lives honored
By John D. Pierce



JUST IMAGINE
 Churches can move beyond
 previously assumed limits
*By Benny McCracken
 and Tonya Nicholson*

10

FEATURES

- 6** **INTENT TO IMPACT**
 Jemar Tisby gets practical about
 doing racial justice
By John D. Pierce
- 40** **RELIGION AND THE
 AMERICAN PRESIDENTS**
 George H. W. Bush (1989–1993)
By Bruce Gourley
- 46** **'WARRIOR COP'**
 When did the narrative about
 police officers as heroes begin?
By Terrell Carter
- 56** **MINISTRY TO MILITARY**
 Church finds lessons in serving
 service personnel
By Andrew Garnett
- 58** **WORTH REMEMBERING:**
 Ty Cobb's eye-opening
 letter to a seminarian
 revealed 50 years later
By John D. Pierce
- 61** **WEAPONIZING FREEDOM**
 A 17th-century foundational
 principle is now a pretense
 for religious extremism
By Bruce Gourley
- 62** **FAITH/SCIENCE QUESTION**
 The Bible says much about
 Heaven and Earth, but isn't Mars
 interesting too?
By Paul Wallace
- 64** **WORDS & WONDERS**
 GFM Writers' Retreat will
 offer insights, inspiration
By John D. Pierce

MEDIA

Brandi Carlile's
 baptism debacle
 met with grace in
 reverse
By John D. Pierce

52



LIGHTER SIDE

Excusing ourselves
By Brett Younger

20

Cover photo by Mitch Randall. The Chilocco Indian School in north-central Oklahoma operated from 1884 to 1980. See story on page 16.

Worth Repeating

“[Pastors] get their people for one hour, and Sean Hannity gets them for the next 20.”

Southern Baptist pastor Joel Rainey of Covenant Church in Shepherdstown, W.Va., on why politics increasingly shape white evangelicals more than biblical faith (*NYT*)

“Good stories can offer us the alternative views and the engagement we need. ... Polls do not change people’s minds. Story and relationships change people’s minds.”

Baylor University English professor Greg Garrett, who will use a multi-year Baugh Foundation grant to identify harmful racial myths within American culture and better stories to replace them (*Waco Tribune-Herald*)

“Political debates over what America is supposed to mean have taken on the character of theological disputations. This is what religion without religion looks like.”

Shadi Hamid, writing on “America Without God” for *The Atlantic*

“America has such a long history of being dominated by Christianity that many people are reluctant to really see the connections between white supremacy and Christianity as part of American culture.”

Robert P. Jones, author of *White Too Long*, in an interview with *Salon*

“What’s dramatically declining in the U.S. is white Christianity. People of color are actually preventing a more precipitous drop in overall church participation.”

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, writing for Religion News Service about the Gallup Poll showing U.S. church membership below 50 percent

“There is a decent chunk of [American Christians] who ... send us prayers saying, ‘Thank God for fossil fuels.’

But Christians in other countries are living the experience of displacement and not being able to grow their crops.”

Yale Divinity student Cameron Kritikos, who works with the Climate Witness Project, on how global Christians don’t share American evangelical suspicions of climate change (*Rolling Stone*)

“What we should fear is not people who refuse to belong to churches, but churches who refuse to belong to Jesus.”

Pastor Kate Murphy of The Grove Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, N.C. (*Raleigh News & Observer*)

“Confronted with the realities of heightened diversity and polarization, we find ourselves continually challenged to choose whether to build bridges or walls.”

Hal Bass, professor emeritus of political science at Ouachita Baptist University and a member of the Good Faith Media strategic advisory board (GFM)

“You are telling me it’s giving you hope. I’m telling you as your pastor that it’s evil.”

Pastor David Rice of Markey Church in rural Michigan, to his congregation about QAnon theories some members have embraced (*LA Times*)



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Available on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts

God so loves the world, even on July 4

By John D. Pierce

Independence Day lands on a Sunday this year. Many pastors and other worship leaders will struggle with how to meet congregational expectations of a civil religion celebration while fulfilling the ministers' primary calling to proclaim a boundary-less gospel.

Some ministers will simply take the Sunday off to avoid the annual criticism for not reducing the worship of God to a pageantry of uncritical Christian nationalism. For others, the show will go on — out of conviction or convenience — that projects God's favoritism on the gathered offspring of romanticized European settlers.

While some civil religion expressions are more subtly woven into worship, other performances suggest the incarnation of God showed up in a star-spangled top hat and red-white-and-blue suspenders.

Conflating one's allegiance to God and nation produces neither Christian faithfulness, nor good citizenship. The horrible realities of that history-honing blend are plentiful — yet often ignored by more gratifying motivations.

For many Americanized Christians, sadly, tenets of the devastating Doctrine of Discovery (and its related Manifest Destiny) continue to overshadow the clarity of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world..."

To some, anything less than a robust celebration of "American exceptionalism" — even at the expense of Jesus and the whole of humanity for which he lived, died and was resurrected — can be unappealing and unacceptable. Just see which sanctuaries



fill on July 4; it will be those draped in the American flag.

The false criticism of those who identify, avoid and warn about the clear dangers of civil religion is that they are not sufficiently patriotic. It is usually a waste of time to explain otherwise, since those making such claims tend to do so emotionally rather than rationally.

Patriotism, however, is expressed in a variety of ways — and best done so in appropriate places. The worship of God — whose greatest gift flowed from a deep well of love for the world — is not the time and place to revel in the nationalistic fervor of an ideology that blends allegiances in a way that suggests God is an exclusive, national mascot. Even when July 4 lands on a Sunday, Jesus is still the savior of the world.



I have nothing but good memories of Independence Days past — whether an all-day community gathering at the Boynton baseball field in northwest Georgia; preaching my very first sermon on July 4, 1976, and then joining my fellow student missionaries that evening to celebrate the nation's bicentennial with a fireworks display in Grayling, Mich; or running down Atlanta's famed Peachtree Street with tens of thousands of other sweaty patriots.

Whatever memories come to mind,

it is good to have an annual focus on the treasured freedoms we enjoy in this imperfect, yet remarkable and fragile union. But it is wise to boast of the ideals of "liberty and justice for all" while working for their fuller realization.

For Christians, our highest devotion calls for paying full attention to the most well-known verse in the Bible. It can bring the proper perspective that we are created, loved and sustained by God — but not more or less so than anyone else, regardless of nationality or any other human definition.

The Christian faith is not our national possession. Nations are not Christian — only individuals within nations can be so.

And honesty compels us to confess enormous shortcomings in living up to the ideals of Jesus' life and example in the ways we have treated — and continue to treat — many others.

We can be patriotic Americans and globally inclusive Christians without messing up either by conflating the two into a murky mess.

God's love is personal but never exclusive. We should have a heart for the whole world because God has a heart for the whole world.

Surely there is a reason the gospel writer John used the word "world" (*kosmos*) four times in John 3:16-17.

Priorities matter. The words of my late seminary theology professor, John Eddins, resound in my mind: There can be only one ultimate; everything else is at most penultimate.

For professing Christians, our highest loyalty must always be to Jesus Christ. His astounding revelation came to us — all of us — because God so loves the whole world. **NFJ**

INTENT TO IMPACT

Jemar Tisby gets practical about doing racial justice

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

When a book's title and the heading of each chapter begin with the two words, "How to," the author is surely offering insight for practical application, not mere pearls of wisdom.

"You caught that," said Jemar Tisby with a laugh, of the obvious observation about his new book, *How To Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey Toward Racial Justice* (Zondervan, 2021).

Tisby is president of The Witness: A Black Christian Collective (thewitnessbcc.com), where he writes about race, religion, politics and culture. He also cohosts the popular *Pass the Mic* podcast.

"I saw a gap in the literature around race, where people would talk a lot about racism but were light on application," said Tisby in an interview with *Nurturing Faith Journal*. "I wanted an entire book for people who ask the question I hear most frequently, 'What do we do?'"

Therefore, his new book — building on his earlier bestseller, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Zondervan, 2019) — seeks to move the faithful from information to intent to impact.

CONTEXT

Tisby grew up near Chicago and attended the University of Notre Dame before going to Mississippi where he taught at a public school and later became the principal.

Having earned a Master of Divinity degree from Reformed Theological Seminary, he is currently a Ph.D. student in history at the University of Mississippi where his studies are focused on race, religion and social movements of the 20th century.

Tisby lives in the Arkansas Delta, where his wife Janeé directs Together for

"History demonstrates and hope requires the fundamental belief that when people of goodwill get together, they can find creative solutions to society's most pressing problems."



Photo courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers.

Hope, a long-term initiative supported by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to address poverty. Tisby's experiences in the South, he said, have shaped his understandings of race and racial justice.

"Living in the Delta has profoundly impacted my perspectives on race, faith and history," said Tisby.

On race he said, "The issue is not simply desegregation, but power and the sharing of power."

On faith, he said his engagement with numerous, small African-American congregations with part-time pastors "have taught me the strength of the Black Christian tradition that doesn't make headlines."

Some of that strength, he noted, is cultural while much is clearly spiritual.

On race, he was quick to state that: "Racism is not just in the South — but if there's something different, it's the geography."

"You can't throw a stone without hitting some artifact of history," he explained — noting how slavery, Jim Crow

laws and the Civil Rights Movement were all played out primarily in the southern U.S.

Living and studying in that context, he said, has "made history come to life."

AUDIENCES

"I call myself 'evangelical-adjacent,' somewhat of an insider," said Tisby, whose earlier and formative faith development was in a predominantly white evangelical church. He considers that proximity helpful in addressing Christian responses to racial injustice.

Therefore, Tisby writes for "multiple audiences, and it's changed over time."

"For the majority of white Christians," he noted, "we have to untangle the idea that racism is an individual attitude — while ignoring systemic racism."

A dozen years ago, he said, he would primarily address "racial justice resistance," asking, "How do I persuade people that we have to deal with [racism] as part of what it means to be Christian?"

CONTINUED ON P 8

ON LEAVING

An episode of *The Witness* podcast earlier this year featured Jemar Tisby being “more honest and vulnerable” in telling about his deep involvement and eventual departure from predominantly white evangelicalism.

From his “textbook conversion” as a teen, Tisby found a home in the Reformed tradition of Christianity that is popularly identified with John Piper, R.C. Sproul Jr., James White and others.

Tisby said that, at the time, he was unaware of the “religious dimension of race.”

After graduating from Notre Dame, where he was active in community service, he headed to the Mississippi Delta to teach in a low-income school through Teach for America.

Next, Tisby enrolled in Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS), spending one year on the school’s Orlando campus before returning to the Delta to serve as a middle school principal.

Re-entering seminary a few years later at RTS’s campus in Jackson, Miss., Tisby worked in the admissions office as part of his scholarship, and began a ministry internship in a Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) congregation.

Though 80 percent of Jackson’s population was Black, few attended the seminary. So Tisby sought to recruit students through conferences that attracted Black Christians.

The Reformed evangelical world, he said, wasn’t prepared for the Black Christian witness. “We were a threat to the racism that permeated those circles.”

Then racial justice hit the headlines. Trayvon Martin was murdered in Sanford, Fla., in 2012. Tisby searched for a word from Reformed leader Sproul, whose ministry is based in the Orlando area. He found none.

Two years later Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Mo., sparking the Black Lives Matter movement. Tisby again listened for voices from within his faith community.

If he heard anything at all, it was usually defenses of those carrying out the hostilities.

Now starting to speak and write more widely in Reformed evangelical circles — while drawing other Black students to RTS — Tisby began to address these issues. He quickly felt the distancing from Reformed leaders.

“They would not publicly associate with me, and certainly not defend me,” he said. Some of the pushback came anonymously on social media, claiming his calls for racial justice were a distraction from the gospel.

Reformed leaders such as Piper and others, he said, were complicit in making space and excuses for racism.

“They were more concerned about keeping slavery apologists in their camp, and more concerned with correcting doctrine,” he surmised.

Still, Tisby held back a bit until 2015, when then-presidential candidate Donald Trump called Mexicans “rapists.” The moment called for “moral clarity,” said Tisby. So he spoke out.

“A church member called an elder to basically put me in my place,” he recalled, “to tell me to stay out of politics.”

Tisby, who was “under care” as one working toward ordination, said he understood the rebuke to mean he was to say nothing negative about Trump — who despite numerous moral failings and scandals was elected president.

“Then the infamous number came out: 81 percent of white evangelicals pulled the lever for Trump,” said Tisby.

Tisby said he felt betrayed by the church and seminary communities in which he and his family had invested so much.

“When a true moment of meaning came, they didn’t just fail a little bit,” he said. “It was catastrophic.”

On a podcast in 2016, he expressed not feeling safe in his own spiritual home. In response, Reformed leader James White of Phoenix produced “an hour-long video takedown” of Tisby.

“For the next three weeks solid, whenever I logged onto social media, it was the worst racism I’d ever seen,” said Tisby of the online comments. He recalled his eye twitching from the ugliness and stress.

The next year, Tisby and others who were part of the Reformed African American Network (RAAN) went on a retreat and reformulated themselves to be “The Witness: A Black Christian Collective.”

“I bounced from the PCA around then,” he said of his departure, having completed his M.Div. degree, but ending the ordination process.

“If you are Black in these spaces, you get either pushed out, burned out or sold out.”

Tisby said he felt pushed out of his plan to become a Reformed pastor. But he was tired of arguing about whether racial justice was part of the gospel or a distraction from it as many white evangelicals claimed.

Moving back to the Delta, he refocused on studying history — including brief enrollment at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary before shifting his Ph.D. work to the University of Mississippi.

Tisby said he liked the structure of Presbyterianism, just not the denominational experience he had found to be unaccepting and painful.

“I call myself a Black Christian” who is “evangelical-adjacent,” he said — meaning he knows evangelical communities well, but no longer feels at home among evangelicals.

Once, while serving as a panelist at a major conference for Reformed Christians, Tisby said he realized he was in the wrong place to live out his faith when someone posed a question asking him to judge the Christian orthodoxy of Martin Luther King Jr.

“I’m more interested in the theology of slaveholders [including heroes of the Reformed tradition such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield],” he said, “...than [the theology of] somebody who was literally killed for standing up for the image of God in people.” **NFJ**

Since, that time, he said, he has found many white and Black Christians attuned to advancing racial justice — whom he deems a “coalition of the willing.”

White Christians, he has found, are often in a state of “deconstruction,” seeking to unlearn what the church and society at large have embedded in their minds about race.

Black Christians, on the other hand, he noted, often need encouragement to be and stay engaged in the struggle for justice. And he reminds African Americans that “you don’t have to be white; it’s not a mistake to be Black.”

Tisby encourages the tension and dialogue among varied audiences. His mission, he said, is “to equip all these audiences with practical tools.”

Being able to talk about how religion shapes racial attitudes and experiences is important, he said. And “a big part of fighting racism... is knowing real people and having actual experiences.”

Tisby identified two obstacles: One, “there are a lot of people who talk about race, but often ignore the Christian element.” And, two, there are those who are “not empathetic to the church” and its role in shaping culture for good as well as ill.

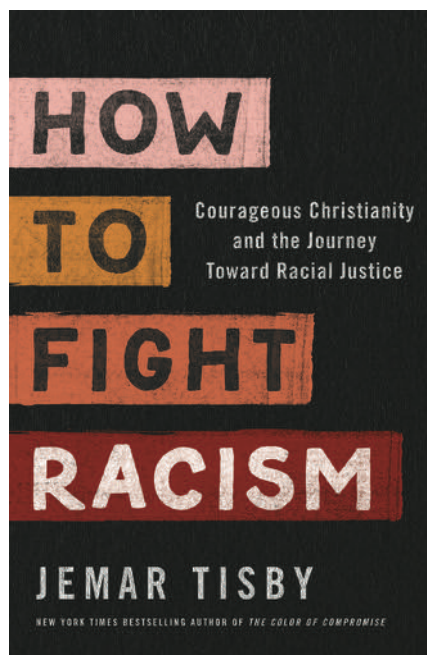
ACTION

“If you want to move from idea to action, you have to make a plan,” said Tisby, adding his own confession. “I realized I’d never sat down and made a monthly or quarterly racial justice action plan.”

Whether doing so as individuals, families or larger groups, Tisby encourages Christians who are concerned about racial justice to set goals, take steps toward those goals, and evaluate the results.

The “ARC of Racial Justice” — described in *How To Fight Racism* — provides a good framework, he added. “That will help us begin to execute our plans.”

ARC is an acronym for awareness, relationships and commitment. It is designed to counter the “array of tactics” that racism uses “to deceive, denigrate and dehumanize others.”



Awareness calls for understanding the racist strategies at play. Such insights, writes Tisby, call for “studying history, exploring your personal narrative and grasping what God says about the dignity of the human person.”

Relationships are how one moves from viewing as “problems” those who are really just people, he said, noting, “All racial justice is relational.”

Such relationships cannot be superficial, he notes. It takes more than the familiar and deflective boast that, “I have Black friends.”

Commitment is required for moving from concern to correction, from intent to impact, and from attitude to action. Concrete changes that require a lot of work are needed to “dismantle racist structures, laws and policies.”

PROGRESS

Tisby starts his book with optimism, but not naivety. He acknowledges that “time will tell” whether the recent widespread public reactions to acts of racial injustice will have a lasting impact.

Tisby believes “something is different this time.” Yet he warns readers to not just watch and see.

“What is clear is that racial progress does not occur apart from the sustained efforts of people who dedicate themselves

to fight racism in all its forms,” he writes.

“History demonstrates and hope requires the fundamental belief that when people of goodwill get together, they can find creative solutions to society’s most pressing problems.”

With that perspective and charge, Tisby jumps into a strategic approach to fighting racism. He sees no place for standing apart from the racial struggle — since “everyone is either fighting racism or supporting it, whether actively or passively.”

For those who “want to be a part of the solution,” he is glad to contribute some practical guidance.

The cost for such engagement is noted in the book’s subtitle: *Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice*.”

There are requirements, including the courage to stand against the rampant white Christian nationalism deep within American evangelicalism that refines Christianity as a self-serving political ideology apart from following Jesus.

One must put a foot on the road toward racial justice, he said, with an understanding that the journey can be long and challenging — and with a commitment to persevere.

The journey, Tisby notes, is not only a way to change society but also to bring about change in our own lives.

“As we begin to treat each other with more love and empathy, it will not only change the world around us; it will change *us*,” he writes. “As I have taken steps to promote racial justice, I have developed more endurance, discovered untapped wells of creativity, and experienced more joy than I ever expected.”

Whatever one’s race, age, experiences or starting point, Tisby invites all willing persons to join the march toward racial justice that is also a journey toward transformation. And his well-developed “How to ...” insights serve as a thoughtful and motivating guide.

How we respond — individually and en masse — will determine whether another opportunity is missed or, more courageously, “something is different this time.” **NFJ**

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JUST IMAGINE

Churches can move beyond previously assumed limits

BY BENNY MCCRACKEN
AND TONYA NICHOLSON

March 2020 was a “fork in the road” moment for First Baptist Church of West Yellowstone, Mont. As the dangers of COVID-19 were announced to the world, we had important decisions to make.

Pondering what this crisis meant for our lives, we realized it not only affected us socially but also spiritually. While never believing the church was a building, we had grown to anticipate gathering numerous times each week for worship, study and fellowship.

When realizing we could no longer do this safely, we wondered how to maintain the continuity of fellowship and worship. On the Sunday before the shelter-in-place order for Montana took effect at midnight, Tonya mentioned Zoom.

Many of us only knew that word to mean a type of camera lens or to move about quickly. But with an iPhone and an iPad, we went live the following Sunday.

We benefited from a free webinar sponsored by Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas and Fellowship Southwest, and some financial gifts from our church members.

As a result, our small congregation has shared the message of our Lord with an extended family from Alaska to Florida, California to South Carolina, and more recently Peru.

Adding Facebook Live to our outreach, we now welcome far more worshippers to the digital format than we have at the in-person service. This is especially true for us in the winter.

One Sunday while Yellowstone National Park was closed between seasons, we had 11 people in our worship service and ended the week with more than 500 views on the Facebook Live post.



First Baptist Church pastor Benny McCracken and lay leader Tonya Nicholson are among the year-round residents of West Yellowstone, Mont., who brave one of the coldest places in the continental U.S. Seasonally, however, tourists fill the town that is the most popular gateway to Yellowstone National Park. Contributed photo.

It has not been an easy journey. Our congregation cannot afford some of the higher end technology — and we began with a pastor who did not want to be a “TV preacher.”

But with training, financial gifts and some gentle reassurance that worship would not turn into a Jim Bakker or Jimmy Swaggart sideshow, we moved forward.

It is not our goal to become a digital megachurch. But we believe our fellowship is unique.

West Yellowstone is a resort town at the busiest entrance to Yellowstone National Park. Seasonally, we welcome guests from across the nation and around the world — at least in ordinary times.

Guests frequently tell us they experience a warm, welcoming and affirming fellowship where they feel free to express

themselves in worship. It is this refreshingly open invitation we strive to offer through the digital format as well.

We learned some important lessons while experimenting with a new approach to ministry. The most important one was not mastering the Zoom and Facebook technicalities.

Sure, we have struggled with these issues as well as with our local Internet provider. Occasionally we have technical issues, but are slowly improving the quality and reliability of the digital broadcast.

Rather, the most important challenge is how to create an inclusive worship environment in a digital space. It requires us to rethink both our theology and practice of worship. Questions often center on how to create fellowship in this new environment.

How can we directly involve digital

worshippers in the in-person service? How do we help them feel connected? How do we maintain the experience as truly worship, and not merely a program to be watched?

Another challenge is helping our local church family to see the need and the ministry opportunities this expression offers. Recently, when sharing comments we have received from digital worshippers about our service, and the number of views we are now getting, one member asked, “So who are these people we are talking about?”

This was an eye-opening moment, and we confessed we did not know who many of them are. That got us thinking about how to involve both our in-person and digital worshippers, so they might know each other and become more than a “view” — defined as a logged-in connection lasting more than three seconds.

So on a recent Thursday evening, we invited our in-person and digital family to come together for what we called a digital fellowship. Unfortunately, there was no potluck dinner!

But this gathering brought together people from across the country. We each introduced ourselves, shared about

our families, where we lived, our work/career and hobbies, and how we became connected with our church in West Yellowstone.

We concluded with a time of sharing concerns and prayer.

Several participants voiced appreciation for the experience, and said it was meaningful to get to know some of those who previously had been just faces on a screen. There was an overwhelming consensus to continue this fellowship on a regular basis.

One of the unexpected opportunities we discovered is the chance to engage individuals who have been spiritually abused by the church. Some have been turned off by the immoral and unethical behavior they have witnessed in church leaders. Others were pushed out and told a particular “sin” had disqualified them from church membership.

Others were put off by the demands of fundamentalist church leaders to believe, think, act and feel as these leaders told them they should. Their turn-off, however, was not to God and divine truths, but to arrogance and abuse.

The digital format provides an opportunity to counter this spiritual hubris with

the truth of God’s grace, love and acceptance. It is a safe space in which to explore, worship and praise God in one’s own way.

COVID-19 has called us to rethink how, when, and where we do worship — which has long meant gathering in one place to sing, pray, praise and fellowship. Whether it was under the stars, in a brush arbor, on the frontier, or under the paintings of Michelangelo in Notre Dame Cathedral, the emphasis has been on gathering together.

Our experience in West Yellowstone seems to affirm the contention that the church is in a transition. We are not suggesting physical gatherings will cease, but rather that the nature of “gathering together” is being transformed.

In a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship podcast last November, New York City pastor Susan Sparks said the church is in the process of moving from a physical presence with a digital footprint to a digital presence with a physical footprint.

It is a journey limited only by our imagination. **NFJ**

—Tonya Nicholson is a lay leader and Benny McCracken is pastor of First Baptist Church of West Yellowstone, Mont.

Good Faith Media welcomes summer interns

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Cally Chisholm and Isaiah Anthony are serving for the summer semester as Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Interns with Good Faith Media, which includes *Nurturing Faith Journal* among its varied offerings.

Chisholm is a graduate student at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tenn., concentrating on gender and diversity studies.

She has an undergraduate degree in mass communications, with a minor in speech, from Missouri Southern State University. There she was editor of the campus-focused media outlet, *The Chart*.

Other experiences include media work with Tennessee Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and University Heights Baptist Church in Springfield, Mo.

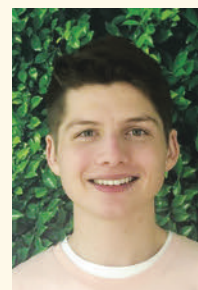
At ETSU, Cally is graduate assistant for equity and inclusion.

Anthony is a journalism student at Emerson College in Boston with minors in digital media and cultural studies, and creative writing.

Previously he served internships with Major League Lacrosse in Baltimore, Md., and *The Norman Transcript* news in Norman, Okla.

He also served as social media coordinator and film/audio technician for Grace Fellowship Norman.

“We are excited to have Cally and Isaiah join our team as summer interns,” said Mitch Randall, CEO of Good Faith Media. “The Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Internship provides an amazing opportunity for the next generation of writers and creators to discover the inner workings of a faith-based media company.” **NFJ**



Rethinking how we do church

BY LARRY HOVIS

I was fortunate to be raised in the church. As a child, when our family talked about “going to church” we thought of the activities that took place in the buildings occupied by Enderly Park Baptist Church on Tuckasee Road in Charlotte, N.C.

Sunday school was very important to my childhood experience. Sometimes we debated whether or not we would “stay for Big Church,” which meant the 11 a.m. worship service.

When most people hear the word, “church” they think of either a building or a program that takes place in that building for an hour (more or less) on Sunday mornings.

When I started my first full-time, post-seminary pastorate at the ripe old age of 24, I discovered that Sundays seemed to come around every other day. In those early years, I spent a big chunk of time every week preparing a sermon for the Sunday morning worship service.

A few years later, American churches started fighting the “worship wars.” Issues of style, mostly related to music, but other factors also, became the focus of much of American church life. Too many churches split, splintered or otherwise suffered over what happens in the building for about an hour a week.

For most churches, personnel costs are the largest area of the budget. Facilities come second (that’s assuming the church is not also engaged in a capital campaign, in which case facilities will top the list). The pastor’s compensation (salary and benefits) is often the single, largest line item in many church budgets.

So, connecting the dots, the church spends a large portion of its financial



resources to produce something that occupies this limited percentage of time, which takes place in an activity that is often controversial.

Is that what Jesus had in mind when he said, “Upon this rock I will build my church...” (Matt. 16:18)?

The global pandemic of 2020–2021 has taught us much about work, family life, economics, and much more. In the church, it has taught us that the building is not as important as we once thought it was, and the church is more than the worship service.

For me, the most meaningful aspect of my own church experience during the pandemic has not been the video worship services (though my church has done them well and I’m grateful for them) but my Zoom Sunday school class.

My class “met” weekly, although we were not in the same physical space. We supported one another and prayed together. We have done rigorous study and deep theological reflection on the intersection of the gospel and daily life, especially racial justice. In many ways, my virtual small group experience has been my church.

As we emerge from the pandemic, I don’t believe we should jettison all of our church buildings. And I definitely believe pastors and church staff should be well compensated. But I also believe we need to re-think how we do church.

Perhaps we need to change our language and reserve the word “church”

for the people of God, the body of Christ.

Perhaps we need to stop referring to the building as the church and reclaim an old Baptist term, “meetinghouse.”

Perhaps we need to see the meetinghouse less as a place to come to and more as a place to be sent from.

Perhaps we need to see the worship service less as the “main event” and more as a time to celebrate what God has done the previous week and to prepare us to engage in God’s mission in the coming week.

Perhaps we need to focus at least as much on the church scattered throughout the week as the church gathered on Sunday morning.

Perhaps we need to provide even more support for the church’s small group ministries, not only on Sundays, but also at other times.

Perhaps, in some instances, we need to see small, simple “congregations” without buildings as legitimate churches.

These ideas are not that radical but have ample support in the New Testament, within the early church and in church history.

I love the form of church that has been the focus of my life and work for the better part of six decades, a form of church characterized by professional clergy leading services in a beautiful building. And I pray that form of church will continue to thrive for a long time to come.

But I fear much of the world (especially the young) may never participate in that form of church, and I long to support new forms of church that are less dependent on large gatherings led by paid professionals and that meet in official spaces. And I pray these old and new forms might find ways to bless one another and work in partnership to reach the world “God so loves.” NFJ

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

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

Weeping over your city

BY BILL WILSON

Often churches ask me how to not only survive their current challenges, but also to thrive in the midst of them. Most are asking for quick fixes or technical solutions.

The illusion is that a new worship style or more lenient dress code or more attractive playground will do the trick. Many churches hope they can mimic the big box church on the edge of town that seems to be siphoning off people from other churches with a hot band, scintillating preacher or both.

Most are disappointed when I respond that there are no quick fixes to the challenges they face. They want to believe that a few tweaks and minor adjustments are all that is needed to regain the glory days of the past.

Instead, I push them to revisit Acts 2, and examine closely the blueprint for the church that verses 42-47 have provided for two millennia. There they will find the familiar five pillars of any healthy church: worship, community, discipleship, evangelism and care for the city.

Then I invite them to do a thoughtful self-examination of their church to see how they are engaging in each of these five essentials. I remind them that they do not get to choose their favorites, and that all are necessary for the kind of balance that a healthy church requires.

I nearly always find that churches have prioritized internal community, worship and some form of mild discipleship — while relegating outreach of any sort to a select few who “have that gift.”

What is nearly always true is that the church has gradually grown inwardly focused and lost its mission, vision and heart for those outside the church family.

That internal focus is a chief trait of a church struggling to survive in the 2020 decade. Ironically, the more their metrics trend downward, the more likely the church is to double down on its internal structures, policies, administrative processes and language of exclusion.

The church assumes a defensive posture and erects visible and invisible barriers that communicate clearly this is not a place for newcomers. Nor are they interested in the needs and issues that plague their city.

The vicious cycle accelerates and eventually the church dwindles to a few hearty souls who run the church into oblivion, wondering why all their efforts to revitalize have been for naught. Yet the solution to this gradual decline and death is found in Acts 2.

The energy and life that come from balancing an appropriate internal focus with a healthy focus on external opportunities is a powerful force. The Holy Spirit erupts and engages such a church in a way that breathes life into every nook and cranny of the building and the hearts of those who participate.

Jesus modeled the way he wants his church to look at their city or community. Matthew 9:36-37 tells us:

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers

are few.’”

Later, as he looked over Jerusalem (Luke 19), Jesus wept over the city as he contemplated their blindness to the gospel. We only know of two times when Jesus wept: once when his friend Lazarus died, and in this moment when he pondered the dying city before him.

When was the last time you wept over your city — not out of anger or bitterness, but with a level of compassion that broke your heart?

Thriving churches in the coming years will be those that weep over their city in compassion and that are then motivated to mobilize themselves en masse to make a difference in the name of Christ.

This can't be left to a few brave souls, or to those who engage in missions when it's convenient — or who believe loving those outside the church is a matter of “turkeys, toys and trips.”

The call is to know your city and embrace your city and give yourself to your city in love and in the name of Christ. We must uncross our arms, unclench our fists, and let go of our prized possessions if we are to find the abundant life Christ promised us.

What you will experience will be your own version of Pentecost, and you, too, may see many, many people come to faith in the one who loves them more than they can imagine.

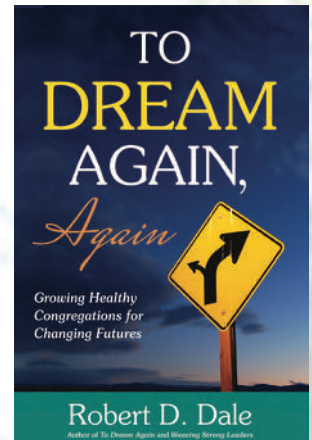
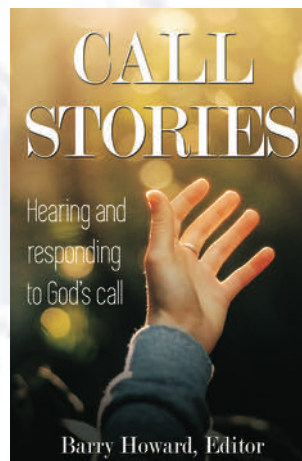
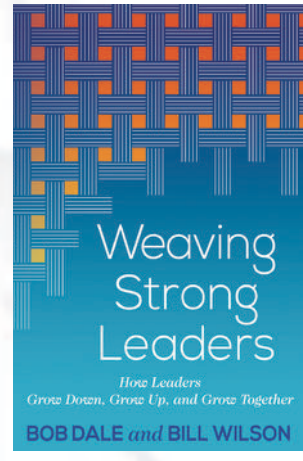
It is the way of Jesus, and it has been the way of dynamic and thriving churches for 2,000 years. **NFJ**

—Bill Wilson is founding director of the Center for Healthy Churches.



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GETTING PERSONAL

'Kill the Indian to save America'

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY MITCH RANDALL

After the turn of the 20th century, Muscogee Creek children Eloise Boudinot and her little sister, Ruby, were taken from their home. They had been born in Broken Arrow, Okla., located in what was previously identified as Indian Territory after the Trail of Tears in the 19th century.

The girls were relocated to the Chilocco Indian Agricultural Boarding School, more than 130 miles northwest of their family and friends. Chilocco was located 20 miles north of Ponca City near the Oklahoma-Kansas border.

There the girls were forced to trade the green hills of eastern Oklahoma for the flat prairie lands of north central Oklahoma.

Upon arriving at Chilocco, the girls were told to strip down for a thorough scrubbing. After the baths, they were taken into a room where their long black hair was cut.

When they left the room, they looked more like the strangers who had bathed them than their own parents back in Broken Arrow.

After the scrubbing and haircuts, the girls were not given back the indigenous clothes that accompanied them for all of their lives. Gone were the smooth fabrics of leather and the soft touch of feathers.

In their place, scratchy wool dresses, covering almost every inch of their bodies, donned their skinny little frames. Again, they were looking more and more like the strangers who spoke to them in an unfamiliar language.

The sisters fell asleep that night in a dark dormitory with other indigenous children from different tribes that spoke unfamiliar languages.

As they closed their eyes to discover



The ruins of the school and chapel of the Chilocco Indian Agricultural Boarding School.

their dreams, tears streamed down their cheeks from the fear of their new surroundings and their missing the friendliness of home.

The girls awoke the next morning to the busy sounds of other children preparing for breakfast and what many were calling "school." After the girls walked to the dining hall for breakfast, they were marched to schoolrooms where a stern white-faced woman greeted them outside.

The girls sheepishly smiled and said, "Hensci," the traditional greeting in Muscogee Creek. The stern-faced woman responded, "Good morning."

The teacher went on to utter many other words the girls did not understand. After the uncomprehending lecture, they headed inside the school.

Finding a seat in the classroom, they were approached by an older student who spoke Muscogee Creek.

She informed the girls:

"They do not like us using our language. They want us to use their language. They say it is better than ours. If we do not learn to use it, we get whipped when we are caught using the language of our ancestors."

The girls looked at each other, more frightened now than ever. Before their journey, they were assured that coming to Chilocco and learning the ways of the white man would be good for them. No one ever mentioned the possibility of whippings.

Over the next several years, the girls learned the ways of the white man. They adopted their hairstyles, wore their clothes, and spoke their language.

Every now and then, they would sneak down to the pond away from the campus to speak Muscogee Creek and recall stories of home. A few times, when caught speaking their native tongue, they were subjected to whippings just as the older student had promised.

However, the most grievous moments came on Sunday mornings —





Eloise Boudinot (back right) and her sister Ruby (center) attended the Chilocco Indian School.

which started much like the weekdays. Yet, instead of attending school after breakfast, the girls were marched to a small chapel where a man in a black robe met them.

The students gathered inside to hear about a man called Jesus who wanted them to be good Christians. From what the girls could figure out, being a good Christian meant obeying their teachers, learning their lessons, and following the ways of the white man.

However, when the stories of Jesus were told to the students, Eloise and Ruby thought this Jesus sounded more like their ancestors than the white man telling the story.

Yet, the girls just figured this was another white-riddle they needed to figure out.

The worst part of Sunday mornings was when the girls felt like running to the pond instead of attending church. Since church attendance was recorded, their teachers knew when they had skipped.

When the girls returned from their day at the pond, they were welcomed back to the dorms by the stern-faced woman holding a whip.

The girls finally aged out of Chilocco, and returned to Broken Arrow much different than when they left. They returned knowing the white man's ways, but never fully understanding them.

Eloise and Ruby grew up to have

children of their own, but both swore an oath never to send their children off to Chilocco.

Eloise ended up marrying a Muscogee Creek man by the name of Mitchell, who possessed a vivid imagination and humorous personality. He was a great baseball player, playing in the Indian leagues all around eastern Oklahoma.

The couple had a daughter whom they named Okema. She stayed with Eloise and Mitchell all of her life, never having to suffer the fate of missing family and being forced to conform.

How do I know so much about the story of Eloise and Ruby? Eloise was my great-grandmother and Ruby, my great-aunt.

I carry their story in my heart and soul, feeling the struggles of my ancestors and honoring them with my life. The evils and injustices of America's founding are heard through the stories of the indigenous peoples of North America and African slaves.

The Chilocco Indian Agricultural Boarding School was modeled after the Carlisle Indian School — an institution in Pennsylvania that had been founded by former U.S. Army officer Richard Pratt.

The Pratt Doctrine, as it is known, argued that to save the indigenous people, one must kill the Indian inside.

Therefore, schools such as Carlisle and Chilocco stripped indigenous children of

their cultural identities to be replaced with a European and Anglo-centric worldview.

Even more discouraging, the “killing” of the Indian was funded by the U.S government and carried out by Christian missionaries on the plains.

That Eloise and Ruby's children accepted Jesus as their Lord and joined the United Methodist Church late in life was a slight miracle. But as I stated before, they saw Jesus to be more like them than the missionaries who introduced them.

America has become a great nation, but we must never forget how the achievements of today came at the expense of others.

Indigenous people and African slaves forfeited their lands and lives under violent force in order for the American dream to emerge. Many properties where American industry thrives are located on stolen lands and have been built by slave labor.

As much as the ideas and practices of “killing the Indian to save the man” attempted to exterminate indigenous peoples, they failed to kill the spirits of Eloise and Ruby. And the spirits of these sisters, as well as their faith, now live on through me and my sons.

I am *NUMUKUTSU* (Buffalo), otherwise known as Mitch Randall. **NFJ**

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



Chilocco Indian Agricultural Boarding School cemetery.

Gospel-shaped freedom is constrained for the sake of others

By John R. Franke

Every summer on July 4, Americans celebrate not only the achievement of gaining Independence from Great Britain, but also the very idea of freedom. According to a common definition, “freedom is the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint.”

Many American Christians seem to equate this idea with Christian faith. Now to be sure, the gospel does bring freedom.

It liberates us from the ways of sin and death, and it frees us from many of the self-imposed restrictions of society — such as rules about particular religious practices, eating and drinking, and who it is proper to associate with or not.

As Paul writes in Gal. 5:1, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” This liberation brings with it the freedom to maintain the particularities of our familial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds even as we commit ourselves to following in the way of Jesus.

The embedded cultural and ethnic aspects of human life, and therefore all forms of Christian faith, lead missiologist Andrew Walls to conclude that no particular group of Christians “has therefore any right to impose in the name of Christ upon another group of Christians a set of assumptions about life determined by another time and place.”

For the Apostle Paul, in the ancient world, this meant especially that Jews and Gentiles could remain Jews and Gentiles, with neither group needing to adopt foreign ways of life to participate in the work of God. Nor should either group attempt to impose their own cultural assumptions on the other.

This means that the gospel of Jesus

Christ, and the individuals and communities that form around it, will always have a cultural tint and hue, even in the midst of the transformation to a new way of life.

A gospel-shaped commitment to cultural plurality and difference allows for a healthy freedom of expression that is important for faithful witness. However, one of the great dangers of the freedom engendered by the gospel is that it can easily become the basis for discord and hostility as individuals assert their freedom over against others.

Paul warns precisely about this danger in his letter to the churches in Galatia (5:13-15):

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”

This poses a challenge to the idea of freedom as we often conceive of it in our individualistic culture. Christian freedom is not a life without “hindrance or restraint.” Rather, gospel-shaped freedom is constrained for the sake of others.

Jesus announces a world where everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid. As sign, instrument and foretaste of this good news, the church is an intentional community where people from every ethnicity, background and social

position have equal standing before God and each other.

Unity is one of the hallmarks of this new community. Hence, Paul exhorts the church (Eph. 4:1b-3) to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

One of the key practices of this unity is the curtailment of individual freedom and preference for the needs and concerns of others, following the example of Jesus (Phil 2:3-8):

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who ... being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.”

While the American vision of freedom we celebrate on Independence Day, with its exultation of unfettered rights and individual autonomy, appears enticing, its aftermath tells a different story. It is one of festering bitterness, intractable division, and increasing hostility as we relentlessly seek our own ends, often at the expense of others.

Jesus calls on his disciples to demonstrate a different vision of freedom. How will we respond? **NFJ**

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



How do we talk about race?

By Starlette Thomas

Much like conversations about religion and politics, talking about race is often met with awkward silence or polite anger. Finding middle ground is nearly impossible.

With police officers and protestors drawing the line on America's streets after actual and suspected cases of police brutality, our belief in race is not going away any time soon. Now a part of the 24-hour news cycle, the subject cannot be avoided.

Though its letters are few in number, “race” is everywhere because we have made it a part of everything. Ubiquitous, race is even internalized, evident in personal biases and beliefs.

Far from being color blind, race gets in front of our eyes and informs the way we see ourselves and others. Consequently, we cannot simply put race behind us despite the desire for a post-racial America.

It is just not that easy. Christians will need to work toward a new vision that resembles God's “kin-dom” coming, the one many of us pray for on Communion Sundays. This is quite fitting as we are called Christ's body and we are all members (1 Cor. 12:27).

How then did we get to be divided and come to believe some parts, some people, didn't fit? We've got to take a closer, harder, longer look at this.

Looking away is not an option — though we often choose who and what “not to see” — because a younger generation is looking. And, to them, it looks like hypocrisy.

We Christians say we are different — that we are countercultural. Yet most North American Christians have not proven that to be.

Jemar Tisby names it in *The Color of Compromise*, writing: “Historically speak-

ing, when faced with the choice between racism and equality, the American church has tended to practice a complicit Christianity rather than a courageous one. They chose comfort over constructive conflict and in so doing created and maintained a status quo of injustice.”

By racializing everyone, in heaven and on earth, even the Divine gets colored in — painted with a really long brush and categorized as either “one of us” or “one of them.”

Race — the sociopolitically constructed system of body hierarchy that supports and empowers the practice of racism — is not often discussed at Wednesday night Bible studies.

Though the Bible has been used to endorse American slavery and its progeny, and despite the focus on body image, we do not see this disconnect between race's stereotypes and our being made in the *imago Dei* (image of God).

But it is not just a lens, but a law, according to Robert Knox who wrote in *The Races of Man* in 1850 that race was “the physiological laws which regulate the destinies of mankind and of race” and these “laws” still govern our bodies today.

However, there is no mention of them in Exodus, Leviticus or Deuteronomy — so we've got to explain why we keep them.

No, we cannot buy a couple of books and call ourselves anti-racists. Instead, we need to take it a step further, choosing to become anti-race or better said, raceless.

Does that seem like a giant leap? Is it too much too soon? The idea is not new or unfounded, but found in literary texts and

supported by biblical passages.

Authors such as Nella Larsen wrote about it in *Passing* and James Weldon Johnson declared it outright in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

Raceless: In Search of Family, Identity and the Truth About Where I Belong is the title of Georgina Lawton's book just published in February 2021. This new volume unknowingly acknowledges Paul's old invitation to church members at Galatia and Colossae, saying to the former:

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27-28).

How then is the church mostly known for and by its divisions along the lines of gender, nationality and social status?

Much of the church in North America remains unable and/or unwilling to have informed discussions about what race means as disciples of Jesus, as a body of believers. We claim that Jesus came to save souls but then behave as though he came to save skin and our skin specifically.

The church in North America is too old to feign ignorance and too battle-scarred to pretend it's afraid. Christians have baptized race, embodied it, made it a practice of discipleship, and segregated our churches along the “color lines” of it.

While there are no easy answers, conversations about race begin with putting race in its place, which is not in front of Jesus and, consequently, behind you if you're following him closely. That's how we talk about race. [NFJ](#)

—Starlette Thomas is the director of the *Raceless Gospel Initiative*.



Excusing ourselves

By Brett Younger

You are on the phone and don't want to be on the phone, but you don't have a good reason to get off:

"Hey, I'm going to have to let you go. My phone's about to die."

"Somebody else is calling."

"The buzzer on the dryer just went off."

"I'm driving through a tunnel."

"Uh, can you hear me?"

For the last year, introverts have not had to come up with excuses to get out of parties, but let's hope we are using these again soon:

"I have so much work to get done."

"I just remembered I have other plans."

"There's no one to watch my cat and she's going through some stuff."

"I left my clothes at the laundromat."

"There's a raccoon in my yard. I'm not going outside."

We used to need excuses to miss work:

"My child isn't feeling so great. She went to school, but still..."

"I'm taking a mental health day."

"My hair is long, and I'm still afraid to get it cut."

"I was up late bingeing *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Do you know about this show?"

"My dog swallowed my car keys, so I have to wait for them."

We have excuses not to share our money:

"We don't know what the market is going to do, but I think I'm too late for Game Stop."

"We have to keep saving for the kids' education."

"We're worried about having enough to keep ourselves entertained."

"We've never found just the right charity."



"We're waiting until we have a little more."

We have excuses not to care for those who need our help:

"I don't have time right now."

"My life is already complicated."

"People make me crazy."

"I feel more comfortable with people I know."

"I have enough to do just getting my own work done."

We have excuses for why we do not feed the hungry, care for the elderly, listen to the lonely, make the lives of children better, and tell the truth. We have excuses for every good thing that is easier to skip.

David Sedaris, who is usually funny, but not in this story, hears his friend Pat say:

"Life is a four-burner stove. One burner represents your family, one is your friends, the third is your health, and the fourth is your work. In order to be successful, you have to cut off one of your burners. In order to be really successful, you have to cut off two. I cut off family, then I switched

off health."

David says, "I cut off my friends."

David's partner Hugh says, "I gave up my work."

This would be a less horrible story if someone then said: "What's wrong with you people? You want an excuse for everything. If you're a lousy friend, a lousy partner, or a lousy employee it is your fault. You can't use your responsibilities to avoid your responsibilities. We can love our neighbors as ourselves. We can love others more than we love our excuses."

Habeeb Akande writes, "Excuses are the nails used to build a house of failure."

We get so used to our excuses that we do not notice what we are building, or what we are failing to build. If we want the best life, we need to think about our excuses. We may find it easy to excuse ourselves, but it is not as much fun. The ones who stop making excuses end up with the best lives.

What if we were afraid of disappointing God with our excuses? What if we were afraid of leaving good unattempted? What if we were afraid of missing out?

God is too great and the world too big for us to focus on our excuses. What if we prayed...

"God, if you want me to feed the hungry, give me money to share."

"God, if you want me to fight for the outcast, give me a voice to speak."

"God, if you want me to understand, give me the ability to learn."

"God, if you want me to be a friend, give me a stranger."

"God, if you want me to live with faith, give me the courage to let go of my excuses." *NFJ*

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



The Bible Lessons that anchor the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies are written by Tony Cartledge in a scholarly, yet applicable, style from the wide range of Christian scriptures.

A graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div) and Duke University (Ph.D.), and with years of experience as a pastor, writer, and professor at Campbell University, he provides deep insight for Christian living without “dumbing down” the richness of the biblical texts for honest learners.

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Teaching resources to support these weekly lessons available at teachers.nurturingfaith.net. Use the new password (faith) beginning July 1 to access Tony's video overview, Digging Deeper and Hardest Question, along with lesson plans for adults and youth.



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.

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IN THIS ISSUE

A Long Look Back

July 4, 2021

2 Samuel 5:1-10

A Rising Star

July 11, 2021

2 Samuel 6:1-23

A Tense Celebration

July 18, 2021

2 Samuel 7:1-16

An Eternal Promise

July 25, 2021

2 Samuel 11:1-27

A Tragic Error

Aug. 1, 2021

2 Samuel 11:26–12:15

A Painful Lesson

Aug. 8, 2021

2 Samuel 18:1-33

A Mournful Monarch

Aug. 15, 2021

1 Kings 2:1-12, 3:3-14

A Wise Request

Aug. 22, 2021

1 Kings 8:1-61

A Solemn Dedication

Troublesome Teachings

Aug. 29, 2021

Mark 7:1-23

Something Rotten

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Troublesome Teachings

Sept. 5, 2021

Mark 7:24-37

Something Surprising

Sept. 12, 2021

Mark 8:27-38

Something Confusing

Sept. 19, 2021

Mark 9:30-37

Something Different

Sept. 26, 2021

Mark 9:38-50

Something Serious

From Suffering to Praise

Oct. 3, 2021

Job 1:1–2:10

When Trouble Comes

Oct. 10, 2021

Job 23:1-17

When God Hides

Oct. 17, 2021

Job 38:1-7, 34-41

When God Roars

Oct. 24, 2021

Job 42:1-7

When God Judges

Oct. 31, 2021

Psalm 146

When God Liberates

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 4, 2021

2 Samuel 5:1-10

A Rising Star

Are you goal oriented? Some people cruise through life without thinking far beyond the present, but others prefer to set goals and then work toward them. Their aims might be as general as a happy marriage and a fulfilling job, or as specific as owning one's own company, earning a certain income, traveling to every continent, or so forth.

After reaching a goal, it's better to set new objectives than to rest on one's laurels. Otherwise, things have a tendency to go downhill.

The story in 2 Samuel 5 brings us to the moment when David attained a goal that he'd been living into for some time. Samuel had promised years before that David would become king over Israel, and today's text marks his crowning moment. Fortunately, David recognized that he hadn't reached the end of the road: there was still much work to do. 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

David, king of Judah

We can't appreciate the significance of 2 Samuel 5 without a brief review of what had transpired since Saul's death and David's plaintive elegy in 2 Samuel 1, last week's text. David had been busy.

So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel. (2 Sam. 5:3)

His first move was to seek God's guidance: Should he remain in Ziklag as a Philistine vassal, or "go up into any of the cities of Judah"?

We understand "go up" to mean "go up and take charge." In an unstated fashion — probably through the priest Abiathar casting lots to determine "either/or" answers — Yahweh responded affirmatively and pointed to Hebron. David left Ziklag and the Philistines then, moving his wives and his private army to the Hebron area. Soon the elders of Judah anointed David to be king over Judah (2:1-4).

Note that this reflects a time of two kingdoms. David ruled the large southern tribe of Judah, while Saul's son Ishbaal (pejoratively called "Ishbosheth," or "man of shame") was officially king over Israel. 🇺🇸

Ishbaal's short tenure as king seems to have been more rump than reality, however. He lived in the relatively remote town of Mahanaim, on the eastern side of the Jordan, and is portrayed as an ineffective ruler. Abner, the military commander, was apparently the power behind the throne.

David understood the importance of public relations, so he began reaching out to Saul's former supporters in the north. When he heard that men from the city of Jabesh Gilead had risked their lives to recover the bodies of Saul and his sons from public

display on the walls of Beth-shean, he sent a message of congratulations and promised loyalty to them (2:5-7).

David personally stayed in the background during a period of civil war between the northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms. While his nephew Joab handled military matters (2:12-32), David ruled Judah from Hebron. The narrator notes that David took additional wives and sired sons by six of them — his way of emphasizing that "the house of David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker" (3:5).

David found himself in a testy spot, however, when Abner turned against the northern king Ishbaal. Abner sent a message to David, offering to persuade Israel's tribal leaders to switch their loyalty. David met with Abner and agreed to the arrangement, then sent him away in peace. Unfortunately, Joab wrecked the plan by murdering Abner at the city gate, gaining vengeance for Abner's earlier killing of Joab's brother Asahel (3:6-30).

Once again, David had to do damage control. He publicly cursed Joab for his actions while mourning openly for Abner, burying him with honor, and sending heralds to proclaim a brief elegy lamenting his death (3:31-39).

This was followed by yet another conundrum when two Benjamite renegades assassinated Ishbaal and brought his head to David, thinking to receive a reward. Intent on sending a strong signal that he did not approve of the murder, David ordered his guards to execute the two men, cut off their hands and feet, then hang their bodies beside the pool at Hebron (4:5-12). David buried Ishbaal's head with due

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honor, demonstrating that he was not complicit in Ishbaal's death.

David, king of all Israel (5:1-5)

This sets the stage for chapter 5, in which "all the tribes of Israel" sent representatives to David in Hebron, offering to bring the northern tribes into his kingdom. 📖

Downplaying past differences, they spoke to David as "your bone and flesh" (v. 1), just as we might speak of relatives as "our own flesh and blood." In asking David to accept the crown of a united nation, the tribal leaders fondly recalled the days before Saul turned against David, when "it was you who led out Israel and brought it in" (v. 2a).

Leading the army was the purpose for which Israel's elders had originally sought a king (1 Sam. 8:19-20).

The leaders shifted to a more spiritual appeal in the latter part of v. 2, stating that "The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel." 📖 This appears to be a reference to David's anointing in 1 Samuel 16, but the divine promise they cite does not appear in scripture. Samuel had originally anointed David in relative secret. Had that become known, or could the tradition have arisen from David's public anointing as king over Judah?

It seems obvious that the author has woven multiple sources together, for v. 3 begins a second and shorter version of the same story, saying the "elders of Israel" came to David, who "made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD," after which they anointed him as king over Israel as well as Judah.

Little is said about the coronation. Since the covenant was made "before the LORD," we may guess that a priest would have been involved and prayers

would have been offered. The act would certainly have been considered a sacred event.

Although David is center stage, his activity in this story is relatively muted. The narrator has carefully constructed the account to establish that David was not driven by ego or a hunger for power, but had been chosen by God and invited to serve by Israel's elders.

The end result was the same: David had become the popular and powerful ruler of all the tribes, the first king of a truly united Israel, destined to rule for 40 years. 📖

David, king in Jerusalem (5:6-10)

As king over all the tribes, David had decisions to make and things to do. He knew that Hebron was too far south to serve as an effective capital for the entire nation, but if he moved to a city in the north it might alienate his southern supporters.

David found the solution in the city of Jerusalem, a Jebusite enclave that had not been conquered by the Israelites (Josh. 15:63, Judg. 1:21). The city was conveniently located near the border between Judah and Israel, but not allied or identified with either. Recognizing its strategic value, David led his private army to conquer Jerusalem and declared the city to be the personal property of the king, an autonomous seat of government not beholden to or belonging to either Israel or Judah. 📖

The account of how David's men conquered the fortified city, located atop a steeply sloped hill, is extremely difficult to translate (vv. 6-9). If the reading of *tsinnor* as "water shaft" is correct, it appears that Joab led a group of fighters through an underground passage between the Gihon spring and a spot inside the city walls, allowing them to surprise the Jebusites and open

the city gates from the inside. 📖

Having captured Jerusalem with his personal army, the new king named it "the City of David," indicating its independence from tribal loyalties. An archaeological site on the Hill of Ophel, where the original city was located, bears that name to this day.

"Good for David," we might think, "but so what?"

Since we are unlikely to become king or queen of anything, does this text have anything to say in our situation?

A careful look reveals helpful lessons, as we see a story that began in conflict move toward resolution and peaceful cooperation when people make wise decisions.

The northern tribes' appeal to David points to the importance of overcoming past grievances and working together for mutual benefit. David and the elders of Israel were willing to put past hostility behind them.

To make it work, David also had to persuade his southern supporters to embrace the new alliance.

All of us have observed or been involved in disagreements that led to feelings of enmity within a family, a church, a community, or a country. To move forward in any of these settings, we must get past suspicious polarization to remember that we live in relationship: we are "bone and flesh," even if not related by blood.

The opportunity for cooperation is especially apparent in times of leadership transition, whether in the context of church or various levels of government. We may or may not believe our new leaders have been chosen by God, but we can do our best to work together for the good of all.

Whether in the church, the family, the workplace, or the country, choosing to cooperate and support each other is key to a promising future. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 11, 2021

2 Samuel 6:1-23

A Tense Celebration

Have you ever experienced notable tension in worship? Perhaps it was the first time someone played a guitar or drumset in the sanctuary. It may have been the introduction of liturgical dance, video clips during the sermon, or an unfamiliar liturgy.

Changes in our familiar worship routine can be double-edged: they may set hearts afire — or set teeth on edge.

Today's text relates how King David led a worship celebration in which he "danced before the LORD with all his might," and at least one person was highly offended. ↓

How any of us would have reacted to David's jubilant performance probably depends on the style of worship to which we are accustomed. Some of us are flexible and open to different expressions of worship, while others look askance at alternative styles.

When you read today's text, do you think your response would be more like David's or Michal's?

An aborted attempt ... (6:1-11)

The materials in 2 Samuel 6, along with 1 Samuel 4:1–7:1, are generally attributed to an early composition known as "The Ark Narrative," and it's helpful to

So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. (2 Sam. 6:15)

remember the first part. The tragicomic story of 1 Samuel 4:1–7:1 recounts how Eli's sons carried the Ark from the Shiloh sanctuary into battle against the Philistines. The Ark was captured and taken to a series of Philistine cities, where Yahweh wrought such havoc that the Philistine rulers sent it back to Israel on an unmanned cart drawn by two nursing cows and accompanied by golden offerings. ↓

When the Ark arrived in Beth Shemesh, the local Israelites rejoiced greatly until the "sons of Jeconiah" showed disrespect to the Ark, causing Yahweh's anger to break out. Many died. The Israelites came to fear their own holy symbol and exiled it to the hilltop town of Kiriath-Jearim. ↓

For 20 years the Ark remained out of sight while "all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord" (1 Sam. 7:2).

This account provides background for understanding today's text. Israel had been in religious disarray, lacking a central shrine and fearful of the primary symbol of God's presence with them. David, in his new role as king of all the tribes, intended to change that.

David would have had both religious and political motives in bringing the Ark to Jerusalem. Having fashioned "the city of David" as Israel's political center, he set out to make it the religious heart of the nation, too. Locating both temple and throne in Jerusalem could have the

effect of increased loyalty to both, strengthening the monarchy as well as the religious system. ↓

David understood both the power of public relations and the risk of dealing with holy things, so he led the expedition to recover the Ark, bringing with him a large honor guard as they traveled to Baale-Judah, an alternate name for Kiriath Jearim (vv. 1-2). ↓ Since the Ark had last traveled by cart, perhaps, David had a new cart constructed to transport the Ark, guided by the sons of Abinadab, who had been consecrated to care for it (v. 3-4).

In a joyful atmosphere of worship and praise, David "and all the house of Israel" demonstrated their respect for the Ark and their celebration of its presence by dancing before it on the 10-mile journey to Jerusalem, accompanied by an assortment of musical instruments (v. 5).

Despite David's careful preparations, tragedy struck. As the cart traversed a hilly and unlevel path on the outskirts of Jerusalem, it appeared poised to tip over. When the priest Uzzah reflexively put his hand on the Ark to steady it, he was struck dead on the spot because "the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah" (vv. 6-7; for more on this, see The Hardest Question in the online resources.)

Puzzled and angry, David called an immediate halt to the march, lest he bring trouble into the capital. He returned the Ark to quarantine, this time at the home of Obed-Edom, from the city of Gath (vv. 8-11). ↓

Uzzah's experience may lead us to wonder not only whether we have shown disrespect to the symbols of

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God's presence or misbehaved in church, but also why we haven't been struck down for doing so.

A successful return ... (6:12-15, 17-19)

David was sorely disappointed with the outcome of his first attempt at bringing the Ark to Jerusalem, but Yahweh's anger did not last. Three months later, word came to David that Obed-Edom had experienced nothing but good fortune during the time he hosted the Ark. Believing the curse to be spent, David decided to try again.

On his second attempt at bringing the Ark into the city, David took extra care to avoid any offense. The cart had proven disastrous, but since the Ark was reportedly equipped with gold-plated poles for carrying, David had the Ark carried into the city on the shoulders of men specially chosen and consecrated for the task (v. 12). ⤵

As an additional gesture of respect, the procession had not gone more than six paces before David stopped to offer sacrifices. Perhaps he saw the successful six steps as a sign that Yahweh had given permission for the Ark to proceed to Jerusalem; thus the sacrifices expressed both relief and gratitude (v. 13).

In the first attempt, "David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might" (6:5). During the second effort, according to the narrator, all Israel joined in shouting together with trumpets, while David alone "danced before the LORD with all his might." Since he was wearing only a linen ephod, the equivalent of an undershirt, David revealed an exuberant side of himself that was not typically on display (vv. 14-15).

David's scanty clothing is made more sedate in the Chronicler's version, where the short linen ephod becomes a fine linen robe (1 Chron.

15:27). In both versions, however, the combination of David's dress and David's dance caused great offense to David's wife Michal (2 Sam. 6:16, 1 Chron. 15:29).

After all of the preceding excitement, the arrival of the Ark was anticlimactic (v. 17). The Levites brought the Ark into the tent David had ordered to be set up, and there it rested.

To celebrate, sacrifices were offered to God, with David himself distributing portions of bread, meat, and raisin cakes to all who were in attendance. Is it any wonder that the people loved the new king?

Note the narrator's insistence that David assumed the high priestly role of offering the sacrifices and blessing the people. David had a priest at hand in Abiathar, but apparently wanted to be known as a king who bridged the political and religious worlds. In time, Israel's king was thought to become "adopted" as a son by Yahweh (Ps. 2:7). Whether this gave David a recognized right to undertake priestly functions — or whether there was simply no one with sufficient authority to deny him — remains a matter of speculation.

An angry wife ... (6:16, 20-23)

David's triumphal day must have soured considerably when he returned to the palace, where he was confronted by Michal, the daughter of Saul who had been his first wife, then taken from him, and later forced to return. ⤵

We know little about David's relationship with Michal after her return except for this episode, in which she is portrayed as a bitter woman intent on spoiling David's party. Her language dripped with sarcasm: "How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly

uncover himself!" (v. 20).

Had Michal watched David's celebratory dance from the window because she pointedly refused to attend the ceremony in person? The narrator doesn't say, but implies that Michal, representing Saul's house, had made one last attempt to harm David's reputation. David rejected her criticism and insisted that his high-spirited dance had been appropriate (vv. 21-22).

There is no question that the writer thought Michal's response to be harsh, unjustified, and worthy of punishment. A simple historical note spells out her penalty: "And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death" (v. 23).

This note echoes earlier passages that emphasized David's virility, pointing out that "the house of David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker" (3:1-5, compare 5:13-16). Saul's house was dying out, and the absence of children born to Michal and David contributed to its decline. ⤵

Today we are not concerned with David's house, nor does the Ark exist. We do, however, have services of worship, and much to be thankful for. Can David's worshipful dance "with all of his might" suggest anything about the effort we should put into worship?

Our worship is always influenced by our culture. In many ethnic churches, shouting and dancing are regular components of worship. Other churches are so formal that even smiles seem out of place.

Today's text suggests that meaningful worship should include opportunities for both joyful exuberance and earnest penitence — a service in which congregants are not passive observers, but active participants.

In what ways can we join David in worshipping "with all our might"? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 18, 2021

2 Samuel 7:1-16

An Eternal Promise

Have you ever wondered where the oft-described New Testament belief in a promised son of David had its roots? Isaiah spoke of a new shoot from the stump of Jesse (David's father, Isa. 11:1, 10), and Jeremiah spoke of a "righteous Branch" to rise up and fulfill God's covenant with David (Jer. 23:5, 33:15-22).

We find that covenant in 2 Samuel 7, a promise that would ultimately be fulfilled with the coming of Christ. This text is our primary key to understanding the relationship between Israel's prophetic hopes, messianic expectations, and an amazingly unexpected act of fulfillment. 📖

A thoughtful king ... (7:1-3)

Imagine what it would be like to sit where King David sat after becoming established in Jerusalem. For the first time in a long while, David had time to think and plan ahead. From the day God had called him from the sheep, through his time serving Saul, and on the long road to kingship after Saul's death, David had precious little time to think about anything beyond daily survival and the next step. 📖

A day came, however, when things had calmed down, according to the

Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. (2 Sam. 7:16)

narrator: "the king was settled in his palace and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him" (v. 1).

Finally, David had time for some forward thinking, and as he sat ruminating in his handsome new palace with paneled walls, he was overwhelmed by a single thought: "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the Ark of God stays in a tent" (v. 2). 📖

David recognized the incongruity of enjoying his fine house while the Ark of the Covenant, where Yahweh was thought to dwell above the cherubim, remained in a curtained enclosure.

The story often depicts David as seeking God's will and trusting God for victory. Like other kings of the ancient world, he wanted to show devotion by building a temple to the god he believed had brought him to the throne. 📖

David would have appreciated the political advantages of a grand temple that would bring more prestige to his capital city, but he appears motivated by a genuine sense of respect for God. It didn't seem right that he should live in a fine cedar house while Yahweh lived in a portable tent. 📖

Perhaps David thought such a project would require divine endorsement, so he took his plans to the prophet Nathan. This is Nathan's first appearance in the story, though he apparently had a close relationship with David. Initially, Nathan agreed with David's

plan, encouraging him to do whatever he had in mind, "for the LORD is with you" (v. 3).

An awesome God (7:4-11a)

That night, however, Nathan could not sleep. David had been given rest, but Nathan had not. He learned that a prophet can speak too soon. In a vision of the night, God directed Nathan to tell David that the LORD didn't need a house.

Some may see Yahweh's question, "Are you the one to build me a house to live in?" (v. 5), as a reference to the claim in 1 Chron. 22:6-11 that God wanted Solomon to build the temple rather than David. The main point in 2 Samuel 7, however, is that Yahweh didn't need a house at all.

"I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day," God told Nathan to say, "but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle" (v. 6). In other words, Yahweh had never asked for a house (v. 7). Perhaps we are to surmise that God did not want people to think that the Divine could be boxed in or limited to a physical structure with walls.

Careful readers may note an inconsistency here. God's question "Did I ever live in a house before?" implies that the Ark of the Covenant, identified with God's presence, had always remained in a tent. There was a period, however, when the Ark reportedly rested in a structure at Shiloh described both as a tent and as a temple. 📖 Perhaps that was considered as a temporary stopover, like the 20 years in Abinadab's house in Kiriath Jearim,

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or the three months in Obed Edom's house just before arriving in Jerusalem. Or, perhaps God was pointing out that where the Ark of the Covenant dwells and where God dwells are not the same.

In any case, God's message to David was "Thanks, but no thanks. I don't need a house." Remembering what God had done for David was more important than memorializing it in a house, so Nathan was instructed to remind David of how God had taken him from the pasture to the palace, giving him victory over all his enemies (vv. 8-9a).

And, God had still more to give, promising to make for David "a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth" (v. 9b), and to establish a place for Israel, giving David rest from all his enemies (vv. 10-11a).

An amazing promise (7:11b-16)

Could anything be better than God's promise to make David one of "the great ones of the earth" and to establish his reign without fear of enemies?

Yes, God had yet one more pledge to make: "Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house" (v. 11b). Yahweh promised to raise up one of David's sons and establish "the throne of his kingdom forever" (v. 13). David's son would build the house for Yahweh, and his relationship with God would be like father and son (v. 14a).

The story turns on a powerful play on words, which we could put this way: "I don't need you to build me a house, David: I will build *you* a house." David wanted to build for God a house of wood and stone and mortar. God wanted to build for David a house of security in which his descendants would rule Israel forever. David wanted to build God a temple.

God wanted to build David a dynasty.

The amazing promise that David's descendants would rule forever did not give them a free pass to do whatever they liked. The promise included an important qualification regarding David's successor: "When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings, but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you" (vv. 14b-15).

With this caveat, the author never backed completely away from the belief that Israel's fortunes would rise or fall with obedience or rebellion, while asserting that God would never completely give up on David's descendants: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (v. 16).

Can you see the significance of the moment? What began as an act of personal piety and political power was transformed into a promise of divine and unconditional grace. In this, Nathan's dynastic oracle in 2 Samuel 7 can be seen as the turning point of Jewish and Christian history.

This story offers an interpretive bridge between the Old and New Testaments. Though God often showed grace, the narrator understood God's covenant with Israel to be a conditional relationship in which God was always faithful, but Israel's blessings were dependent on the people's obedience to God. The Israelites, however, were no more inclined to fidelity than we are. From Joshua through 2 Kings, the same story is told time and again, with different characters and circumstances. When Israel served faithfully, God's blessings were abundant. When Israel turned away, so did God. Although Yahweh was persistently depicted as gracious, the relationship turned on

the word "if."

With 2 Samuel 7, however, the element of grace comes to the fore. God made a promise to David that was not conditioned entirely by his obedience or the obedience of his children. Rather, it was an unconditional promise of undeserved grace. Yahweh *would* bless David's house and establish his dynasty. If David's descendants proved disobedient, God would allow them to experience punishment, but God's steadfast covenant love would never be withdrawn: the operative conjunction changed from "if" to "nevertheless."

The earthly kingdom of David ceased when Judah fell to the Babylonians in the early sixth century BCE, but the promise was not forgotten. Through the years of the Babylonian exile, the Persian period, and Roman rule, faithful Jews continued to look for a day when a son of David would arise to lead Israel once again.

Many Jews continue to long for such a messiah, but Christians believe that Jesus — carefully portrayed as a descendant of David — became the ultimate fulfillment of the promise. There was a twist, though: Instead of becoming an earthly ruler over Israel, Jesus came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God into which all are invited.

It is this new covenant that calls us into relationship with God. And, as much as we love our church buildings, we don't honor God primarily by building more houses, but by the way we live. God invites us to participate in an eternal house, the Kingdom of God.

David responded to God's promise with an impassioned prayer of praise (2 Sam. 7:18-29). How will we respond to the awesome, amazing grace of God? Are we still trying to build a house of good works or public acclaim, or will we embrace life in the house of grace and promise that God has built for us?

NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

July 25, 2021

2 Samuel 11:1-27

A Tragic Error

Optimists among us may hold to the belief that life can get better and better. Pessimists are more inclined to expect the worst. Reality is more situational. Before rockets were built that could escape the earth's gravity, it was a truism that "what goes up must come down." That's no longer the case: we've seen spacecraft escape not just earth's orbit, but even the solar system.

On a human level, it's also possible for people to ascend to prominence and continue to live exemplary lives: people such as Mother Teresa or Jimmy Carter come to mind.

The ideal is to maintain a steady trajectory. Too often, however, human foibles bring us crashing down.

We have no clearer example of that than the story of how Israel's beloved King David gave in to selfish desires, metaphorically falling on his own sword. The one enemy David could not defeat was himself. ↓

David and Bathsheba (vv. 1-6)

In the ancient Near East, "the spring of the year" marked the end of the rainy season and the harvest of winter grains. Most people lived off the land, and once spring planting was done, farmers

It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. (2 Sam. 11:2)

had time on their hands and seasonably dry weather suitable for outdoor living. Thus, spring was the time when kings could call out the militia and fight their wars (v. 1). ↓

The notable thing about this particular spring is that David did not go out to lead his troops, as he had been accustomed to doing. No longer acting as the king Israel had requested to "go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Sam. 8:20), David sent Joab to do the job of leading "his officers and all Israel." ↓

The statement "But David remained in Jerusalem" is as dramatic as it is incriminating.

The narrator's note that David was "on his couch" in the late afternoon implies that he had left the work of state to others. Flat-roofed patios with latticed walls were a nice place to catch the afternoon breeze. David's rooftop retreat, no doubt, would have been an appealing spot for an afternoon nap.

The king's house would presumably have been the tallest building around, so the rooftop could have afforded David a clear view into the open courtyards of any nearby homes. The royal residence would have been atop the Hill of Ophel, which still overlooks houses built on the steep slopes of the narrow Kidron Valley. Typical Israelite homes were rectangular, with rooms for sleeping, eating, and storage surrounding an open courtyard

used for cooking, bathing, and other activities.

So it was that David happened to spy Bathsheba as she went about a ritual bath marking the end of her menstrual cycle. ↓ ↓ The woman was "very beautiful" (v. 2, literally, "of exceedingly good appearance"), according to the text. David sent someone to learn the woman's identity and discovered that she was the daughter of Eliam and the wife of a man named Uriah, known as a Hittite (v. 3). ↓

Both Eliam son of Ahithophel the Gilonite and Uriah the Hittite are listed among David's most renowned soldiers, known as "the Thirty." This may or may not be the same Eliam, but Uriah's presence is unmistakable. On the list of heroes in 2 Sam 23:34-39, Uriah is named last, probably for emphasis.

We are thus reminded that David's liaison with Bathsheba involved the wife of a man who had risked his life on David's behalf.

The narrator describes David's indecorous conduct in the space of one short statement built on four active verbs, literally: "David *sent* messengers and they *took* her and she *came* to him and he *lay* with her" (v. 4). All else is left to the imagination.

Short encounters can have long results. The parenthetical note that Bathsheba had been purifying herself after her menstrual cycle (cf. Lev. 15:19-24) reminds the reader that she could not have been pregnant prior to David's summons, and was at a point in her cycle that was favorable to conception.

Bathsheba's later message that she had become pregnant (v. 5) comes as no real surprise, but how would David

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respond? As a very popular king, David probably could have survived politically even if he had taken Bathsheba from Uriah as a royal prerogative. David, however, knew the importance of his reputation as a righteous leader and did not want it sullied, so he quickly attempted to cover his misdeeds.

We may wonder if the matter could have possibly remained quiet, given that the messengers and other household members would have known David had called Bathsheba to be alone with him, but the narrator ignores such concerns.

David and Uriah (vv. 6-13)

David's cover-up would have been much easier if Uriah had been less pious and loyal. David called him from the front on the pretext of seeking news of the war (vv. 6-7). After hearing Uriah's report, David told him to go home and "wash his feet" (v. 8). This probably implied sexual activity, since "feet" was a Hebrew euphemism for genitals.

Uriah understood it that way, but refused to sleep with his wife, choosing instead to camp out on the steps of the palace (v. 9). When David tried again to send him home (v. 10), Uriah reminded him of the pledge Hebrew soldiers took to remain pure during a time of Holy War (v. 11; see Deut. 23:9-14, Josh. 3:5). Uriah's words must have stung, for David had once claimed to have been scrupulous about the same practice (1 Sam 20:6).

Uriah underscored his commitment with an oath: "As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing."

David told Uriah to stay another day and he made another attempt the next evening, inviting Uriah to a banquet where he "made him drunk" in hopes that an inebriated Uriah would lose his compunction about sleep-

ing with his wife, but the soldier was unwavering (v. 13). David could slay giants, but he could not defeat the will of unyielding Uriah.

David and Joab (vv. 14-27)

The third act in this sad drama reveals an ugly and desperate side of David, who determined that if Uriah would not cooperate, he would have to die. If Uriah was killed in action, David could quickly marry the widow and pretend that the child was born prematurely.

David wrote a message to Joab, instructing him to send Uriah to the fiercest part of the battle, then order the other soldiers pull back, leaving Uriah to be killed.

The reader can't miss the irony: David took advantage of Uriah's loyal obedience to entrust him with the sealed warrant for his own death (vv. 14-15).

Joab did not want his other troops to know that he had willingly betrayed one of his most faithful soldiers, so he adapted David's instructions. Joab sent Uriah's entire unit to a spot near the wall where fighting was so fierce that Uriah would surely be killed sooner or later (vv. 16-17). To maintain the soldiers' trust, Joab sacrificed other soldiers along with Uriah.

Joab had to report the losses to David, but he designed his report so that if David questioned the poor strategy, his messenger would respond: "Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead, too" (vv. 18-21). Joab knew this would cool any intemperate response over the needless losses in fighting near the wall (one Greek version says there were 18 dead).

David got the thinly veiled message and told Joab not to worry, blaming Uriah's loss on the arbitrariness of battle, in which "the sword devours now one and now another" (v. 25).

The narrator draws an artful contrast in vv. 25 and 27 that is unfortunately lost in nearly all of our English translations. "Do not let this matter trouble you" (NRSV) renders the idiom "Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes." David tried to pretend that neither he nor Joab had done anything evil, ascribing Uriah's death to business as usual in a time of war. But, the last line of the chapter, read literally, is an emphatic word of judgment: "But the thing David did was evil in the eyes of Yahweh."

The closing scene tells much in short order: Bathsheba grieved for her husband (v. 26), probably for the typical period of seven days (Gen. 50:10, 1 Sam. 31:13, 1 Chron. 10:12). Afterward, "David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son" (v. 27a). One might think David's cover-up had succeeded, except for that last telling phrase: "The thing David did was evil in the eyes of Yahweh."

How many of us, like David, have fallen short of our ideals and commitments? It's easy to fall into the trap of abandoning obedience for the allure of pleasure, with one sin leading to another.

Imagine what factors might have contributed to David's political complacency and spiritual downfall. Might we need to watch out for similar patterns or entanglements?

The narrator constantly reminds us that Uriah was a Hittite rather than a native Hebrew. Yet, he is clearly the most faithful and most inspirational character in the story. Can you think of unsung heroes in your world — people whose sincere piety is unwavering? Might one of them be you?

A final thought: How can we tell if something is good or evil in the eyes of God? And, how is it that we can know the answer, but convince ourselves otherwise? David's fall was not the last. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Aug. 1, 2021

2 Samuel 11:26–12:15

A Painful Lesson

Have you ever done something you knew was wrong, but the transgression remained secret? Other than dealing with your own conscience, perhaps you felt that you'd gotten away with it. But what if you gotten caught and your behavior became known? That's a different story altogether.

Today's text involves a sin, a story, and sorrow.

David's deeds (11:26-27)

For readers familiar with the life of David, the sordid tale of his tryst with Bathsheba is all too familiar. The story would be bad enough if it were limited to adultery, but David went beyond taking another man's wife: To hide the affair, he took the man's life.

The victim was Uriah, one of David's most valiant soldiers, who had been on duty at Ammon. After learning that Bathsheba was pregnant, David recalled Uriah from the battlefield on the pretense of seeking news, hoping the faithful warrior would sleep with his wife and become the presumed father of her child.

Uriah refused, however, on the grounds that he had taken the customary vow to remain celibate while at war. With his fellow soldiers living in

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan said to David, "Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die." (2 Sam. 12:13)

the field, he asked, "shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife?" Uriah swore that he would not do such a thing (11:8-11).

The following day David succeeded in getting Uriah drunk, but still could not persuade his loyal soldier to sleep with his wife. In a desperate bid to cover his transgression, David sent Uriah back to the front with sealed orders for Joab, his military chief, to engineer Uriah's death in battle by having other soldiers abandon him.

Joab followed David's orders, though in a less obvious way than David had suggested, and it cost additional Israelite lives. He sent an apologetic report to the king, but David counseled Joab not to worry: "Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours one and now another ..." (11:25).

Those words would come back to haunt the king. The NRSV's "Do not let this matter trouble you" translates the Hebrew idiom "do not let this thing be evil in your eyes." Just two verses later, after recounting David's marriage to Uriah's widow and the subsequent birth of their son, the narrator tells us "but the thing David had done displeased the LORD" (11:27). The narrator used the same idiom: what David had done "was evil in the eyes of Yahweh."

Humans have an innate ability to rationalize our actions and make them seem right in our own eyes. The

judgment that matters, however, is "in the eyes of the LORD."

Nathan's parable (vv. 1-6)

The last phrase of 11:27 serves as an artful transition to the next chapter, for it is grammatically connected to the opening words of 12:1: "... and Yahweh sent Nathan to David."

This may lead us to believe that Nathan had quickly confronted David for his sin, but months had passed. David had married Uriah's widow and the child conceived of their extramarital union had been born — an apparently healthy baby boy. David may have thought his plan had worked and his sin had gone unmarked.

Not so.

The prophet Nathan had first entered the biblical story in 2 Samuel 7, where he had communicated God's promise to establish David's house as a dynasty that would rule over Israel forever. We would presume that Nathan had been supportive of David, and thus would have easy access to the king. God sent him back to David with a story designed to puncture David's illusions of invulnerability.

The story Nathan told contrasts two men. One is rich, powerful, and arrogant. The other is poor, helpless, and humble. The rich man has more livestock than he can count, while the poor man has just one ewe lamb, which he loves like a child. When the wealthy man is obligated to entertain a passing traveler, he steals the poor man's only lamb, slaughters it, and feeds it to his guest (vv. 2-4).

The characters are so clearly drawn and the rich man's behavior so

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contemptible that David responded with great anger and an oath, declaring the wealthy man to be worthy of punishment (v. 5). English translations attribute to David the words “he deserves to die!” The Hebrew expression literally means “he is a son of death,” and may have been intended as a negative epithet, not unlike a popular English idiom beginning with “son of ...”

David did not order the “son of death” to be killed. Rather, he declared that the man must restore the stolen lamb four times over (v. 6). According to a law recorded in Exodus, the standard penalty for sheep stealing was fourfold restitution (Exod. 22:1).

Nathan’s point (12:7-15)

Nathan responded to David’s heated judgment with a presumably pointed finger and the words: “*You are the man!*” The story was not about a sheep thief. It had been about David all along, and the crestfallen king’s own words of judgment now rested on his own head. Nathan’s accusation, pronounced as a message direct from God, uses a striking combination of first person and second person verbs to remind David of the shocking nature of his sin: “*I* anointed you ... *I* rescued you ... *I* gave you ... *I* would have added as much more” (12:7-8). But, *you* despised the word of the Lord ... *you* have struck down Uriah ... *you* have taken his wife ... *you* have killed him ... (12:9).

A third person verb marks the transition from accusation to judgment: “the sword shall never depart from your house” (12:10). Then the narrator shifts back to first person verbs to show it is Yahweh who will wield the punishing blade: “*I* will raise up trouble ... *I* will take your wives ... and give them to your neighbor” (12:11). David’s sin was committed in secret, but his

punishment would be a matter of public record (12:12).

The reference to David’s anointing as king probably points to Samuel’s prophetic anointing in 1 Sam 16:13 rather than the two official ceremonies described in 2 Sam. 2:4 and 5:3. The point is that *Yahweh*, not just popular acclaim, was behind David’s rise to the throne.

Nathan’s insistence that David had “despised the word of the Lord” (12:9) probably refers to the law rather than any direct instructions. David had violated the commandments against coveting, adultery, theft, and murder. Sufficient time had passed for the child conceived in David’s sin to be born with no apparent trouble, but if David thought his crime would be forgotten, he was mistaken. God had not forgotten, and Nathan’s fiery charges targeted David’s evil in no uncertain terms as he twice accused David of murder: “you have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword,” and “(you) have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites” (12:9). “Sword” in this case is metaphorical, for Uriah would have been killed by Ammonite archers (11:24), but was sent within their range at David’s orders.

Recall that David had told Joab not to worry, for “the sword devours now one and now another” (11:25). Now Nathan turns the metaphor to David with a prediction that “the sword shall never depart from your house” (12:10) and that God “will raise up trouble against you from within your own house” (v. 11a). Tragic and bitter events will unfold in ensuing chapters, culminating in public humiliation for the king, the private rape of David’s daughter, the public abuse of his secondary wives, and the deaths of three sons.

Nathan’s cutting words had their intended effect, though David’s response is downplayed to keep the

spotlight on Nathan. Did David fall to his knees and pray Psalm 51? Did he weep? We don’t know. The narrator tells us only that David said “I have sinned against the Lord” (12:13a).

Remarkably, although he had predicted painful punishments to come, the prophet declared on Yahweh’s behalf that “I have put away your sin; you shall not die” (12:13b). The law prescribed capital punishment for both adultery (Lev. 20:10, Deut. 22:22) and for murder (Lev. 24:17), but David would not die.

David found grace, but at a cost. He had “utterly scorned the LORD,” and his sin could not be easily dismissed. Rather than falling upon David, however, the death penalty David deserved was transferred to the innocent child of his adultery (12:14-15), who would die in David’s behalf — a sad story told in the remainder of the chapter.

David’s actions in the Bathsheba-Uriah affair remind us of how one sin may often lead to greater sin and greater sorrow. David was neither the first nor the last to have done something wrong, and then compounded the problem while trying to cover up the error.

We do not live under the covenant with Israel that promised blessing for obedience and trouble for sin: we shouldn’t assume that every sin will be repaid with sorrow.

Still, Paul reminds us, a life of sin ultimately leads to death (Rom. 6:23). Wrongdoing may lead to physical death, and not always the death of the sinner. Sin may also bring the death of relationships, the death of good health, the death of a career, or the death of hopes and dreams. Can you think of ways in which you or your loved ones have experienced some kind of death as a result of sin?

Isn’t it better to foster *life*? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 8, 2021

2 Samuel 18:1-33

A Mournful Monarch

Family relationships have the positive potential to foster affection, a sense of belonging, and lifelong security for parents, children, and siblings who love and respect each other.

But families may also be wracked by favoritism, infighting, and jealousy. Parents can instill confidence in their children, or a sense of worthlessness. Children can make their parents proud, or make them ashamed.

Few things hurt as much as a disappointed parent cutting off a child, or children who turn against their parents.

Today's text relates some measure of both. It is a sordid tale of a father who loved but spoiled his son, and an entitled son who turned against his father.

A one-sided war (vv. 1-8)

Our study passage recalls the sad story of how David's son Absalom orchestrated a coup against his father and proclaimed himself king in Jerusalem, then died while leading his supporters in an ill-fated battle against David's security forces. 📖

The conflict between David and his son had been a long time coming, and it culminated with a disaffected

"O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam. 18:33b)

and power-hungry Absalom recruiting an army of supporters to help him topple his father from the throne [for more on the steps leading to Absalom's rebellion, see "The Hardest Question" online].

Absalom "stole the hearts of the people of Israel," the narrator says. He did so by putting on the trappings of royalty, stationing himself at the city gate, and falsely claiming that David cared nothing for justice (2 Sam. 15:1-6).

Absalom portrayed himself as a more caring king, and his rebellion garnered so much support that when he and his supporters advanced on Jerusalem, David fled the city rather than subject it to war. Accompanied by his most ardent supporters and a large contingent of loyal soldiers, David traveled eastward, crossed the Jordan River, and set up camp in the city of Mahanaim, a day's journey beyond (15:13-18, 17:24).

Unsatisfied with his occupation of Jerusalem and public humiliation of David's harem (2 Sam. 16:20-22), Absalom gathered an army of untrained recruits and led them in a war against his father, hoping to eliminate him as a rival. As Absalom's army advanced across the Jordan, David divided his elite soldiers into three groups led by veteran commanders.

David volunteered to lead the army, but his men insisted that he stay behind, because the king's safety was the entire

point of the battle: If David died, the rebellion would have succeeded (18:1-4). Relegated to supporting his soldiers from behind, David reviewed the troops as they left Mahanaim, but also undermined their mission.

Not wanting Absalom to be harmed, he shouted orders to his commanders that they should "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom" (18:5). 📖

The account of the actual combat is so abbreviated that it seems like no battle at all. Absalom's army of conscripts and recruits were numerous, but green. David's forces were smaller but composed of seasoned professionals who had fought many battles for David. The king's veteran soldiers flanked Absalom's army on three sides and forced them into the dense forests of Ephraim, where the narrator said more of them fell victim to the forest than to David's fighters (18:6-8). 📖

An ill-considered death (vv. 9-15)


Absalom had made the poor decision to accompany his army into battle while riding on a mule, which was standard transportation for kings in those days. As the army fled, the mule ran beneath an oak tree. Absalom's head got caught in low-hanging branches while the mule kept running, leaving the would-be king hanging and unable to free himself (18:9). 📖

One of David's soldiers spotted Absalom's helpless state and quickly reported it to his commander. Joab was incensed that the man had not killed Absalom immediately (18:10-13), because it left him with a difficult decision. 📖 He could easily capture

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Absalom and bring him in unharmed — as David wished — but Joab feared that David would do no more than put him under house arrest and the young rebel would continue making trouble.

Joab was a man of action who was guided by strategy rather than emotion. He was not bound to Absalom by the same cords of love that clouded David's judgment, so Joab found it relatively easy to disobey his king for the sake of his country. With a small group of fighters, he saw to it that the would-be king was finished (18:14-15). 

A broken-hearted man (vv. 16-33)

After Absalom's death, Joab restrained the troops, ordering horns to be sounded so his men would cease pursuing their fellow Israelites. With Absalom dead, there was no need to continue killing those who had been caught up in his rebellion.

Joab likewise ordered his men to bury Absalom's body in a great pit in the forest, then cover it with a heap of stones so that David would not see what remained of his son. Strategically, he delayed the messengers who would deliver news of the victory, so that the deed was done before David ever knew (18:16-17).

As the reader wonders how David will take the news, the narrator builds suspense by spinning a tale of two messengers. Ahimaaz, a son of the high priest Zadok, had been chosen by David to carry secret messages before, and he wanted the job. Knowing how distraught David would be, Joab would not allow Ahimaaz to go, fearing that David might hurt him when he heard the news. 

Joab ordered Ahimaaz to stand aside. He chose instead to send an unnamed Cushite with the message. The Cushite, probably a mercenary, was an African man in a Hebrew world.

Retracing the army's steps, he ran to tell David the news.

Ahimaaz remained persistent, however, and Joab finally agreed to let him go, believing the Cushite had such a head start that things would have settled down by the time Ahimaaz got there. Ahimaaz took a short cut, however, and arrived before the Cushite. He told David that the victory had been won, but when he saw that David cared only for Absalom, he pretended that he didn't know the young man's fate and left it for the guileless Cushite to break the news that Absalom was dead.

David responded with perhaps the purest example of abject mourning to be found in scripture. Despite the victory his forces had won against his rebellious offspring, all David could do was to cry out "*O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!*" (18:33).

Not-so-easy choices

What are we to do with this difficult text? What can we learn from this remarkable soap opera, from these "Days of Their Lives"? Perhaps we can gain something from examining the choices its characters made.

Absalom's choices were consistently selfish and foolish. He had everything going for him. He was the best-looking man in the kingdom, and had charisma, too (2 Sam. 14:25). But his head got too big for his shoulders. Absalom's decision to rebel against his father led to his own early death.

David's choices leading up to the battle were made on the basis of what it takes to survive with the least possible conflict. Unfortunately, that isn't always possible. When conflict is present, it needs to be dealt with openly before it reaches the boiling point.

Joab was a pragmatic man. He chose to do what he believed should

be done for the larger good, and to use whatever means were at his disposal to accomplish his goals. It was not the first time he had killed someone that David wanted alive, and it would not be the last. Joab's violence overshadows all of his other choices.

The unnamed warrior chose to stay out of trouble. When he saw a difficult situation in which he could not win, he chose to avoid it. That soldier's ability to recognize trouble ahead of time and the wisdom he demonstrated in avoiding it is worth remembering.

Ahimaaz wanted to be in the center of things. He was filled with excitement and wanted to tell the good news, but his fervor was greater than his courage, and he told only part of the story.

One thing all these decisions have in common is that God does not appear to be involved in any of them. In fact, God is wholly absent from this chapter except for two brief references when Ahimaaz and the Cushite used a standard formula of praising God for the good news when they reported to the king. There is no evidence that God was consulted in the making of any of these decisions.

There are many areas of life in which God expects us to use our own minds and make good decisions based on the information we have and the love in our hearts, but always within the context of Jesus' teaching. When we make our decisions without any reference to God's will for our lives, we are asking for trouble.

All of us are faced in life with hard choices, and sometimes the lines between good and evil, wisdom and folly, prudence and impudence are not at all clear. In those times, especially, talking things out with God and seeking divine direction are essential. There's no guarantee we will always choose rightly, but a prayerful approach certainly increases our chances. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 15, 2021

1 Kings 2:1-12, 3:3-14

A Wise Request

America prides itself on democratic elections and peaceful transitions of power that show respect for the process and the will of the people. Sadly, the presidential transition of 2021 was the most rancorous in memory, with the outgoing president seeking to undermine the electoral process, leading to unrest, violence, and attempted insurrection.

What could that have to do with today's text? Our passage describes the first transition of power after David's ascendancy, and it was far less peaceful than one might expect. 📖

A dying father's advice? (2:1-4)

The text begins with a decrepit David belatedly naming Solomon as his successor over his older brother Adonijah, who thought he had a better claim to the throne. 📖

As told in 1 Kings, David appeared to be near death when Nathan and Bathsheba convinced him to name Solomon as the next king. After doing so, David summoned Solomon and offered both positive advice and a vengeful charge. David's private instructions to Solomon begin with a speech that sounds more like the Deuteronomistic narrator than David,

"Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" (1 Kgs. 3:9)

and should probably be seen as an editorial embellishment. 📖

The command to "Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways . . ." (2:2-3) reflects the theology that pervades most of the Old Testament. The text says God had instructed Joshua to "be strong and courageous" no less than four times (Josh. 1:6, 7, 9, 18), and Joshua had in turn charged the Israelites to be strong and courageous if they were to possess the land (Josh. 1:25).

Success, according to Joshua-2 Kings, resulted from strict obedience to God by faithfully obeying all the various commandments "as written in the law of Moses" (2:3).

David's promise that Solomon's heirs would follow him as king (v. 4) refers back to 2 Samuel 7. There Yahweh had promised David that his descendants would rule Israel in an unbroken dynastic succession. David gives it a more conditional twist, however: Solomon's heirs would remain on the throne only so long as they followed God's command to "take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul" (v. 4).

Whether David spoke these words or not, they bear a sharp contrast to the less inspirational directives that followed.

An old king's revenge (2:5-12)

David had long held grudges against several men that he could not afford to punish personally, so he directed Solomon to deal with them — actions that would also remove them as threats to Solomon's rule. The first target was David's nephew Joab, who had long served as his military chief (2:5-6). Not only had Joab supported Adonijah over Solomon, but in earlier days he had twice murdered persons whom David wanted to honor (Abner, 2 Sam. 3:20-29; Amasa, 2 Sam. 20:4-10). Joab had also overseen the death of David's son Absalom, against David's express orders (2 Sam. 18:9-15).

Solomon's execution of Joab is recorded in 2:28-35. Even though Joab sought sanctuary by grasping the horns of the altar and pleading for his life, Solomon ordered his new security chief Benaiah to kill him.

David charged Solomon to honor certain persons who had aided David when he fled Jerusalem during Absalom's revolt (2:7, cf. 2 Sam 17:27-29; 19:31-40), but also to punish Shimei of Bahurim, who had cursed David on that same occasion (2:8-9, cf. 2 Sam. 19:23). David had promised then that he would not harm the vocal critic — but he told Solomon to "not hold him guiltless" and "bring his gray head down with blood to Sheol." Shimei's demise is recorded in 2:36-46.

David's last words reflect the hard and bloody road he had traveled since his youth, when he had been known as "a man after God's own heart." His death and burial are reported in 2:10-11, after which Solomon also ordered the execution of his rival brother, Adonijah

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(2:13-25; for more, see “The Hardest Question” online).

Only at the end of a pathway marked by blood and tears could the narrator say, “So the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon” (2:12, 46b). 📖

A new king’s wish (3:3-14)

After noting that Solomon entered an alliance with Egypt by marrying a daughter of the ruling pharaoh (3:1), the narrator adds a comment that Israelites “were sacrificing on the high places” at that time, because “no house had yet been built for the name of the LORD” (3:2).

These verses provide background to foreshadow Solomon’s positive role in the construction of the temple, but also negative actions for which the writer would later condemn him. Solomon married many other foreign wives to seal political alliances, built temples for their gods, and reportedly joined them in worship (1 Kgs. 11:1-13). 📖

When most of us think of Solomon, however, we probably call to mind his wealth and his wisdom, both of which became legendary. How Solomon came to possess such wisdom is found in 3:3-14, a charming account and a welcome change from Solomon’s blood-marked transition to power.

The story begins with a glowing remark that seems to describe a different person than the one who had avenged David’s enemies. “Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David.” Before the temple was built, we are told, Solomon piously led Israel in worship, offering sacrifices to God on the high places (3:3), including a site at Gibeon where he reportedly “used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar” (3:4).

Such an effort would have been a multi-day event, and Solomon would

have slept on location. Ancient Near Eastern people sometimes sought visions by presenting offerings, then sleeping in the sacred space and hoping that God would speak in a dream. Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and Samuel had heard from God in dreams, though most did not actively seek them. 📖 The text does not indicate whether Solomon prayed for a vision, but he got one anyway. While at Gibeon, “the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night,” and offered to grant the young king one wish: anything he asked (3:5).

Can you imagine such an offer? If *you* could ask for any one thing, what would it be?

Solomon’s response was a model of humility. He thanked God for having loved his father David and having made him king in David’s place. When it came to actually ruling, though, Solomon professed to being like a little child who didn’t know when to go out or come in (3:6-8). Thus, he prayed, “Give to your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil . . .” (3:9).

The expression translated as “understanding mind” (NRSV) or “discerning mind” (NET) is literally “a listening heart.” Hebrew thought assigned mental faculties — especially those related to decision-making — to the heart. A “listening heart” is one that would be open to God’s guidance in making wise decisions. 📖

Yahweh was pleased that Solomon asked for wisdom rather than the expected request of long life, riches, or victory over enemies. As a reward, God promised to give Solomon both wealth and honor in addition to the wisdom for which he asked. Victory over enemies was also implied in the promise that “no other king shall compare with you” (3:10-13).

God also promised long life — but only “if you will walk in my ways,

keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked” (3:14). Readers both past and present know that David did not always walk in God’s ways, so we are not surprised that Solomon would later turn from the path. For the present, however, Solomon had redeemed the bloody beginnings of his rule by seeking a better way, asking God to help him become a wise and capable ruler.

What can we take from this multi-layered story in which both David and Solomon appear as alternately upstanding and lowdown?

The narrator remembers David’s earlier love for Yahweh and puts into his mouth a charge for Solomon to follow the path of obedience to God — but also to take vengeance on his enemies.

Solomon does David’s dirty work and forcefully consolidates his rule, but he also leads the people in sacrificial worship, and he prays humbly for the wisdom needed to rule God’s people.

The narrator doesn’t want us to miss the fact that Israel’s two greatest kings had potential for both good and bad. Both did laudable things when they utilized a listening heart — when they sought to follow God’s way and put the people’s interests above their own. Yet, they both were subject to human frailties: to selfishness, to pettiness, to self-aggrandizement at the expense of other people.

Isn’t this the way it is in our own lives? We all are capable of good or evil, of humility or pride, of obedience or rebellion. We all have the ability to love unselfishly or to turn our desires inward.

Choices lie before us every day. Making good choices does not make us immune from mistakes; making bad choices does not take us hopelessly off the path. Life with God is an ongoing affair in which faithfulness and failure are always before us.

What guides *your* choices? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 22, 2021

1 Kings 8:1-61

A Solemn Dedication

When I was a pastor and often called upon to preside at funerals, it was not unusual for the family to request that a former pastor, or the pastor of a family member, be invited to read scripture and pray.

Some preachers found it hard to pass up an opportunity to sermonize or even evangelize, and would use their prayers to do so. Beseeking God to “remind us to do so and so,” or “convict us so that we may avoid such and such” can be a subtle way of preaching through prayer.

The Bible has multiple examples of speeches or sermons fashioned as intercessions, and the dedicatory prayer attributed to Solomon in 1 Kings 8 is a prime example. 📖

A celebration to remember (vv. 1-11)

The text is centered around the long-awaited dedication of a temple for Yahweh in Jerusalem, a task that David dreamed of (2 Samuel 7) but Solomon carried out. The construction of the temple, described in 1 Kings 5–7, reportedly required seven years and involved more than 180,000 workers who were drafted to labor for months at a time. 📖 It’s not surprising that

“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kgs. 8:27)

Solomon would host a huge service of dedication to mark its completion. 📖

To emphasize continuity with the past, leaders from every tribe and ancestral family were invited to join a triumphal procession onto the temple grounds and to witness the final act that would establish the temple as the “house of the LORD” — the installation of the Ark of the Covenant in the sacred room at the back of the temple, the Holy of Holies.

When David had first brought the Ark into Jerusalem, he did so with great care, many sacrifices, and joyful celebration (2 Sam. 6:12-19). Solomon followed suit with an even grander sweep. As the priests and Levites brought the Ark and other sacred items from the old tent to the new temple, “King Solomon and all the congregation of Israel” were “sacrificing so many sheep and oxen that they could not be counted or numbered” (v. 5).

After the priests positioned the Ark and emerged from the holy place, according to the narrator, “a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD” (vv. 10-11). 📖

A promise kept (vv. 12-21)

The appearance of the thick cloud was understood as a visible mark of divine

acceptance: a sign that Yahweh had chosen to dwell in the “house of the LORD” and imbue the holy place with the divine presence, or glory. 📖

Solomon pronounced a poetic invocation: “The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever” (vv. 12-13). The “thick darkness” could refer to the heavy cloud, or to the Holy of Holies, where the Ark was closed off by a heavy curtain and thus kept in darkness.

The word translated as “dwell” in v. 12 is *shakēn*, which was associated with the portable tabernacle (called the *mishkān*) said to have moved with Israel through the wilderness. But Solomon claimed the days of divine traveling were over. The verb also translated “dwell” in v. 13 is *yashav*, which suggests a more permanent residence: Solomon intended the temple to be a place for Yahweh “to dwell in forever.”

Following the invocation, Solomon turned to the people and reminded them of God’s dynastic promises to David. Recounting the divine promise in a fashion closer to Psalm 89 than 2 Samuel 7, Solomon said God had praised David for wanting to build a temple but had chosen his son to do the job (vv. 15-19). 📖 Solomon then praised God for fulfilling the promise to David while congratulating himself for having done his part: “I have risen to the place of my father David; I sit on the throne of Israel ... I have built the house for name of the LORD ... I have provided a place for the ark, in which is the covenant of the LORD that he made with our ancestors ...” (vv. 20-21).

Solomon appears to have been quite proud of himself.

Additional information at
goodfaithmedia.org



A prayer for the future (vv. 22-61)

With v. 22, Solomon is said to have adopted a posture of prayer, praising God's unmatched majesty and reputation for "keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart" (vv. 22-23). Returning to a more self-focused concern, Solomon thanked God for having shown faithfulness to David, and prayed for God to remain true to David's descendants who walked faithfully before him (vv. 25-26).

Verses 27-30 appropriately affirm that Yahweh's presence could not be limited to the temple, indeed, even to all heaven and earth. Still, the temple served as a portal of prayer through which people facing various trials could come to God in search of solace (v. 30).

The prayer continues by naming several categories of potential petitions the Israelites might bring, echoing the belief that troubles often result from sin (Lev. 26:14-39, Deut. 28:15-68). The temple would be an opportune place of prayer for those seeking justice (vv. 31-32); for petitions seeking deliverance from enemy oppression after national sin (vv. 33-34); for those suffering from drought as divine punishment for sin (vv. 35-36); and for pleas for aid during times of famine, pestilence, or plague (vv. 37-40). 🇺🇸

Though Israel-centric, the prayer asked further that God would hear the prayers of foreigners who come "from a distant land because of your name" and respond to them in a way that all peoples would fear God and "know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built" (vv. 41-43).

But what of times when the distressed were far from the temple, such as soldiers fighting far from

home? Even then, Solomon insisted, the temple remained an important symbol. He asked God to hear and respond to fighters on the battlefield who faced Jerusalem and prayed in the direction of the temple (vv. 44-45).

More pointedly, the prayer then builds on vv. 33-34 and turns to the possibility of exile. If the people should sin, Solomon prayed, so that God allowed them to be defeated and carried into captivity ... if the exiles should "come to their senses" and "repent with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies," praying toward "the city that you have chosen, and your house that I built for your name," God should hear their prayer and forgive (vv. 46-53).

This is where the praying clearly turns into preaching. While purporting to reflect Solomon's speech at the temple's dedication, the words almost certainly derive from the hand of a writer during the exile itself, when the large unit from Joshua-2 Kings reached its final form. The writer expressed the nation's current concerns through Solomon's voice.

When 1 Kings 8 was written, Israel was not a free nation contemplating captivity, but rather a defeated people who believed that God had given them over to the Babylonians because of the nation's deep and persistent sin. The writer wanted them to draw hope from Solomon's prayer, believing that if they turned their faces toward Jerusalem and turned their hearts back to God, forgiveness and restoration might come.

The prayer may have gone to preaching, but it was a welcome message of hope. Even though the temple had been destroyed in 587 BCE, the people could still look toward Jerusalem and pray for the day when the temple would be rebuilt, and God's presence would once again bless the

grateful Hebrews with freedom and prosperity.

As Christian people living under a new covenant, what are we to make of this account? Solomon's temple and its replacement no longer exist. The physical temple marking God's presence has been replaced — as far as the church is concerned — by the body of Christ.

The parts of Solomon's prayer that emphasize a connection between royal power and the religious establishment remind us of the perpetual temptation for church and state to be intertwined, inevitably corrupting both. If we believe the claims of Jesus, however, heeding God's call and following God's way are far more about serving others than about exercising power over them.

Many people still hold to the common belief that success or failure in life is a direct result of piety or perversion, but we know that the righteous often suffer while the wicked prosper. For followers of Jesus the point of faith is not to be rewarded, but to be faithful — not to be blessed, but to be a blessing.

As king of the country and builder of the temple, Solomon had a vested interest in promoting the structure as the locus of the national religion and the gateway to God, but even his self-serving prayer acknowledged that God cannot be limited to a sacred box, a holy place, or a designated city. Nor is God limited to the church, neither the larger institution nor any building associated with it. God is approachable from any place, at any time.

There is one area of the prayer that continues to speak plainly: humans are sinful, but God is merciful. It is not a turning toward Jerusalem that matters, but a turning toward God, who remains willing to hear and to forgive.

Thanks be to God. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Aug. 29, 2021

Mark 7:1-23

Something Rotten

One of my favorite musicals is *Fiddler on the Roof*, which premiered on Broadway in 1964 and ran for more than 3,000 performances. Both professional and amateur productions have since spread around the globe, along with a 1971 film adaptation.

I've been fortunate enough to see several live performances of the play, and the movie version is on my shelf.

The appeal of *Fiddler on the Roof* is embodied in a Jewish milkman named Tevye. In early 19th-century Russia, he tries to maintain his religious traditions in the village of Anatevka, but life conspires against him: his daughters want to marry for love, rather than having him arrange a match for them.

Tevye's inner conflict between love for tradition and love for his daughters drives the musical's ongoing allure.

Today's text describes an earlier dispute regarding certain Jewish traditions, but it's a story we'd rather avoid. ↓

What about tradition? (vv. 1-5)

Chapter 7 marks a transition in Mark's gospel. Jesus has been traveling around Galilee, teaching in synagogues. In this

"Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." (Mark 7:14a-15)

story he has a testy confrontation with some Jewish leaders about the place of a certain religious tradition — and appears to write it off as a human tradition rather than something inspired by God (vv. 1-23).

Afterward, Jesus journeys northward to Tyre and an interesting dialogue with a Syrophenician woman who believes she and her daughter are also worthy of his attention (vv. 24-30). Mark seems to be setting readers up for an expansion of the gospel to the Gentiles, a gospel that does not require adherence to external purity rituals, but demands an internal commitment expressed through care for others.

The story begins with a verbal skirmish when certain Pharisees and "some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem" quizzed Jesus about why he allowed his disciples to eat without washing their hands (vv. 1-2, 5).

The question was not just about cleanliness: the hand washing in question was a special practice that we can no longer identify with exactness. Orthodox Jews of today practice a pre-meal ritual of pouring water over each hand, in succession, two or three times. Kosher restaurants routinely provide two-handled cups at the bathroom lavatories or a public sink. Observant Jews fill the cup with water and then use the two handles to take turns pouring water over each hand. ↓

Verses 3-4 indicate that Mark was

writing to a largely Gentile audience, as he takes time to explain the issue to his readers, although he overstates the case in saying "the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands." While Pharisees observed that particular tradition, Sadducees did not, and neither did many less observant Jews. ↓

The point, however, was that Jesus' accusers had drawn a line around what was deemed acceptable practice, and they considered eating without properly washing the hands to be outside the line.

Tradition vs. commandment (vv. 6-13)

Jesus' response to their critique was sharp, more caustic than the image we typically have of gentle Jesus. He started by calling them hypocrites. Our English word comes directly from the Greek *hypokritos*, though the original sense was not as pejorative as we tend to think of it.

For the Greeks, a *hypokritos* was an actor in a play — someone who pretends to be someone they are not. Jesus charged that the Pharisees acted out their rituals to show they were close to God, when that was not necessarily the case.

Jesus loosely quoted from the prophet Isaiah, who saw a similar issue in his own contemporaries: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" (vv. 6-7, cf. Isa. 29:13).

Jesus accused his critics of abandoning what God had commanded in favor of traditions developed by

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humans (v. 8). As an illustration that some readers characterize as biting humor, Jesus reminded them of God's command to honor one's father and mother, then posed a situation in which overly religious persons might decline to help their needy parents by claiming that all of their resources were "Corban," or devoted to God.

The term "Corban" grew from the practice of making vows, which in Hebrew life were conditional promises to do some service or to give some offering to God in response to an answered prayer.

The law held that vows, once made, had to be fulfilled. Thus, if someone had pledged a certain amount of money to God in making a vow, they could refuse to draw from it to help their parents by saying, in so many words, "Sorry, but I already promised that to God."

Later rabbinic tradition allowed a release from the Corban requirements in order to help one's parents, but whether these views had developed in the time of Jesus is unclear — and one was not obligated to seek such release. 🇺🇸

The point Jesus made in vv. 9-13 was that the Corban rules should be seen as human traditions that had been given precedence over God's teaching, "thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on."

"And," Mark has Jesus add, "you do many things like this" (v. 13).

Jesus' return volley would have hit hard, because people such as the Pharisees and scribes thought of their traditions as "building a hedge about the law." The idea was that keeping the traditions built around the Torah would keep one safe from violating the biblical law.

Instead, Jesus argued, their traditions could actually allow them to circumvent the law, placing human tradition above divine commandments.

It's the inside that counts (vv. 14-23)

As Mark describes it, Jesus built on the confrontation with his critics by explaining things further, first to the public crowd that had gathered, and later to the disciples in private.

In doing so, Jesus appears to go beyond decrying human traditions, and to question some elements of the kosher laws, even as found in the Torah (Lev. 11:1-47, Deut. 14:1-20).

To the crowd, Jesus said "Listen to me, all of you: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (v. 15). 🇺🇸 The word translated "defile" literally means "to make common."

Once he and the disciples had entered the relative privacy of a house, the disciples pressed Jesus for a further explanation. Did he mean to say the kosher laws no longer mattered?

Jesus got down and dirty with his response. Surely the disciples understood that whatever went into their mouths would pass through their digestive system and end up in the sewer. To this, Mark added an interpretive note for his readers: "Thus he declared all foods clean." Literally, "he cleansed all foods" (v. 19).

A surprising question is this: If leaders of the early church had known that Jesus had so clearly weighed in on the subject, why did there remain so much contention over whether Christians needed to follow kosher rules or avoid meat that had been ritually offered to idols (see Gal. 2:1-2, Rom. 14:1-23, Acts 15:1-29)?

The tradition Mark preserves may not have been widely known or accepted prior to the writing of Mark's gospel, probably between 64 and 72 CE and well after the early debates.

Jesus wasn't passing down a juridical ruling, however. His point was to draw a sharp contrast between ritual

traditions and the human heart: "It is what comes out of a person that defiles" (v. 20).

Jesus cited a variety of "evil intentions" that arise from the heart, which was considered the seat of both desire and decision making: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly" (vv. 21-22).

This list is not exhaustive, but clear enough. The harmful things we think and do — the evil we bring into the world — has no relation to the foods we eat or how carefully we wash our hands before dining: "these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" (v. 23).

In our day, we don't wash our hands to fulfill a ritual requirement, and if we exclude certain foods from our diet it is generally due to health concerns or ethical scruples such as a desire not to eat meat of any kind — not just pork.

So, does this text even relate to us?

Indeed, it does. The passage challenges us to ask what forms and sustains our own faith.

Is our religious practice based on traditions or rituals that have little to do with following Jesus?

Do we define our relationship with God in terms of church attendance, a favored type of music, or a familiar liturgy?

Do we base our behavior on what is considered acceptable in our community, rather than what jives with Jesus' call to love God and love others?

What defiles us comes from within, but the heart is not irretrievably evil. 🇺🇸 We are also capable of heartfelt compassion and generous choices that bring goodness into the world.

If we would please God, it is not through adherence to ritual practices, but through ethical living that grows from a heart that is devoted to God and to others. **NFJ**

George H.W. Bush (1989–1993)

By Bruce Gourley

A conservative televangelist, a temperamental senator, a former football player, and an uninspiring contestant tossed their hats into the ring to succeed a former Hollywood actor.

The 1988 Republican contest became a minefield for aspirants hoping to seize the mantle of President Ronald Reagan and further advance a conservative agenda — largely spearheaded by Christian nationalists against equal rights for minorities.

Christian nationalist Pat Robertson came out preaching but never landed a serious punch. Senator Bob Dole lacked the nimbleness to move fast enough. Former Buffalo Bills' quarterback Jack Kemp aired out his arm but failed to connect with voters at large.

When the dust settled, George H.W. Bush, considered by many to be the least interesting candidate — and someone often dismissed by detractors as a wimp for lacking a strong ideological identity — remained standing.

STRATEGY

Bush won the Republican presidential primary in part through a “discreet evangelical strategy” of deploying code words to convince evangelical leaders he was “born again,” and name-dropping popular Christian writer C.S. Lewis — although he only read the first chapter of *Mere Christianity*.

Also, Bush spoke at gatherings of the

This is the 41th article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, managing editor for *Nurturing Faith Journal*, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.



National Religious Broadcasters and chose evangelical U.S. Senator Dan Quayle of Indiana as his running mate. And his campaign literature was placed in church foyers around the nation.

Campaigning on behalf of Bush, his eldest son George W. Bush harbored his own political ambitions. Recognizing the power of the evangelical vote, the junior Bush while helping his father became an effective liaison to the Christian Right.

Nonetheless, the elder Bush's emergence as the Republican presidential nominee dampened the enthusiasm of Reagan's politics-oriented Christian nationalist base.

Bush's lack of fervent religious convictions was not the problem; Reagan had been the same way. However, Bush's low-key demeanor and centrist politics fell far short of the inspirational conservatism of Reagan.

Many white evangelicals simply could not overcome the feeling that he was not really one of them.

FORMATION

Born in 1924 in Milton, Mass., into a wealthy, politically active, well-connected Episcopal family, George Herbert Walker Bush, son of investment banker and future U.S. Republican Senator Prescott Bush, could count on a good life.

His family's religion valued public service over public piety. Graduating from an exclusive boarding school, 18-year old Bush enrolled in the Navy during World War II. The youngest pilot in the Navy, he flew 58 combat missions.

Shot down by Japanese fire on Sept. 2, 1944, he parachuted into the ocean. Rescued at sea, he was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for heroism under fire.

In an event-filled 1945, Bush married Barbara Pierce, received his discharge from the Navy, and enrolled in Yale University. He played sports, became a member of the exclusive and secretive Skull and Bones society, and earned a degree in economics.

Leaving the Northeast, the Bushes moved to Texas. Using his connections and family wealth, he founded a succession of oil companies, eventually making Houston his home.

Aspiring for more, he made a name for himself in Texas politics, winning election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1966 as a Republican.

Displaying a moderate political ideology, Bush supported fellow-Texan President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1968 Civil Rights Bill prohibiting discrimination in housing. Reelected to Congress in 1968, Bush lost two years later, after which President Richard Nixon appointed him U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations.

Following Nixon's resignation due to the Watergate scandal, Bush served under President Gerald R. Ford as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Moving back to Houston during Carter's presidency, Bush burnished his credentials as a moderate conservative on social and economic issues.

ELECTABILITY

Following an unsuccessful run for the presidency in 1980 — in which he derided Reagan's trickle-down economic policies as "voodoo" economics — Bush was chosen by Reagan as his running mate to balance the Republican ticket.

President Reagan and Vice President Bush, despite their ideological differences, worked together well for eight years, enacting Reagan's conservative agenda. As vice president, Bush re-calibrated his religious image.

Having proclaimed to religious leaders in 1980 that he was not "born again," in the years following he mounted a charm offensive with white evangelicals. In private, however, Bush still disdained evangelical leaders.

He saw televangelists as snake handlers and swindlers, an opinion reinforced in the late 1980s as several became embroiled in financial and sexual scandals. Younger son Neil Bush spoke more bluntly: White evangelicals were "cockroaches" crawling "from the baseboards of the Bible Belt," as related by Bush scholar Jacob Weisburg.

Having earned his credentials under Reagan and parroting evangelical language, 1988 presidential candidate Bush, running against a gaffe-ridden Democrat opponent, Michael Dukakis, won the presidency in an Electoral College landslide. In doing so, he garnered 81 percent of white evangelical votes, more than Reagan in 1984.

Forced to choose between a liberal Democrat who ignored them and a moderate Republican who voiced their language, white evangelicals — including many who were registered Democrats and had first voted Republican in 1980 — stuck with the party of Reagan and hoped for the best.

No single issue more publicly galvanized Christian nationalists in the late 1980s than abortion.

Providing tactical cover for conservative white evangelicals' strategy of using government to suppress ascendant human rights and maintain white dominance, opposition

to abortion had become a Republican Party mantra.

White middle- and upper-class women had the means to obtain abortions regardless of restrictions. Evangelicals' determination to restrict abortion, however, would force impoverished minority women to have more children, furthering the cycle of Black poverty.

Bush understood the dangerous relationship between unwanted children and poverty. In 1973 he had written of his support for "fertility control," an issue that had been "a private matter" until the 1960s.

As a U.S. congressman in 1967, he found himself "impressed by the sensible approach of Alan Guttmacher, an obstetrician who served as president of Planned Parenthood."

Bush agreed with Guttmacher's observation that "it was ridiculous to blame mothers on welfare for having more children when the clinics and hospitals they used were absolutely prohibited from saying a word about birth control."

Bush also supported 1970 federal planning legislation signed by President Nixon that created Title X, a program that provided millions of federal dollars annually to Planned Parenthood. In the 1980s as vice president under Reagan, however, Bush set aside his personal convictions and wooed anti-abortion white evangelicals.

PRESIDENTIAL

As newly elected president, Bush turned to famed evangelist Billy Graham for his inaugural prayer, and took the oath of office with a hand on George Washington's Bible. Following introductory formalities, Bush got straight to the point, beginning — rather than ending — his inaugural speech with a prayer.

"[M]y first act as President is a prayer," Bush announced. "I ask you to bow your heads." He continued:

Heavenly Father, we bow our heads and thank you for your love. Accept our thanks for the peace that yields this day and the shared faith that makes its continuance likely. Make us strong to do your work, willing to heed and hear your will, and write on our hearts these words: "Use power to

help people." For we are given power not to advance our own purposes, nor to make a great show in the world, nor a name. There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people. Help us remember, Lord. Amen.

Sprinkled throughout his speech, was discrete evangelical language — such as "reborn," "man's heart," "the right path," "free will," "faith," "better hearts and finer souls," and "God's love" — that did not go unnoticed by the faithful.

Expressing his secular personal values, however, the new president also called for tolerance, generosity, unity, and "a Thousand Points of Light ... doing good."

At the same time, Bush framed American democracy not as an instrument of human rights and equality, but as a freedom "just and prosperous" based first on "free markets," code for placing the interests of corporations above working citizens as modeled by Reagan.

Bush also voiced the language of white moral superiority in criticizing Black poverty, proclaiming:

"There are those who cannot free themselves of enslavement to whatever addiction — drugs, welfare, the demoralization that rules the slums. There is crime to be conquered, the rough crime of the streets. There are young women to be helped who are about to become mothers of children they can't care for and might not love. They need our care, our guidance, and our education, though we bless them for choosing life."

Having nodded in all the appropriate directions, Bush closed his inaugural address with words always thrilling to white evangelicals: "God bless the United States of America."

Beyond Bush's politically astute language, evangelicals found some hope when he continued Reagan's policy of prohibiting federal funding of family planning organizations abroad that offered abortion services or information about the procedure.

Even so, Bush disappointed conservatives by refusing to support a human life amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Convinced by late 1989 that Bush was too moderate, some conservative white evangelicals, led by televangelist Pat Robert-

son, called a meeting of leading Christian nationalists to determine their next steps. Coveting full control of the Republican Party, they created the Christian Coalition and began building a political network across all 50 states.

CHALLENGES

Despite Bush's rosy inaugural speech, he faced a record national debt of \$2.8 trillion, three times greater than at the beginning of Reagan's presidency, a result of Reagan's massive tax cuts for the wealthy.

Constrained fiscally, Bush's presidency soon descended into a tug of war with a Democratic-controlled Congress and inevitable problems.

A year into Bush's presidency the savings and loan industry — deregulated in the late 1970s and early 1980s and thereafter investing in ever-riskier investments — faced collapse. Bush signed a \$100 billion government bailout for the industry.

Forced to address the spiraling federal debt in 1991, the president reneged on an earlier promise made during the 1988 Republican convention to not raise taxes. Many small-government conservatives, including white evangelicals, felt betrayed.

Apart from fiscal challenges, Bush's two main domestic achievements stoked conservatives' hatred of marketplace regulations. The Americans With Disabilities Act (1990) required businesses to provide accommodative infrastructure and inclusive policies for persons with disabilities.

And Bush's Clean Air Act Amendments (1990), presaged by the disastrous *Exxon Valdez* tanker spill of 10 million gallons of oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound, mandated the reduction of urban smog, acid rain and industrial emissions of toxic chemicals.

MILITARY MIGHT

In foreign affairs Bush received praise for using military force to remove Panama's brutal dictator, Manuel Noriega, from power.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 — occupying a strategic U.S. ally boasting large oil supplies, and international diplomatic efforts failed to convince Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to withdraw —



Chief Justice William Rehnquist administers the oath of office to President George H.W. Bush during inaugural ceremonies at the United States Capitol.

Bush assembled an international coalition of military forces that included Arab and European nations.

The coalition's war against Iraq, dubbed Operation Desert Storm, became the largest American military action since the Vietnam War.

Beginning in January 1991 with bombing and missile strikes on strategic targets in Baghdad, a ground invasion in Iraq-occupied Kuwait followed in late February. The allies' overwhelming military superiority led to Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait in early March.

Despite a clear victory and few U.S. deaths (140), Hussein nevertheless remained in power in Iraq.

Bush praised the military coalition and subsequent victory as the emergence of a "New World Order" following the Cold War and ensuring collective security through multinational cooperation. But in the years following, the New World Order proved more visionary than achievable.

On the other hand, Bush's early overtures to Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev generated more lasting results. During the Bush presidency the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, a momentous event followed by the breakup of the Soviet Union, the latter fostered by Bush's conciliatory policies.

Thereafter the U.S. and Russia

remained on good terms until the rise of Russia's Vladimir Putin at the turn of the 21st century.

ISRAEL

Despite Bush's aggressive policies in the Middle East, the president, unlike his predecessors Carter and Reagan, maintained a more discreet attitude toward Christian nationalists' favored foreign nation, Israel.

Convinced that the apocalypse — the end of the world order as ordained by God — was near, conservative white evangelicals believed the Middle East was key to triggering events that would ultimately lead to God eradicating evil (including liberalism) through a global war prior to establishing a new kingdom on a New Earth.

Israel, the biblical holy land, stood at the center of this modern misinterpretation of the Bible first put forth by clergyman John Nelson Darby in the 1830s, a theory known as Premillennial Dispensationalism that was ridiculed by most Christians as heresy until the early 20th century.

Nevertheless, conservative white evangelicals during Bush's presidency perceived the Iraqi War as the beginning of the end.

For years Israel had loathed the Iraqi regime. Although not a coalition member, Israel quietly provided a list of Iraqi sites for targeting.

All Israeli-identified targets were subsequently destroyed, furthering Israel's supremacy in the Middle East, along with white evangelicals' dream of an imminent return of Christ.

Bush, on the other hand, remained aloof to eschatological flights of fancy. Even as his administration in November 1990 prepared to go to war with Iraq, the president in his annual Thanksgiving address publicly verbalized an inclusive, progressive and ecumenical faith.

Equating Abrahamic ancient holy texts to America's modern concept of freedom and peace through war, he declared:

The grand experiment called America is but a recent manifestation of humanity's timeless yearning to be free. Only in freedom can we achieve humanity's greatest hope: peace. From the wisdom of Solomon to the wonder of the Sermon on the Mount, from the prophecies of Isaiah to the teachings of Islam, the holy books that are our common heritage speak often of the many blessings bestowed upon mankind, often of the love of liberty, often of the cause of peace.

FAITH

Even as conservative white evangelicals cringed at the inclusion of Islam, Bush made some overtures to them.

Most notably, Bush nominated far-right ideologue Clarence Thomas, an outlier among Black Americans, to the Supreme Court, the beginning of a successful, decades-long Republican campaign to make the Court more conservative.

He also dutifully attended the National Prayer Breakfast, an annual Washington event orchestrated by conservative white evangelical leaders. In addition, Bush by some accounts mentioned prayer in 220 speeches, remarks and proclamations.

But in the end, Bush's traditional Episcopalian, non-evangelical faith maintained enough space between religion and politics to disquiet the Christian nationalist ideology growing ever more prevalent among conservative white evangelicals.

The most common religious faith

among American presidents, the Episcopal Church was the faith of George Washington and many 19th-century White House occupants.

Lacking the emotional fervor and theological certainty of evangelicalism, the Episcopal faith by the founding of the United States of America covered much ground, ranging from deism to Unitarianism to other non-orthodox belief systems.

Intellectually thoughtful and well-heeled Americans often gravitated to the Episcopal Church, a modest-sized denomination that in turn contributed disproportionately to the ranks of American presidents.

For a century prior to Bush's presidency, however, only two presidents had been Episcopalians: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a progressive Democrat, and Gerald R. Ford, a moderate Republican.

Both were moderate churchmen at best, however, while Bush attended church regularly, even when on vacation.

By the late 1980s, the relationship between the Episcopal Church, politics, civil religiosity and public sentiment grew increasingly complex.

No longer a sanctuary reflecting America's self-perceived preeminent stature and superior democratic ideals, the Episcopal Church during Bush's presidency opposed the Persian Gulf War, while the president framed the conflict as a "just war."

NATIONALISM

Rather than turning to the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church for a blessing, Bush hosted Billy Graham overnight at the White House on the eve of the war. A former Nixon supporter chastised by Watergate, Graham had since backed away from Christian nationalist rhetoric.

Upon Graham's retreat, the battle for the ideological soul of America passed to evangelicals Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, Ralph Reed Jr., Pat Robertson and a host of other far-right partisans.

While the less-influential Graham frequently met with the less-than-evangelical Bush during a presidency characterized by less-than-fully-conservative politics, two Christian nationalist organizations were busy preparing for a different kind of warfare.

In Washington the Council for National Policy, established during Reagan's term, entrenched itself yet further within the federal power structure. Working afar from Washington, the newly-formed Christian Coalition, led by Reed and Robertson and focused on reshaping the Republican Party from the bottom up, allied with white evangelical churches during the 1990 midterm elections to distribute hundreds of thousands of partisan voter guides extolling far-right Republican candidates.

Both organizations operated in stealth mode to force the Republican Party further to the right. Morals and morality were absent; only power mattered.

Their success in the 1990 midterms birthed a decades-long structural realignment of the Republican Party into the mold of Christian nationalism.

In November 1991, Reed, the mastermind behind the Christian Coalition, gloated of the organization's campaign to reshape the Republican Party: "I want to be invisible. I paint my face and travel at night. You don't know it's over until you're in a body bag. You don't know until election night."

Although not fully satisfied with Bush, the Christian Coalition in the fall of 1992 threw its support behind the president's run for a second term by distributing tens of millions of pro-Republican voter guides, primarily in churches. Their real goal, however, reached beyond Bush.

"We want ... to see a working majority of the Republican Party in the hands of pro-family Christians by 1996," Pat Robertson said of the Christian Coalition's primary emphasis on local and state politics.

Robert Boston, a spokesman for Americans United for Separation of Church and State, observed the Coalition's activities and sounded the alarm.

"Their only purpose for existence as far as we've been able to determine is to take over the Republican Party from the bottom on up," said Boston. "They're running the Republican Party in certain parts of the country, and they're doing it all with a tax-exempt status, and the IRS so far has done nothing."

Reed did not disagree. “I think this will be the most effective coordinated activity by evangelical Christians that we’ve ever seen,” he said of the group’s 1992 electoral activities.

EXTREMISM

Evangelical “pro-family” Christian activism focused on protecting white male superiority in a rapidly diversifying America. Labeling a proposed equal rights amendment in Iowa as a “feminist agenda,” Robertson resorted to outrageous lies in declaring that equal rights encouraged “women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.”

Many mainstream Republicans at local and state levels were stunned at the extremist ideology.

“What they’re doing along the way is antagonizing the hell out of mainstream Republicans who have just gotten fed up” with the Christian Right, declared John Treen, Republican Party chairman in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana.

Treen, whose party’s central committee in Louisiana had fallen under control of the Christian Coalition by 1992, criticized the Coalition for “using the Republican Party as the pulpit for their religious views.”

One after another, many local Republican organizations fell captive to Christian nationalists.

“America is at a crossroads,” the Coalition’s Robertson insisted. “Either she returns to her Christian roots ... or she will continue to legalize sodomy, slaughter innocent babies, destroy the minds of her children, squander her resources and sink into oblivion.”

Pollster Stanley Greenberg understood the bipartisan power of white Christian lies that led even long-time Democrats to vote for Reagan and Bush alike. From working with focus groups, Greenberg learned that disgruntled whites were angry that “the leaders who were supposed to fight for them seemed to care more about the Blacks in Detroit and the protesters on campus; they seemed to care more about equal rights and abortion than about mortgage payments and crime.”

“The old politics had failed them,” Greenberg concluded. “What they really want is a new political contract — and the freedom to dream the American dream again.”

Millions of white evangelicals across America, long conditioned to white privilege but no longer able to openly display their racism without evoking public criticism, channeled their anger at liberalism into an ideological war against human rights embedded within America’s founding ideals.

‘RELIGIOUS NATION’

As white Christian nationalism bubbled up in America, Bush struggled to excite the far-right base of his Republican Party.

On Aug. 20, 1992 while running for a second presidential term, he attempted to seal his complicated relationship with conservative evangelicals in a speech at the Republican Convention’s “ecumenical” prayer breakfast in his hometown of Houston.

A man of wit, he reveled his audience with self-deprecating jokes. “[B]reakfast speeches are always my favorite. I figure it’s the one meal where broccoli is never served,” Bush joked of his renowned dislike for the vegetable.

He playfully acknowledged the egotism of Texans, praising Texas as “the most religious nation on earth.”

Biblical humor, too, was sprinkled among his remarks. “Tonight I give my acceptance speech. If it catches fire, it might give a whole new meaning to the story of the ‘burning bush.’”

The president seemed at ease, with frequent laughter filling the venue. But beneath the laugh lines lay the serious business of connecting with Christian nationalist currents.

Striving to rise to the occasion, he equated the fall of the Berlin Wall with the biblical story of Jericho, marrying the Old Testament to America. The word “God” issued from his lips many times, including as the source of victory over communism and in Desert Storm, although some in the audience likely noticed that the president failed to

mention Christianity or Jesus directly.

Nearing the conclusion of his remarks, Bush made his pitch for reelection by sharing a personal testimony.

“I’ve been president for three and a half years now,” he noted. “More than ever, I believe with all my heart that one cannot be president of our great country without a belief in God, without the truth that comes on one’s knees. For me, prayer has always been important but quite personal. You know us Episcopalians...”

Following the laughter, he continued: “And yet, it has sustained me at every point of my life: as a boy, when religious reading was part of our home life; as a teenager, when I memorized the Navy Hymn. Or how 48 years ago, aboard the submarine *Finback* after being shot down in the war, I went up topside one night on the deck, on the conning tower, and stood watch and looked out at the dark.

“The sky was clear. The stars were brilliant like a blizzard of fireflies in the night. There was a calm inner peace. Halfway around the world in the war zone, there was a calm inner peace: God’s therapy.”

Would appeals to his private prayer life — and the extent of his religious faith he seemed willing to publicly share — be enough to win the conservative evangelical vote?

Transcripts of the speech note that Bush was interrupted five times with laughter, but none with applause. There had been no political red meat for which Christian nationalists longed.

ONE TERM

Two years later, in 1994, sociologists Lynam A. Kellstedt, John C. Green, James L. Guth and Corwin E. Smidt published a study of the “Religious Voting Blocs” of 1992. Examining the data, they sought to determine if 1992 had been “The Year of the Evangelical.”

White evangelical Protestants, they concluded, “solidified their support for the Republican Party,” their “social traditionalism” and “conservative economic policy” cementing them as “the most loyal adherents to the GOP.”

Many white mainline Protestants, however, defected from the GOP and voted for either Democrat Bill Clinton or third-party candidate Ross Perot. In similar fashion many white Catholics “returned to the Democratic fold,” the shift “halting two decades of drift toward the GOP,” a reversal that “obscured serious rifts among Catholics over traditional values.”

Finally, Jews and Black Protestants remained firmly Democratic, while secular voters “moved solidly into the Democratic coalition,” establishing a “sharp counterpoint” to conservative white evangelicalism.

Consequently, only 63 percent of evangelicals cast votes for Bush in November 1992, a significant decline from four years prior. A big majority who voted for Bush named abortion as their overriding issue. Clinton and Perot voters, on the other hand, named economic issues as most important.

In a contest between conservative social issues and a lagging economy, the Southern Baptist duo of Bill Clinton and Al Gore, with little support from conser-



After arriving on board Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base, New Orleans, former President George H. Bush sits down to eat with military personnel. U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Dawn C. Morrison.

vative white evangelicals, won the election with support from “the Democrats’ base of cultural minorities.”

Conservative white evangelicals, failing to rally firmly enough behind Bush, had not won the day. But all was not lost.

On the cusp of a communications revolution, the machinery of Christian nationalist political organizations was in place throughout America, ready for unholy, untiring warfare against the new Democratic president and his perceived

evil, liberal policies.

Long after the 1992 election and with white Christian nationalists publicly and proudly the base of an extremist Republican Party, Bush died at age 94 on Nov. 30, 2018, seven months after the death of his wife, Barbara.

After leaving the White House, Bush had witnessed the presidential election of his son, George W. Bush, a darling of conservative evangelicals. And still later, the elder Bush, remaining a quiet Christian and political moderate, had found himself far too liberal for his own party.

Bush’s state funeral concluded at Houston’s St. Martin’s Episcopal Church, the former president’s home church. Bush biographer and fellow Episcopalian Jon Meacham eulogized the former president’s kindness and humanity — attributes that were largely absent in national politics at the time of Bush’s death.

Reflective of the centrality of personal prayer throughout Bush’s life, country music star Reba McEntire sang “The Lord’s Prayer.” **NFJ**

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‘WARRIOR COP’

When did the narrative about police officers as heroes begin?

Editor’s note: This article is excerpted and adapted from the book, *Police on a Pedestal: Responsible Policing in a Culture of Worship* (2019, Praeger) by Terrell Carter. This is fifth in a series of his articles exploring racial justice.

BY TERRELL CARTER

From my research, the narrative about police officers being heroes began in the 1960s and 1970s. It was a way to bolster public opinion about officers as they suffered the consequences of trying to protect certain neighborhoods.

Also, during this time, politicians began to use the words “war” and “warfare” to describe policing and its ensuing atmosphere. As much as politicians cared about their constituents, they also cared about their careers.

What better way to ensure job security than to scare people into trusting them to fix the communities’ problems, even if they didn’t live in those communities or regularly visit them?

Especially when the problems being identified were ones that revolved around the growing fear of people who were different from the politician’s constituents in so many ways.

This fear — and entrusting politicians with the authority to define this new “war” and modes of “warfare” — led to multiple crime commissions, and eventually to the national “war on drugs” campaign.

It also led to the rise of the “warrior cop,” the only person qualified to make an impact on crime, especially the kind of crime found in urban (always translated as African-American) communities.

INTERACTION

This narrative continues to be facilitated by the fact that the vast majority of white people don’t regularly interact with police. They typically receive their information about police and policing — who participates in committing crimes, how often crime is committed, and where crime is likely to occur — through daily news media outlets and the talking heads they choose to follow, along with fictional television programming.

Such media, however, can’t always be trusted to accurately portray information about crime.

One problem inherent in having this limited opportunity to learn about people who may be different from us — in addition to only getting information from a source that likely already shares our political and social leanings — is that it is unlikely our beliefs or preconceived ideas about someone will be challenged.

Instead, they will likely only be verified. We are less likely to question how people who are different from us are portrayed and will simply believe what we hear from our preferred media outlet, whether it is conservative or liberal.

An additional problem with receiving the majority of our information about others from one type of source is that the portrayals of those people may be intended to be satirical, but viewers might consider them accurate as described.

When confronted with a person from a group who doesn’t fit our preconceived ideas, we are likely to believe that that person is the exception to our expectations and not an adequate representation of what such people must be like.



Because of this lack of personal experience with police and criminality, typical citizens likely believe what they are told by these media programs.

Americans typically spend less time interacting in person with those who are different from them. Instead they learn about different cultures, people groups, and what police do from watching them on television or finding information on social media and YouTube videos.

Therefore, it becomes easier to understand why people’s view of police and policing may not be adequately informed.

STORY FRAMING

This narrative also continues because law enforcement personnel have made it a priority to actively frame and/or participate in the story that is told about them. I don’t blame them for this. This is an understandable act of self-preservation.

What better way to try to ensure that public opinion surrounding our actions and attitudes is shaped in a way that makes us the hero at every turn? What better way to ensure that the public is sympathetic to us regardless of the decision we have made and the outcomes that follow that decision?

It is more beneficial to frame almost every incident as “us versus them” — and those identified as “them” are always the bad guys who need to be dealt with. Officers are never bad, but simply heroes who may have been overzealous in trying to do good.

By attempting to shape the stories that are told about them, police organizations hope to insulate the collective body from being held responsible for the actions of a singular officer, especially as it relates to violence perpetrated against citizens.

This is evident when an officer’s actions have been proven to be over the

top, such as an incident of police brutality. Department representatives often portray the officer as a lone wolf who acted in a way that doesn't represent the overall culture of the department.

These representatives and departments don't willingly divulge information that clarifies the level of violence perpetrated by officers against citizens. Instead, the particular incident is framed as an anomaly.

Regardless of the type of interaction the system of law enforcement representatives finds themselves in, we can rest assured that they want to control the narrative that is being expressed at all costs.

Consider one reason for this: If they are thought to be doing the right thing for the right reasons the majority of the time, they can build goodwill with the general public so that when something does go wrong, or someone does something that should be unacceptable, they will have earned enough respect to use when it's needed.

REPUTATION

By actively developing or cultivating a reputation for doing what's right, police departments can also require greater subordination from the general population.

It's essentially akin to saying, "If we've been known for doing what's right in the past, and having a reputation for being good, then most of the things we ask or require of citizens is due to our desire to do what's right and good. There's no reason to think otherwise."

When police, on the off chance, resort to violent or extreme means to obtain

compliance from citizens, that extreme action should be excused because it's either out of the ordinary or a citizen forced the officer to behave in such a manner.

An inherent set of challenges accompanies any attempt to control how an officer or law enforcement agency gets defined — either by others or with terms of their choosing.

One challenge to this practice is transparency. To make sure this process is effective, police must control the type and amount of information the public receives about their interactions with citizens, as well as the timeframe.

Another challenge for departments in this area has been the increased proliferation of cell phones and social media applications that capture and convey how officers interact with citizens.

Multiple officers have said that cell phones have hindered them from being able to effectively perform their police duties. This comment should leave anyone who hears that with the question, "What duties do you need to perform that shouldn't be seen by everyone at any given time?"

Overall, this type of process leads to intentional and unintentional consequences related to what typical citizens are willing and/or capable of learning about police, especially when they typically don't have to interact with police in real life.

Due to this reality, a person may not see the value in locating and learning new information about how police operate or interact with people who are different from them or understand how police

tactics are developed or implemented in neighborhoods and communities that are different from theirs, and how all of this is framed and shaped by law enforcement in order to gain more support and compliance from the public.

The immediate consequences of the process described above are that law enforcement officials use this circular system as a way to continue to control those whom they are patrolling instead of operating as an equal source of power and/or solutions with that community for the problems that face the community that the circle encompasses.

Often it seems law enforcement prefers to have citizens following orders instead of working closely with them on adequate solutions.

This line of thinking fosters an attitude by police that they reside and operate above those they are hired to protect and serve. And because, for all intents and purposes, citizens are unable to manage their own lives, it is reasonable for officers to hold certain attitudes toward them.

Ultimately, this can lead to officers believing they are the final arbiters of what is right and wrong — determining who deserves or doesn't deserve mercy, and who will and will not receive due process. **NFJ**

—Terrell Carter, with a background as a police officer and a pastor, is executive director of Rise Community Development in St. Louis. He is a member of the Good Faith Media Strategic Advisory Board.



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Is this a 'Cave of Horror' or one of wonder?

By Tony W. Cartledge

The Israeli Antiquities Authority announced in March that a “new” Dead Sea Scroll had been found in the Judean desert. Most news accounts told only part of the story: the rest is far more interesting.

The “new scroll” (and both words belong in quotation marks) consists of dozens of tiny fragments, none larger than a thumbnail. Experts were able to piece together enough of the snippets to determine that they represent Zechariah 8:16-17 and Nahum 1:5-6, two prophets from the “Book of the Twelve.”

Scholars had plenty of time to assemble the jigsaw puzzle, because the fragments were discovered in 2019, but kept secret until Israeli archaeologists could complete a 50-mile sweep of caves in the cliffs west of the Dead Sea.

The lengthy, sweeping project was an effort to head off looters who have ransacked many of the caves, destroying archaeological contexts and selling their finds on the illegal antiquities market.

This particular cave was in the steep southern wall of the Nahal Hevron, a large seasonal wadi that runs to the Dead Sea, midway between Qumran and Ein Gedi.

Pieces of the scroll in question have actually been “discovered” three times. The first was in the early 1950s, when Bedouin looters dug around in the cave and found fragments of it. Fortunately, they sold them to researchers in Jerusalem rather than to private collectors.



The 10,500-year-old basket was found in Muraba'at Cave (Yaniv Berman, Israel Antiquities Authority).

In the early 1960s, archaeologists led by Yigael Yadin excavated the same cave and found other bits of parchment from the same scroll, but obviously not everything.

The recently announced finds add to the collection of fragments, which are easy to miss. Finding them is not as simple as looking for a tall jar filled with scrolls. It involves precarious climbs, lots of sweat and dusty digging, and then carefully sifting the dirt to search for the tiniest of artifacts.

The scroll was written on parchment, by two different scribes. It is a Greek translation, quite different than the more common Septuagint. Though the text is written in Greek, the divine name YHWH is spelled with Hebrew letters.

The manuscript dates to about 50 BCE, so it was already old when brought

to the cave by rebel Jews who hid out there during the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–136 CE). Roman soldiers found their hideout, then laid siege and starved the occupants rather than attacking the cave while they were strong enough to defend it.

The bones of 40 victims were later found, some accompanied by ostraca indicating their names. When they were discovered during Yadin's excavation in 1960, the site was nicknamed the “Cave of Horror.”

In antiquity, the cave was accessed from above by rope ladders. It's more difficult now: archaeologists used mountain climbing gear to rappel down into the caves, hundreds of feet above the wadi floor.

The isolation of the caves — combined with a full bladder — contributed to the decision to conduct a thorough excavation.

Archaeologists in the field rarely have a bathroom nearby. When nature calls, excavators look for tall grass or find what privacy they can, and no one thinks anything of it.

When they were first exploring the cave before its recent excavation, Oriah Amichai, one of the team leaders, was squatting down to urinate when she noticed something different in the sand before her: it turned out to be the sole of a Roman sandal.

A man standing to relieve himself wouldn't have noticed it, she said.

The presence of the sandal was an indication there were discoveries yet to be made, so they undertook a full-scale excavation: the lack of a toilet proved serendipitous.

As they dug, the excavators found far more than a few scroll fragments, and things far older. From the Roman period they also found a cache of coins minted by Jews during the Bar Kokhba revolt, along with arrowheads and pottery.

Continuing to dig — for silt and dust cause cave floors to build up over time — they discovered the partially mummified body of a young girl who had been buried in a fetal position about 6,000 years ago. She was clutching a small bundle of cloth, and another cloth had been wrapped around her upper body and tucked in.

Further down — near where a looter's



6,000-year-old skeleton of a girl who was buried wrapped in cloth (Emil Aladjem, Israel Antiquities Authority).

pit had barely missed it — they uncovered a large and astonishingly complete woven basket dated to about 10,500 years old, the oldest known complete basket of its type.

Woven as a storage container during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Period, the basket was large enough to hold about 25 gallons, and it was complete with a lid. Unfortunately, it was empty except for a little sand at the bottom, which is being analyzed for potential clues as to what it might once have contained.

We may be technologically advanced in these modern days, but I never fail to be amazed at the genius of people who could weave an oversized basket 10 millennia ago; at the heart of people who carefully buried their dead 6,000 years ago; and at the commitment of people who considered scripture so precious nearly 1,900 years back.

Life was different, but they were rocking it: long may their memory live. **NFJ**



Fragments from the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets scroll (Orit Kuslansky Rosengarten, Israel Antiquities Authority).

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Making an apology for apologetics

BY LEROY SEAT

Communication is hard for many reasons — one being that the same word sometimes has quite different meanings. *Apology* is one such word.

Think with me a bit about the meanings and values of apology and apologetics.

An apology often means an expression of regret or remorse for something a person has said or done. But there is another technical meaning of that same word.

Apology can also be legitimately used to mean the verbal or written defense of one's basic beliefs.

There is a long history of *apology* being used in the latter sense with regards to the Christian faith, beginning with these New Testament words: "Always be ready to make your defense [*ἀπολογία*, *apologian*] to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet. 3:15).

One of the important Christian books of the second century CE is *First Apology of Justin Martyr* (c. 156), and his *Second Apology* was written shortly after the first one.

As a third-year college student, I became deeply interested in Christian apologetics, the religious discipline of defending Christian beliefs through rational discourse.

Philosophers/theologians such as Pascal and Kierkegaard were the Christian "apologists" I was most interested in at first and through graduate school, although I also read — and wrote papers

"Long ago I began to shift my emphasis from apologetics by rational argument to what I sometimes refer to as 'apology by life.'"

on — lesser-known thinkers such as German theologian Karl Heim and Hungarian philosopher Michael Polanyi.

However, it was my recent reading of Randal Rauser's book, *Conversations with My Inner Atheist: A Christian Apologist Explores Questions that Keep People Up at Night* (2 Cup Press, 2020), that prompted the writing of this column.

Rauser is a Canadian Baptist seminary professor. After a brief introduction, the entire book from the first chapter through the conclusion after the 25th chapter is written as a dialogue between the author and "Mia," a name formed by the first letters from "my inner atheist."

Although I have maintained my initial interest in apologetics, long ago I began to shift my emphasis from apologetics by rational argument to what I sometimes refer to as "apology by life."

That shift was prompted by my growing awareness that the main reason so many Japanese students in my classes at Seinan Gakuin University rejected Christianity was not because of intellectual issues but because of

ethical problems.

I gradually began to see that the bulk of the students in my Christian studies classes did not have as much of a problem with Christian doctrines as with Christian actions.

Rejection of Christianity was based far more on what they had learned in high school world history classes about the Crusades, for example, or what they had seen on television about racism in the United States, which they generally thought was a "Christian nation."

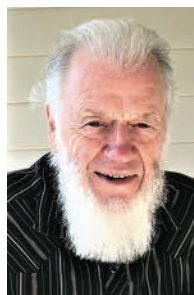
With that awareness, I began to read and think less about traditional apologetics and more and more about Christian social ethics. Thus, I began thinking more about apology by life rather than apology by rational discourse.

Rauser hardly deals with this matter in his book, although the 20th chapter begins with Mia saying, "It's often been said that the biggest objection to Christianity is the life of Christians." That is probably true.

Although I was unable to find the source, I have often heard these or similar words that Nietzsche reportedly said to Christians: "Show me that you are redeemed, and I will believe in your Redeemer."

For a long time now, Christians have needed to say less about their beliefs and to act much more deliberately and lovingly for peace and justice, that is, for the basic well-being of all people. **NFJ**

—Leroy Seat, a retired Baptist missionary to Japan, lives in Liberty, Mo., and blogs at theviewfromthisseat.blogspot.com where this writing first appeared.



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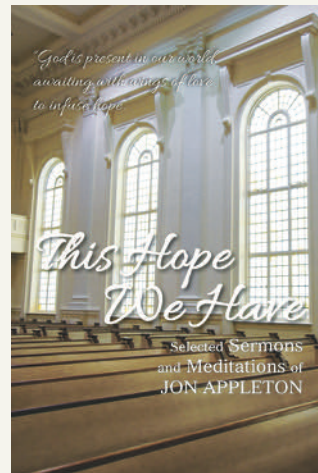
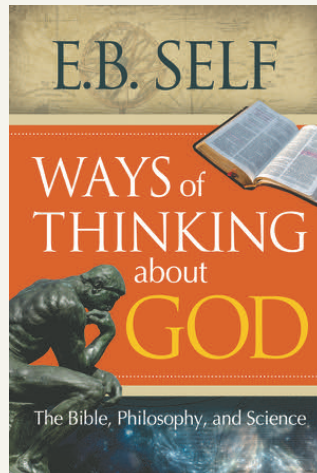
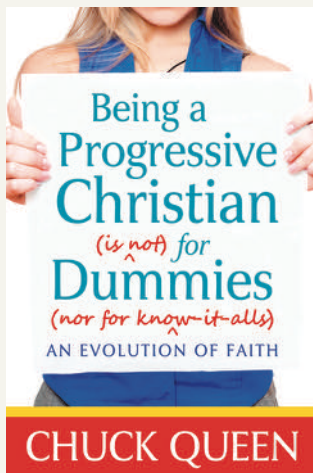
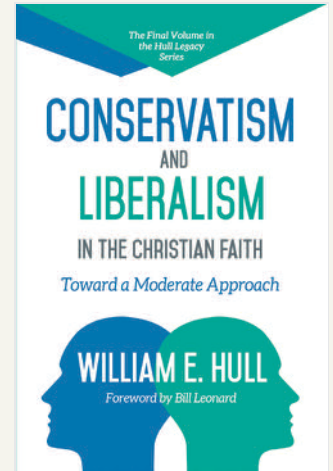
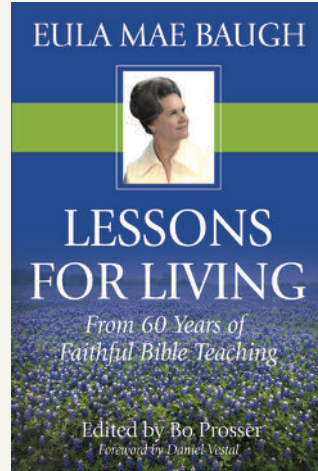
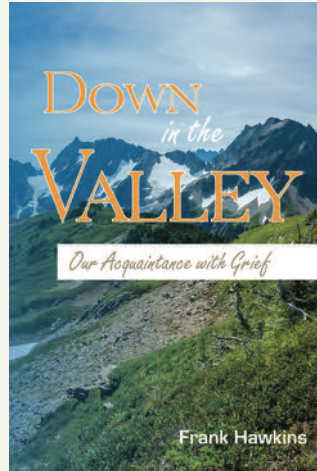
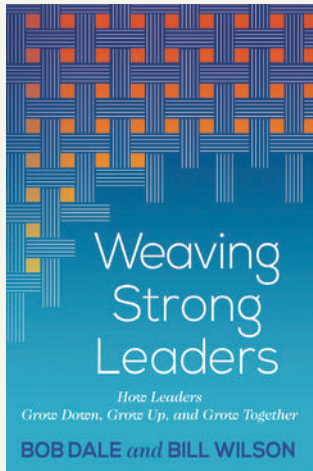
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Brandi's baptism debacle met with grace in reverse

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Singer/songwriter Brandi Carlile could have started the writing of her autobiography, *Broken Horses*, by touting her musical success as a six-time Grammy winner or penning what it's like to be befriended by Dolly Parton and Elton John.

Instead this self-described “mean, scrappy little trailer girl” first jotted down the account of what should have been her baptism — following her profession of faith in Jesus at a church youth camp. The expected holy moment quickly became hellish, however, deserving no “Amens.”

Brandi had invited family and friends to witness the moment that publicly marks the beginning of a new life in Christ. But instead of accepting her affirmation that “Jesus is Lord,” her Baptist minister refused to dip the 15-year-old in the ritual waters of resurrection because she is gay.

The very person and place designated for extending God's grace failed — miserably.

Afterward, the minister called Brandi repeatedly, asking for her forgiveness. That would take a while since her youthful self-worth and newfound faith had been so damaged.

Yet, grace in reverse truly happened many years later when Brandi wrote a heartfelt, but painful letter, letting the pastor know she had forgiven him for the trauma delivered in that moment.

In a 2018 studio interview with radio station KEXP in Seattle, Brandi was discussing her song, “Every Time I Hear That Song,” with the repeated line, “By the way, I forgive you.”

She described how “inherently radical” forgiveness has been “diluted,” often serving as an “evangelical buzzword.”

Forgiveness, she added, is very hard to do.

Yet, she did show “radical forgiveness” in writing the letter of grace to the pastor who refused to baptize her. She told him that her faith in God and people remained, which is not the case for many young people battered by faith leaders who heap undeserved condemnation on those who are simply being the persons God created them to be.

Ignorance is no excuse for this continuing abuse. What Jerry Falwell said when launching the Moral Majority (a misnomer) is untrue. Homosexuality is not a chosen, overtly promiscuous “lifestyle” that seeks to undermine families.

No amount of religiosity — or bad psychology masquerading as “biblical counseling” — can reprogram one's sexual orientation or identity. Rather, such endeavors, along with the constant labeling of LGBTQ persons as abominations to God, damage and even destroy lives.

There is no “gay agenda” other than wanting to be afforded the same freedoms and respect as all others. And the degree to which someone is a devout Christian has nothing to do with his or her sexual orientation.

As Jim Dant states in his book, *This I Know: A Simple Biblical Defense for LGBTQ Christians* (Nurturing Faith, 2018): “There is no valid, Christian, biblical argument against same-sex relationships between consenting adults.”

Rather the few, highly selective biblical texts — dealing mostly with ancient religious purity codes — are “lifted from their historical and theological contexts and used to blunder the listener.”

The word “homosexual” did not enter English translations of the Bible until wrongly inserted in the Revised Standard Version in 1946. Even the head

of that translation team admitted it was an incorrect rendering of the Greek text.

Yet, even with all of this available awareness, if one insists on holding to the unfounded and unloving idea that LGBTQ persons are somehow more sinful than the rest of us, there remains a vital choice:

Would it not be better to accept and affirm an LGBTQ person than contribute to their alienation, condemnation and even potential suicide?

Would it be better to be guilty of overextending grace — as if that's possible — or guilty of withholding grace in a highly selective way that causes great harm to a beloved child of God?

The hard truth is that much of Americanized Christianity — due to theological ignorance, authoritarian tendencies and ingrained bigotry — cannot be trusted to be faithful dispensers of the love and grace that Jesus calls his followers to share.

Speaking of her rejected baptism, Brandi said, “I didn't realize how much that experience hurt me until I was wrestling with the concept of radical forgiveness ... that is not accusatory.”

That's when she became the dispenser of the divine grace she had not received. She said she genuinely does forgive and love that pastor, adding, “[Forgiveness] might be the very reason why we're even here on earth.”

In her memoir, this confessing Christian woman admits the pain of being on the receiving end of religious-fueled abuse, even titling a chapter, “Baptists are mean.” But she doesn't let such misrepresentations define Jesus for her.

Even when pushed away, she affirms that “something mystical brings me back, time and time again, to the revolutionary gospel of forgiveness.”

Now that is the divine truth that deserves a resounding “Amen!” **NFJ**



Charity is good; justice is a good deal more

By John D. Pierce

It has taken decades for me to fully recognize and come to terms with a significant failure, especially in my earlier ministry life, that needs to be confessed. This awareness has come into clearer focus recently.

Apparently, I taught compassionate charity instead of biblical justice, and I accept my fair share of the blame. The two lessons are notably different.

Charity (as the word is used today, not the earlier synonym for unconditional love) has a measurable, short-term cost. It may be a specified amount of money that is given for a good purpose or even an ongoing percentage of one's income.

Likewise, charitable actions are good expressions of much-needed volunteerism. These too are worthy of praise.

For example, spending a Saturday or even a week on a Habitat for Humanity build or distributing food to those in need is a kind and generous act of charity. But it is indeed charitable.

Biblical justice demands more, however. Specifically, it requires a willingness to give up power — not just a predetermined amount of money and time — so those who suffer continuing social inequities and the resulting, compounding harms can gain needed and deserved power.

Charity is a good deed; justice is a good deal more.

This realization and confession don't invalidate the positive aspects of all earlier ministry experiences. Helping shape better servant leaders and being available in times of crisis have unquestioned value.

There is much from those years to recall fondly and consider of lasting benefit. But one of the most important aspects of being a Christian disciple-maker was not prioritized and fulfilled.

So, I confess to not conveying appropri-

ately the more sacrificial parts of following Jesus.

Never did I anticipate, and therefore adequately challenge, the notion that a political ideology of protecting one's national identity based on white cultural dominance would surpass — for so many Americanized Christians — Jesus' call that leads his followers away from fear-based self-preservation.

During my campus ministry years, I'd often remind Christian students who were "too busy" with studies and part-time jobs to serve others, that even better excuses can be made later when working full time with family responsibilities.

Serving others has to be a priority, I repeatedly said to them. And they responded so well — and many continue to do so.

The number of good things done to make life better for others, both locally and during spring break trips, is countless. And such unselfish service is commendable.

While I took many students to build houses with Millard and Linda Fuller in the early years of Habitat for Humanity, I failed to adequately explore and convey the injustices toward African Americans so apparent in Southwest Georgia and elsewhere.

Students and I spent a week in Cherokee, N.C., putting a roof on a church and providing entertaining musical programs in schools and worship services at night. It was an impactful and charitable effort.

However, we didn't wrestle enough with the clear and deadly injustices enacted by white Christians against Native Americans. We didn't come to grips with how the theological justification for such atrocities remains intact in white American Christianity.

I didn't anticipate that those same attitudes of racial injustice would regain such

strong political popularity decades later and attract so many confessing Christians.

In retrospect, it seems I taught service more than sacrifice, charity rather than justice, and good deeds over willingly relinquishing power as Christ both did and called his followers to do.

Jesus didn't soft-sell discipleship as we tend to do. There should be nothing confusing about the destiny that comes from denying oneself and taking up a cross.

Sadly, as louder nationalistic voices have arisen on the political/religious scene in recent years — portraying white Christians as victims and proclaiming their social privilege as deserved, even divinely ordained — too many otherwise bright and good people have fallen for this anti-Christ perspective. In fact, it is a dominant trait of American evangelicalism today.

Seek ye first the preservation of cultural dominance has overtaken the actual teachings of Jesus about how to live out the reordering values of the kingdom of God — on earth as it is in heaven.

Those served in times of need, especially minorities and migrants, have too easily become the perceived threats that allow for fear-based demeaning and maligning these beloved children of God.

Justice does lead to doing good deeds, but not as occasional acts that soothe one's sense of goodness. Rather, justice is part of an ongoing process to right society's wrongs and to remove human-erected obstacles to equality and equity — and it carries a price tag.

Biblical justice is not an attachment to the gospel or an optional way of being Christian. Doing justice (righteousness) is precisely what Jesus told his followers to be and do. It is the radical, inclusive love by which we are to be known. **NFJ**

Listening in and learning from a private conversation

BY JANA PETERSON

There's a familiar story in the Bible (Luke 10:25-37) where we get to listen in to a one-on-one conversation Jesus has with a lawyer. The lawyer asks Jesus what is required for a person to inherit eternal life.

Jesus answers by inviting the lawyer to recall what he already knows from the Torah:

"You must love the Great Spirit from deep within, with the strength of your arms, the thoughts of your mind, and the courage of your heart, and you must love your fellow human beings in the same way you love yourselves" (First Nations Version).

The lawyer leans further into the conversation, asking for more definition around who such a fellow human being, or neighbor, might be. Jesus answers with this story:

There was a person traveling on the dangerous, rugged, and windy road from Jerusalem to Jericho. This person was overtaken by robbers and severely beaten. Everything the person had was stolen — and, without help, this person would surely die.

A couple of religious leaders — who knew exactly what the Torah required, who had grown up memorizing Bible verses — came upon this wounded traveler, but chose to continue on their journey. The wounded traveler languished on the side of the road.

Eventually, someone whom the suffering traveler may have only recognized as a person with whom they shared nothing in common was traveling that same road. When seeing the one who had been harmed,

this stranger was moved with compassion.

In response, this last-on-the-scene traveler stopped to help — disinfecting the wounds of the abused traveler with oil and wine, and then bandaging them. This compassion was extended by taking the wounded person to an inn for further care — and offering to cover all present and future costs of recovery.

Ending the story, Jesus flips the lawyer's question. "Which one of these three," Jesus asks, "acted as a fellow human being to the one who was attacked by the thieves?"

The lawyer rightly observes that the one who was moved by compassion was the true neighbor. Jesus says: "Go ... and walk in the same way."

Rather than returning to his initial question about how to identify a neighbor, Jesus invites the lawyer to consider what it means to *be* a neighbor.

The lawyer's question was one of scarcity. He wanted to know exactly who he was required to love in order to inherit eternal life. But the way Jesus flips the lawyer's question provides a very different answer.

I hear Jesus saying to the lawyer and to all who get to listen in on this conversation: "It's not necessary to exclude anyone. Just love abundantly in the same way as the one who was moved with compassion. This is the way to love your neighbor as yourself."

The Western mindset I bring to this passage imagines that this lawyer really just

wanted Jesus to tell him what he wanted to know in the simplest, most straightforward way possible. But Jesus doesn't do this. Instead, Jesus tells a story.

Stories engage more than just our minds; they invite our whole bodies to an experience of listening and responding. Stories invite us into rare vulnerability. A good story invites us into the narrative and never gets old. Jesus told really good stories.

Randy Woodley, a Keetowah Cherokee and missiologist, wrote in his 2012 book, *Shalom and the Community of Creation*:

"The Bible is a remarkable book of many stories. It is short on propositional points and long on narrative devices such as 'imagiNative' phrases, symbols, mythos, and backstory [which] ... come together to create a grand narrative of the one Creator designing shalom community for all creation, and becoming human, in order to show other humans how to live in the shalom community of creation."

I love the First Nations Version of this story because the language of neighbor has been shifted to invite us to consider what it means to be fellow human beings with each other. I believe this is much closer to what Jesus was inviting the lawyer to live into at the conclusion of this story.

As ones who have been allowed the sacred gift to eavesdrop on this conversation between Jesus and the lawyer who approached him, we are invited to ask

A graphic with a teal background and hot air balloons. The text reads: "FREEDOM IS FRAGILE" in large white letters, "Your generosity keeps us moving into a hopeful future." in smaller white letters, and "Thank you!" in a white script font. At the bottom right, it says: "Gifts to Good Faith Media may be made at goodfaithmedia.org; by calling (615) 627-7763; or by mail to P.O. Box 721972, Norman, OK 73070."/>

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ourselves some rich questions.

More than asking what this means, we may also ask ourselves what Jesus' story means for us and for our communities, since we as individuals live in community with each other.

The way I live on a daily basis not only holds significance for those in my household, but also impacts everyone in my wider neighborhood. We all belong to each other.

As we step into Jesus' story, I wonder:

- Who in our communities has been wounded, robbed and left for dead?
- Who has been languishing in pain because we have seen, but have chosen to distance ourselves?
- Where have we, ourselves, been wounded and robbed?
- Where have we been the robbers, taking liberties that are not rightly ours?
- Where have we been complicit in systems of harm by choosing silence and distance over proximity?
- Where have we allowed our familiarity with the Bible to blind us to the pain right

Stories engage more than just our minds; they invite our whole bodies to an experience of listening and responding.

in front of us?

- Where are we being invited to stop in our tracks, see anew, and be physically moved with compassion?

The way we answer these questions is dependent on where we see ourselves in the context of American history and culture.

The group that invaded the U.S. Capitol building on Jan. 6 included many Christian nationalists. They saw themselves as having been robbed of something — in this case, believing falsehoods about the recent election.

Others, however, would contend that these Christian nationalists were actually seeking to rob something from others by their calculated attack on democracy that day. These two groups perceived the Bible and culture in completely opposite ways.

How we read the Bible — as well as current events playing out in society — really matters.

The conversation captured by Luke is a one-on-one exchange between Jesus and a Jewish lawyer who holds significant power and privilege. Thus, we can assume this story is for readers who hold privileged positions in society as well.

As a white woman raised with profound privilege, I read myself as the lawyer who sits at Jesus' feet. Jesus' story invites those of us with privilege and power in our communities to look more deeply.

May we be moved with compassion and draw near to those who are so often overlooked, to meet their pain with a love that moves closer in proximity with a heart of abundance in a way that brings liberation and healing to those who are battered and marginalized. **NFJ**

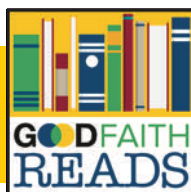
—Jana Peterson of Bozeman, Montana,
was the spring semester Ernest C. Hynds Jr.
Intern with Good Faith Media.

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MINISTRY TO MILITARY

Church finds lessons in serving service personnel

BY ANDREW GARNETT

Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies, and to acquiesce to a violent person instead of resisting (Matt 5:38-45). Jesus discouraged his followers from violence when he was arrested and executed by Roman soldiers (Luke 22:47-53), and Jesus explicitly renounced violence as a tool of his kingdom (John 18:36).

With this beginning, we might expect the churches that sprang up after Jesus to shun violence — and particularly to shun the Roman army, which was responsible for Jesus' death.

In fact, the first Christians displayed a complicated relationship with the army. The evolving relationship between the early church and the Roman army contains valuable lessons for our relationship to service members today.

OPPOSITION

In the early church, the majority of Christians likely felt hostility toward the Roman army.

Celsus, a second-century Greek philosopher, wrote an anti-Christian treatise that included the charge that Christians shirked their civic duty by refusing to participate in public life and serve in the army.

Origen, an early Christian theologian, sought to counter Celsus. Tellingly, Origen did not dispute the accusation. Rather, he argued that Christians benefited the Roman Empire not through military service but through their prayers and their holy lives.

Christian aversion to the army sprang from several factors.

First, serving in the army involved the possibility of warfare, and the bulk of Christians remained opposed to violence.

Second, most provinces of the Roman



Empire did not have any force we would equate with law enforcement. Therefore, soldiers were sometimes assigned duties we would classify as “policing” today.

In this capacity, soldiers did everything from chasing bandits to executing criminals to arresting Christians during periods of persecution. All of this would have been problematic for many Christians.

Third, many church leaders were opposed to service in the army because of its religious dimensions. Today, when military service is secular in nature, it is difficult for us to conceptualize how religious the Roman army was.

Yet there was a deep religious dimension to army life. The army drew recruits from across the empire and beyond, making it a melting pot for all the religious diversity of the ancient world.

Beyond the varied religious beliefs within the ranks, soldiers would also have participated in pagan religious practices mandated by the army. Soldiers were obligated to observe dozens of different festivals in honor of Roman gods and deified emperors, sacrifices were performed before battle for the pleasure of the gods and the purification of the army, and the standards each unit followed into battle were endowed with religious power.

This deep-seated paganism probably made soldiering a disagreeable profession for many Christians.

SUPPORT

Yet through the early centuries of the church, a counter argument was probably building. When soldiers came to visit John the Baptist, he did not tell them to abandon their profession.

Rather, John urged them to be the most faithful and honest soldiers they could be (Luke 3:14).

While Jesus spoke against violence, he did not tell a centurion to abandon his career. Instead, Jesus commended the centurion's understanding of faith — an understanding based on his military service (Matt 8:5-13).

Presumably, this line of thought arose either among Christians who were converted while in the army and wanted to stay in the ranks, or among lay Christians who were already believers but wanted to enlist. It is easy to imagine reasons why Christians might have been attracted to the service.

For all the hardship of the army, there was also job security — which was better than the hardship without job security that characterized the life of most of the empire's inhabitants. The army also carried with it the possibility for career advancement, and potentially a relatively comfortable retirement.

For a lower-class person (as the majority of Christians were in the early centuries), there were certainly upsides to the army. Christians were serving in the army by the late second century, and Christian soldiers became increasingly common as the centuries passed.

This shift in Christian life is reflected first in the church orders — documents drawn up to explain church structure and give practical guidance for pastoral care. At the same time Christian theologians were still writing strongly against service in the army, the church orders seem to give indirect evidence that the situation was shifting.

The earliest church orders were generally more hostile toward military service, while later ones imagined soldiers participating freely in the life of the church. This suggests that Christians were increasingly found within the army, and churches had to change their practices to account for this.

As the centuries passed, theologians began to make arguments supportive of military service. By the fifth century, service in the army had become widely accepted for Christians.

APPLICATION

Perhaps the most significant implication of the early church's relationship with the army is the realization that disagreements over military service are not new.

Individual congregations often have markedly different attitudes toward service — with conservative churches often more supportive of service, while liberal-leaning congregations tend to be more skeptical.

Awareness of past differences does

not in itself bridge the gap between conservative and liberal attitudes toward the military, but it gives some comfort in knowing that our struggles are not new. The early church was also divided on the issue.

Second, we should be realistic about the ability of churches to shape Christian behavior. Throughout the early period, most church leaders advocated against military service, but lay Christians increasingly chose their own course of action. It is a helpful reminder of the church's inability to compel Christians to moral behavior.

The church and its leaders should speak truthfully about their convictions, and there is nothing wrong with trying to convince others of what is believed to be true. However, past precedent suggests that there is little to gain from being absolutist.

A third suggestion follows closely from this one: regardless of our own ethical convictions regarding war and

violence, it is helpful to take a pastoral approach toward members of the military.

Pastoral approaches toward Roman army members seem to have been more successful than the rigorist denial of the military life. Likewise, today, a particular church or minister might feel uneasy about some activities a service member performs in the service of our country.

We do well to remember that early Christian soldiers faced difficult moral questions when they served, and their church leaders did not always feel ready to endorse the lifestyle of a soldier. Yet soldiers and church leaders increasingly found ways to relate spiritually to one another.

To follow the path of the early church may mean we ask ourselves: "If a person is already serving in the army and engaging in these kinds of activities, how can we best care for their soul?" **NFJ**

—Andrew Garnett is pastor of Hampton (Va.) Baptist Church.

LEGACY GIFTS: A LASTING INFLUENCE



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Editor's note: At times the subjects of articles published over the past 20 years come to mind as having particular relevance or interest. This article is one of those occasional features based on earlier topics and writings.

SINCERELY, TY COBB

Baseball great Ty Cobb's eye-opening letter to a seminarian revealed 50 years later

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The lifetime batting average of Tyrus Raymond Cobb — either .366 or .367, depending on which statistician one believes — has never been topped. Yet, ol' Ty was so disliked that only three other former players showed up for his funeral in North Georgia in 1961.

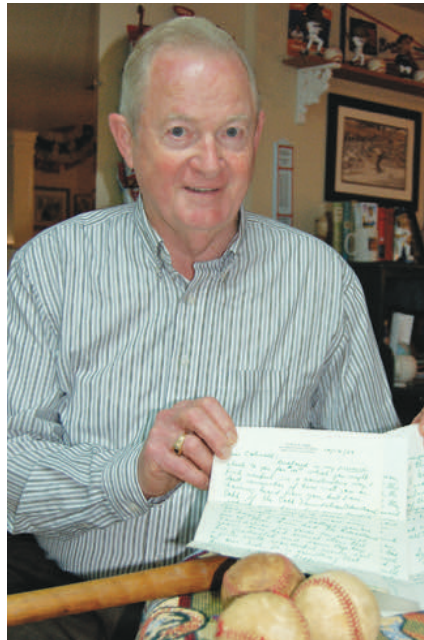
Admiration for his play on the field, however, resulted in his election — with the highest percentage of votes — into the inaugural class of the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1936. The other initial inductees were Babe Ruth, Honus Wagner, Walter Johnson and Christy Mathewson.

The degree to which Cobb was a scoundrel depends on who is telling the stories. Some described him as violent, racist and disreputable. Others claim those attributes have been applied unfairly.

It is known that his life was filled with family tragedies and fractured relationships that likely shaped his less-than-congenial personality.

GREEN INK

Retired pastor Jack Colwell knows his one encounter with Cobb served him well — and gives a small peek, at least, into something of the larger character of the longtime batting champion. Yet Jack waited 50 years before revealing what he had experienced as a seminarian in 1959.



Ty Cobb was widely known for being confrontational, hot-tempered and impatient — as well as a great competitor — making his 1959 letter to ministerial student Jack Colwell more surprising.

Cobb, who became wealthy by investing his baseball earnings in General Motors and Coca-Cola stock, created an educational foundation to provide scholarships for Georgia youth in need. Jack received such scholarships to attend college and seminary.

But it was a personal letter and a check from “the Georgia Peach” that surprised Jack when he opened his mailbox in Wake Forest, N.C., as a seminarian in 1959.

“Enclosed is my personal check to you for \$100, which you might find useful in a constructive way...” began the four-page letter, handwritten in Cobb’s trademark green ink.

Cobb noted that more than 30 students at the time were receiving scholarship funds — with just two being ministerial students.

“It is something that brings me much happiness,” penned Cobb. “Your selection for the ministry is very commendable; we have you and one other going to divinity schools.”

THE GIFT

Jack noted that \$100 was a lot of money for a seminarian in 1959. But the greater shock was the lengthy, very personal letter from a baseball legend.

“I looked closely to confirm that it was, indeed, intended for me,” said Jack. “I was amazed and excited to discover that the letter was from Ty Cobb, the famous former baseball player.”

Cobb told how his foundation staff kept him well informed about scholarship recipients, noting, “We know all about you more than you might think.” He encouraged Jack in his ministerial calling.

“Keep up your good work, spare no efforts, aim high,” wrote Cobb, reflecting the approach he took to his own vocation. “You have but one life to live, you are fortunate to apply yourself on God’s side.”

Cobb explained how the \$200 that he was splitting between two ministerial students came to him in an unusual way. He had cashed a check for someone he considered a “religiously inclined” person. But when Cobb misplaced the check, that person refused to replace it.

‘SELFISH PRAYER’

“I said a little selfish prayer to God and asked [that] this person be influenced to see the right way, and pledged that if I did receive the money I would put it to good use in God’s work,” Cobb explained. “So help me, I was called on the telephone the next day; the person had thought it over

and assured me a check would come.”

After receiving and cashing the replacement check, Cobb fulfilled his promise to God by helping out the two ministers in training.

Cobb considered the experience to be “one of those astounding things that proves to us here on earth [of] God’s power or workings that seem to be answered by the power of prayer.” He added, “It’s a small matter but it did happen; it’s not the only time I have received revealings.”

Cobb said he considered the experience to be “a lesson in serving in some way for God and the Christian way.”

Jack did not reveal the surprising letter and gift for more than 50 years — doing so in the December 2011 issue of *Baptists Today* (now *Nurturing Faith Journal*). But it wasn’t due to a lack of appreciation.

“Cobb has been portrayed as self-centered and self-seeking, especially in his latter years,” said Jack. “His letter acknowledged twice that his prayer was selfish, but focused attention upon its result... He seemed to rejoice genuinely, though, in the other man’s change of heart.”

Reflecting on the letter of more than a half-century ago, Jack said he was reminded that personalities are complex and that few public figures are as one-dimensional as they may appear.

The affluent Cobb referred to receiving the \$200 as a “small matter,” but noted: “I struck a responsive chord in this person; he answered from his conscience and so got closer back to God.”

Getting a bit theological, Cobb noted that one should not pray to receive material things — hence deeming his divine request a “selfish prayer” — but “try to live in God’s way.”

CONFIDENTIALITY

Though not a churchman, Cobb knew such a story would be fodder for any preacher. Or, as he told Jack in the letter, “right up your alley.”

However, he clearly did not want his experience and generosity to become a sermon illustration. So more than once in the letter, he insisted on confidentiality.

Cobb added that if Jack couldn’t resist telling the story, he should replace his name with “John Smith” to retain anonymity.

That point was further emphasized in the closing words of the lengthy letter:

“Hope you very good wish in your work, remember all this is strictly between you and I. I am sincerely, Ty Cobb.”

Well trained in pastoral care and ministerial ethics, Jack kept the requested confidentiality for more than five decades.

“As a minister and counselor I have great respect for confidentiality,” said Jack. “In some cases, though, I believe that confidences should have expiration dates.”

So in 2011, for the first time, Jack shared the story of the green-inked letter and personal check from a baseball giant better known for confrontation than compassion.

“Fifty years after Cobb’s death I cannot see how the content of his letter could harm anyone,” said Jack in 2011. “Of more importance, the communication might refute some negative popular notions about Cobb’s character.”

MIXED REALITIES

The harshest image of Cobb comes from a lengthy — and widely questioned — biography by Al Stump that was made into a movie starring Tommy Lee Jones. On the other side are those seeking to make Cobb an almost mythological figure.

The reality is that he’d fight at the drop of a hat, yet also give generously to support former players in need — such as catcher Mickey Cochrane, who attended Cobb’s funeral. His scholarship fund is not Cobb’s only lasting impact; his generous gift in memory of his parents created a hospital in his hometown of Royston, Ga.

The small town’s museum — attached to a professional building — commemo-

rates Cobb’s baseball career and sells related gifts. But copies of Stump’s brutal biography are not available.

The calmness of the mausoleum outside Royston, where Cobb and his relatives are buried, belies the troubles they faced. Ty’s mother was just 15 when he was born.

Later she was cleared of charges after she shot and killed her husband coming back into their house. The death of his father haunted Ty.

Cobb’s own two failed marriages and his fatherly ways were not of championship caliber. Tragically, two of his five children preceded him in death: Herschel, 34, from a heart attack and Ty Jr., a physician, at age 42 from a brain tumor.

ONE PERSPECTIVE

For 52 years, one Baptist preacher who had experienced an act of generosity and gained insight into the personality of Ty Cobb kept his mouth shut. And he stored the treasured letter — which came with a check to help with his ministry preparation — in a safety deposit box.

“Undoubtedly, Cobb lacked the ability to win friends, and was not always a good role model,” said Jack. “His letter to me indicated, though, that his inner self had another side. After 50 years I came to feel that this glimpse of his religious faith should be shared.”

Checking in with Jack recently, he said that he’s had conversations about the letter and gift with various persons interested in Cobb’s legacy. He sent copies of the feature story in the December 2011 issue of *Baptists Today* to the Cobb Educational Foundation and the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y., where it was added to the research archives.

Jack still has the four-page, green-inked letter, which he hopes to sell to a sports memorabilia collector and then give the proceeds to the Cobb Educational Foundation. The fund created by Cobb’s generosity — which helped Jack and many other Georgians gain their education — has distributed more than \$18 million in scholarships. **NFJ**



Friends remembered, lives honored

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

We remember and honor the lives of some longtime friends of *Nurturing Faith Journal* and Good Faith Media. Each was a very generous and supportive person who made a significant impact through faithful living.

Bob Dale of Richmond, Va., died April 30. A leadership coach, professor and denominational leader, he wrote numerous books and articles. Two of his books are part of the Healthy Church Resources series published under Good Faith Media's Nurturing Faith imprint. *Weaving Strong Leaders: How Leaders Grow Down, Grow Up, and Grow Together* was co-authored with Bill Wilson. *To Dream Again, Again: Growing Healthy Congregations for Changing Futures* — a fresh approach to his former bestselling book — provides guidance for keeping churches healthy and redemptive.



David George of Nashville, Tenn., died March 7. He was pastor of Nashville's Immanuel Baptist Church for 30 years, before retiring in 2006 and being named pastor emeritus. He grew up in Louisiana and Texas, and also served churches in Shreveport, La., and Stuttgart, Ark. David filled many denominational leadership roles and was a trustee at Belmont University. He and his wife Peggy were married for 60 years.



Anne Green of Dahlonega, Ga., died March 9. Raising four children and serving churches where her late husband Bob was pastor, she was also a public school kindergarten teacher for 23 years until retirement. Her faithful service as part of Dahlonega Baptist Church spanned more than 50 years and numerous roles including choir member, ministry to homebound adults, mission experiences, and teaching adults with special needs.



Woodie Williams of Clemson, S.C., died April 11. Professor emeritus at Clemson University, where he taught for nearly 30 years, Woodie spent 20 years as an international consultant through his company, Nutrition One. From serving as state Baptist Student Union president in Mississippi to teaching Sunday school for more than 50 years, he was an active Christian lay leader. His wife of 65 years, Winnie Williams, is a former board chair of Nurturing Faith (now Good Faith Media) and a director emerita.



Good Faith Media expresses deep appreciation for the contributions of these good friends. We pray that God's comfort and peace will be experienced by the many who loved them.

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WEAPONIZING FREEDOM

17th-century foundational principle now a pretense for extremism

Editor's note: This article, supported by a gift from the Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society, continues the former organization's mission to advance freedom of conscience and other historic Baptist principles.

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Religious freedom has always had a distribution problem. If applied equally to all persons, everyone enjoys equal protections from discrimination. But if confined to certain persons only, religious freedom becomes a weapon of evil.

In the early 17th century, Baptists arose in opposition to establishment churches that confined religious freedom to themselves. Religious extremists in Europe and in the New World's theocratic colonies harshly persecuted dissenters.

Baptists, something less than Christian in the minds of Christian extremists, suffered for demanding equal freedom of conscience and religion for all persons.

"All" meant everyone: Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, pagans and heretics, persons of all faiths and of no faith.

It's not that Baptists agreed with those of other faiths or no faith. Rather Baptists insisted that God alone was Lord of the human conscience, and hence one's religious beliefs.

Kings, popes, and most all extremist religious and community leaders disagreed.

King James I (of King James Bible fame) sent early Baptist leader Thomas Helwys — who dared condemn the king's authority over individual's souls — to Newgate prison, where Helwys died a martyr.

In the colonial era and apart from enslaved African Americans, Baptists were among the most persecuted peoples—experiencing beatings, floggings, incarceration, waterboarding and confiscation of property.

In response, Baptist Roger Williams

created Rhode Island as a haven for dissenters, providing his colony's citizens with freedom of conscience and religion.

Yet not until the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, enshrining Baptists' once heretical religious freedom principles, were dissenters' beliefs and practices finally protected. Majoritarian Christians — no longer allowed to control the thoughts and beliefs of citizens — expressed anger at America's founding as a secular nation.

In time many disgruntled white Christians living in the South embraced the Confederate States of America as God's chosen nation.

Persons publicly opposing God's ordained institution of African slavery were punished, expelled or executed. Many white Baptists, having already forsaken their heritage of freedom for all by embracing the enslavement of Black Americans, punished dissenters within their own denomination.

Radicalized in their hatred, many white Southerners in the century following the American Civil War denied freedoms to Black Americans, whom they impoverished and terrorized throughout the South, and lynched by the thousands.

Yet once again courageous Baptists arose and demanded freedom for everyone. Led foremost by Black Baptists working and marching alongside like-minded people of other faiths and color, a bold movement for civil rights endured the wrath of white supremacists and achieved progress in human rights.

Yet the ascendancy toward equal rights in America re-energized many white Christians' hatred of minority groups. Portraying themselves as victims of reverse discrimination, they claimed their "religious freedom" to deny Blacks access to their churches, businesses, public schools and neighborhoods.

Today, discrimination in the name of "religious freedom" is a rally cry for white

Christian nationalists.

Similar to the Confederacy of yesteryear, modern Christian nationalists are waging war against America's federal government — and hence diversity — as vividly evidenced in the Capitol insurrection.

At the same time, the now-conservative controlled U.S. Supreme Court is increasingly elevating the "freedoms" of far-right Christians above the freedoms of others, a development some scholars attribute to a backlash to the Court's 2015 decision establishing same-sex marriage as a constitutional right.

A study by the Stanford Constitutional Law Center concluded that during the past five years the "politicization of religious freedom has infiltrated every level of federal judiciary." In 2018 the Court ruled that a conservative Christian baker could refuse service to gay customers on the basis of his personal religious beliefs. Two years later the Court ruled that a conservative Catholic school could discriminate against employees on the basis of age and disability. During the past year the Court has repeatedly sided with conservative Christian churches that insist their right to unrestricted worship in person during the COVID pandemic is more important than the safety and well-being of their members and the general public.

Today's Supreme Court "majority has weaponized free speech in service of business and conservative interests," concludes scholar Lee Epstein of Washington University.

The flame of equal freedom for all persons continues to flutter. Baptists' founding principles are sputtering, and democracy is imperiled.

As early Baptists did long ago, now Christians of good faith must join with others of good will in denouncing Christian nationalism, affirming America's inherent diversity, advocating for human rights, and working for the common good. [NFJ](#)

Questions Christians ask scientists

The Bible says much about Heaven and Earth, but isn't Mars interesting, too?

Yes it is! And since it is one of the five planets human beings can see with their unaided vision, and one of the brightest of these, Mars has drawn our interest since before recorded history.

We've not only studied Mars with telescopes and landers and rovers, but have written poems about it, told stories about it, and even given it a personality. Mars both challenges our intellects and excites our imaginations.

That so many people have been fascinated by the most recent mission to Mars comes as no surprise. In February, after a six-and-a-half-month journey from Earth, the *Perseverance* rover touched down and began operations on the surface of Mars.

NASA scientists chose Jezero Crater, just north of the Martian equator, as the landing site for *Perseverance*. The reason for this choice is simple:

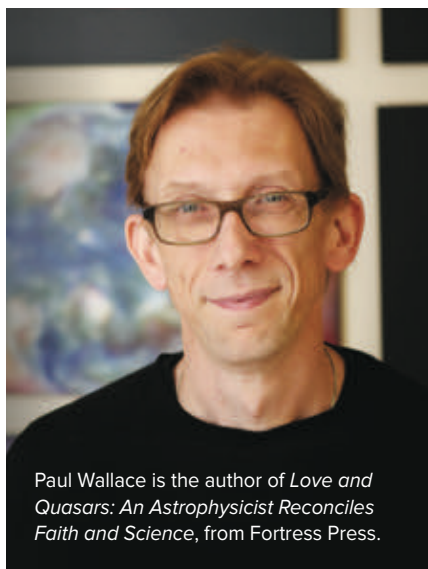
Billions of years ago, Jezero and the surrounding area were once flooded with water. In fact, billions of years ago, Jezero was the location of an ancient river delta.

Yes, Mars once had liquid water on its surface, and its northern hemisphere may have been entirely covered by a vast ocean. Like all planets, Mars was much warmer long ago.

It has since cooled considerably, just as Earth and the other planets have, and today Mars is too cold to support standing water on its surface; its average temperature is about -70 degrees Fahrenheit.

But way back, in the early days of the Solar System, water pooled and ran across the Martian surface just as it does on Earth today. And why is water so important?

That's because, as far as we can tell, liquid water is a prerequisite for life. And life is what this mission — and nearly all scientific work on Mars — is really about,



Paul Wallace is the author of *Love and Quasars: An Astrophysicist Reconciles Faith and Science*, from Fortress Press.

and in two ways.

First, it is about alien life. In the early days of the scientific study of Mars, speculation arose about the possibility of life there.

Giovanni Schiaparelli, a 19th-century Italian astronomer, saw through his telescope some details on the surface of Mars that he called “channels.” He published his work, and in it this term was translated into English as “canals.”

Canals, unlike channels, suggests some kind of artificial construction. This mistranslation gave rise to speculation and folklore about the possibility of intelligent life on Mars, and the term “Martians” was coined.

Among the speculators was the prominent astronomer Percival Lowell, who spent much of his career championing the idea of intelligent life on Mars. And while he did succeed in discovering Pluto, he was quite wrong about the Martians.

But the idea of canals on Mars remained fixed in the public imagina-

tion, as did the terribly exciting notion of Martians. Throughout the 20th century, storytellers and science fiction writers mined the widespread notion of life on Mars in their quest to entertain and enlighten people.

The 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast scare — in which some listeners came to believe that Martians had actually invaded New York City — stands as a prime example of this trend.

Today, thanks to a number of landers and rovers equipped with cameras and scientific equipment, we have observed Mars up close and have encountered no direct evidence of life, past or present, intelligent or otherwise.

But we still have a lot of looking to do. So one piece of *Perseverance*'s mission is to search the ancient river delta for signs of life.

A second piece of the *Perseverance* mission also has to do with life — not alien life, but human life. Human beings have long dreamed of traveling to and colonizing other planets, and, however it plays out, Mars will definitely be our first stop.

Some features of Mars make it a very attractive target: it's close, its day is only 37 minutes longer than ours, and it has seasons as Earth does. But the similarities end there.

Getting to Mars and back will be a triumph of technology, grit and know-how. But remaining on Mars for any length of time will be much more difficult.

Gravity on the Red Planet is much more feeble than here at home. So after some time on Mars our bones and muscles will grow weak (and this process may not be reversible).

The average temperature, as I noted,

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 john@goodfaithmedia.org.

is extremely low. So outdoor activities won't be possible without heavy suits.

The atmosphere is composed almost entirely of carbon dioxide and contains only a trace of oxygen. There's no way we could breathe it. Worse, the thin air allows lots of ultraviolet light to reach the surface so cancer, cognitive disease and reproductive problems would multiply.

The planet lacks a magnetic field, so it's constantly bombarded with fast-moving electrons and protons from the Sun — which means even more cancer.

Mars orbits further from the Sun than does Earth, so even bright days would seem dim. This fact, combined with the lack of surface water and organics in the soil, makes it impossible to grow food or anything else for that matter.

Also, no germs live on Mars so our immune systems would lose their ability to fight any diseases that may arrive on spaceships from Earth. Other challenges abound, but these points serve to make my case: colonizing Mars will be hard to do.

But human beings are nothing if not ingenious and hard working, and *Persever-*

ance has recently shown that it is possible to extract oxygen from the atmospheric carbon dioxide. This oxygen cannot only be breathed by visiting astronauts and possible future colonists, but also be used to power rockets leaving the Martian surface.

Speaking of the surface, the Red Planet is well named. Its color is caused by the iron in the surface rocks combining with the oxygen in the planet's atmosphere, which produces iron oxide.

We earthlings have another name for iron oxide: rust. That's right: the surface of Mars is literally rusting away, and this rust gives it a distinct ruddy glow when seen against the dark night sky.

The question naturally arises of why would we spend so much money — and employ thousands of scientists and engineers, and commit so many years of hard effort — to leave our rich green world, flowing with water and filled with life, in favor of a rusty, cold, apparently-dead hazard of a planet such as Mars?

There are many answers to this question. Some have to do with the nature

of human beings, how we relentlessly explore and ask questions. Other answers have to do with politics, and some with economics.

But the Christian has a different set of challenges: Why, in a world so filled with need, so crowded with the least of these, should we turn our eyes upward and dream of visiting a red light in the sky?

But this is not an either-or question. The two impulses — serving others and exploring the Solar System, which is our home as well — are not naturally opposed. They are not mutually exclusive.

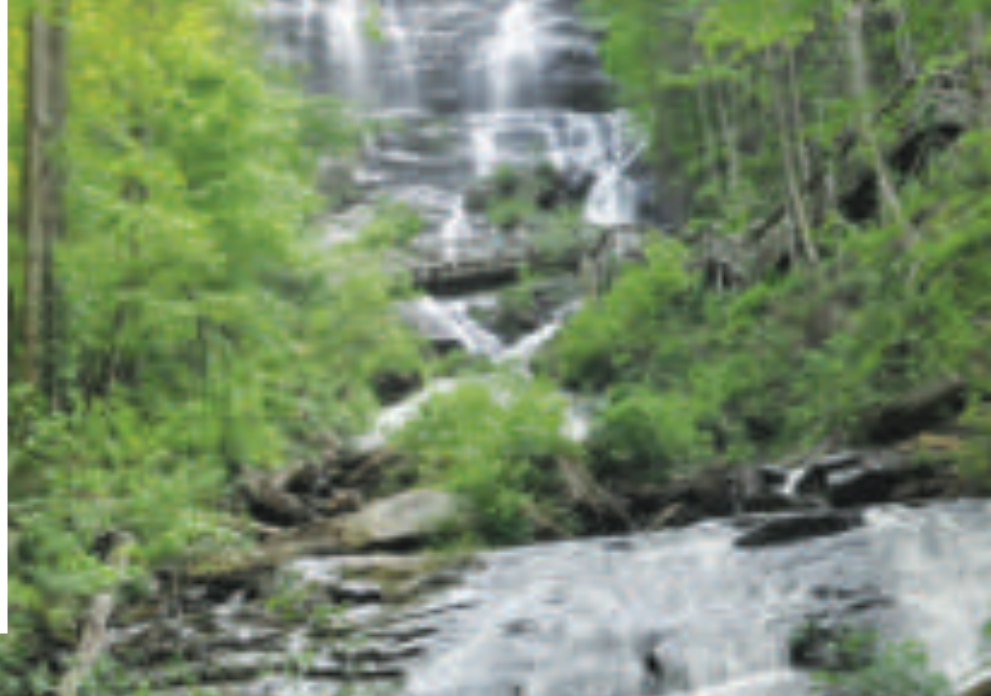
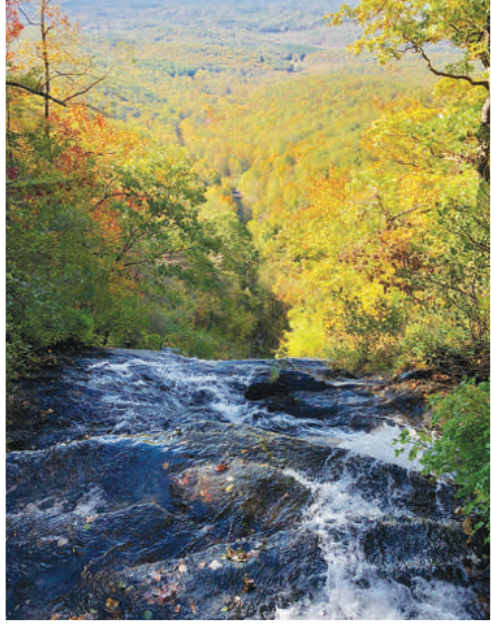
In fact, any success we may have in space exploration will be a sign of our care for others. Any society that does not lift up, care for and educate all its people will have neither the human resources nor the spirit required to go where no man or woman has gone before.

But if we do follow Jesus' command to love, to search out the lost, to bring hope to the poor, and to serve one another, we will find one day that traveling to Mars is not only possible, but also inevitable. **NFJ**

LOVE AND QUASARS
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WORDS & WONDERS

GFM Writers' Retreat will offer insights, inspiration

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

What a combination: mountain vistas aflame with varied hues, fresh fall air for every breath, the soothing and continuous sound of water flowing over rocks, writers and readers engaging with one another about the creative shaping of words for good purposes.

Good Faith Media will host its first Writers' Retreat, Oct. 20-22, at Amicalola Falls Lodge in the colorful mountains of North Georgia. And the invitation is open "to anyone who loves words."

The retreat is truly designed for anyone — whether a seasoned writer, an aspiring author, an appreciative reader, or someone simply seeking to craft words more creatively or learn from those who do.

Program guests include author/playwright Anne Nelson, singer/songwriter Pat Terry and novelist Pamela Terry, along with the Good Faith Media publishing and marketing team.

An award-winning author, Anne Nelson's books include *Shadow Network: Media, Money, and the Secret Hub of the*

Radical Right (Bloomsbury, 2019) and *Suzanne's Children: A Daring Rescue in Nazi Paris* (Simon & Schuster, 2017).

A former war correspondent and human rights advocate, Anne directs the International Program of the Columbia School of Journalism in New York City.

Her play, *The Guys*, dealing with the aftermath of 9/11, has been widely produced on stage and as a feature film starring Sigourney Weaver.

Pat Terry has penned top hits for country artists such as Tanya Tucker and Travis Tritt. Others who have recorded his songs include B.J. Thomas, the Oak Ridge Boys, Roy Rogers, Alan Jackson, Kenny Chesney and many others.

With his well-traveled Pat Terry Group in the 1970s, he was a pioneer of Contemporary Christian Music. His latest songs express honest struggles, sensitivity to suffering, and reigning hopefulness.

Pamela Terry and her new novel, *The Sweet Taste of Muscadines* (Penguin Random House, 2021), were featured earlier this year on *Good Morning America*.

She tells an intimate story of a woman's return to her small southern hometown in

the wake of her mother's sudden death — only to find stunning family secrets.

A gifted storyteller, Pamela's internationally popular blog, "From the House of Edward," was named a top-10 home blog of the year by *The Telegraph* in London. Her second novel is in the works. She and her husband Pat live in the Atlanta area.

The retreat begins on Wednesday afternoon, Oct. 20, and concludes with a Friday morning session on Oct. 22. A complete schedule is available online along with registration details.

The retreat fee of \$390 per person includes catered meals, all programming, writing consultation, optional free time activities and the daily park pass, internet access and other perks.

Rooms at the beautiful Amicalola Falls Lodge are offered at a deeply discounted rate of just \$149 plus taxes per night, with a variety of room types.

To register for the conference (and then receive lodging information for making one's own room reservations), visit goodfaithmedia.org/writers-retreat-2021 or call Good Faith Media at (615) 627-7763. **NFJ**

New titles available from **Nurturing Faith** — the publishing arm of Good Faith Media

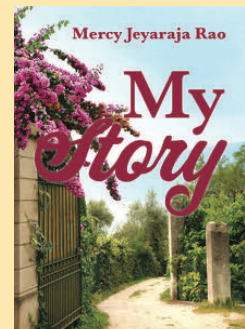
Staring at Dementia: Lesson from Mother

This tender journal recollection depicts the author's time spent with his mother during the last decade of her life. Danny E. Akin journals their many visits together in an attempt to capture and record the rapid and extreme changes Mother experiences as she transitions over the years from an independent living apartment to a Personal Care setting and finally to Memory Care.



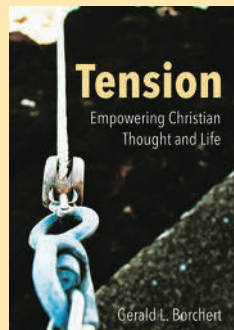
My Story

“The story of my life is not about my accomplishments. The choice I made in the year 1947, when I turned my life over to Jesus, has made all the difference. A man of God prayed, ‘Lord, get me out of the way and let the instrument be forgotten and you get all the glory.’ This is my prayer as I write my story.”



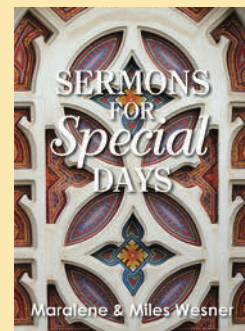
Tension: Empowering Christian Thought and Life

Author Gerald L. Borchert wrestles with the many ways in which Christians experience tension, both in the church and in real life. The very nature of choice is a source of tension, and all humans are confronted daily with choices that can have significant impacts on themselves and those around them. Borchert examines what it means to live with freedom and to engage with our choices in a meaningful way.



Sermons for Special Days

Enjoy this collection of 51 sermons written by husband-and-wife team Maralene and Miles Wesner. These sermons are written for holidays throughout the year, from New Years Day to Christmas. These sermons were developed with three goals in mind: appropriateness, depth, and psychological soundness. The authors hope this collection of meaningful and successful “celebration services” will be useful to others. They are highly adaptable and require a minimum amount of preparation.



Join us for our **2022** Adventures

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Astrophysicist and faith/science columnist Paul Wallace will join the experience.

ISRAEL/WEST BANK

MAY 26 – JUNE 5

Bible studies writer Tony Cartledge will guide this remarkable exploration of the Holy Land — including participation in an archeological dig for a day.

YOSEMITE AND SEQUOIA NATIONAL PARKS

JUNE 11-18

Join Good Faith Media hosts for a small-group encounter with the towering trees and majestic mountains in these well-preserved parts of California.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

JULY 24-31

This well-hosted experience will take in the varied wonders of Olympic National Park and other sites in Washington State, as well as the beautiful coastline extending into Oregon.



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Mark your calendars and make plans!
Further details and upcoming registration at
goodfaithmedia.org/group-experiences.