

MAY-JUNE 2022

NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

Special
edition:

Migrants
& Ministry

goodfaithmedia.org

'PA-STOR! PA-STOR!'

Crime, complexities and compassion
along the U.S.-Mexico border

FROM LOST TO FOUND

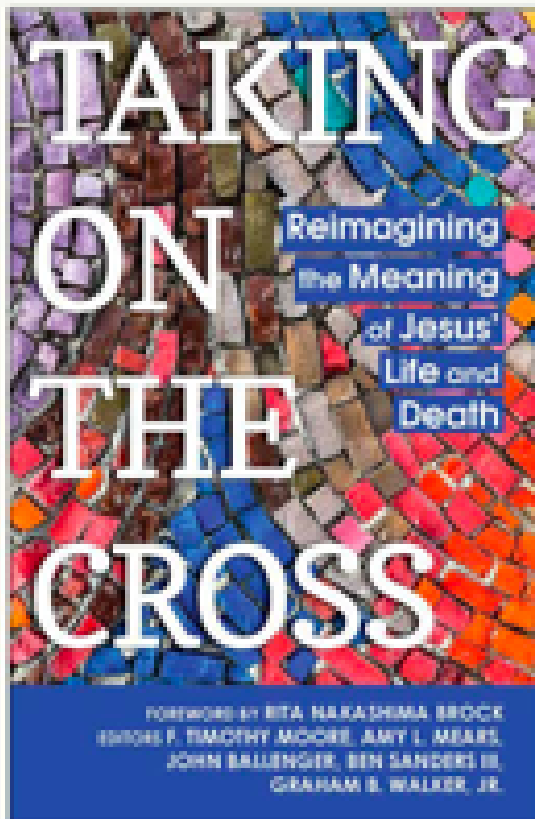
Q&A with "1.5-gen immigrant"
Karen Gonzalez

THE BIBLE & STRANGERS

A conversation with author/minister
Christopher Harbin

A publication of Good Faith Media

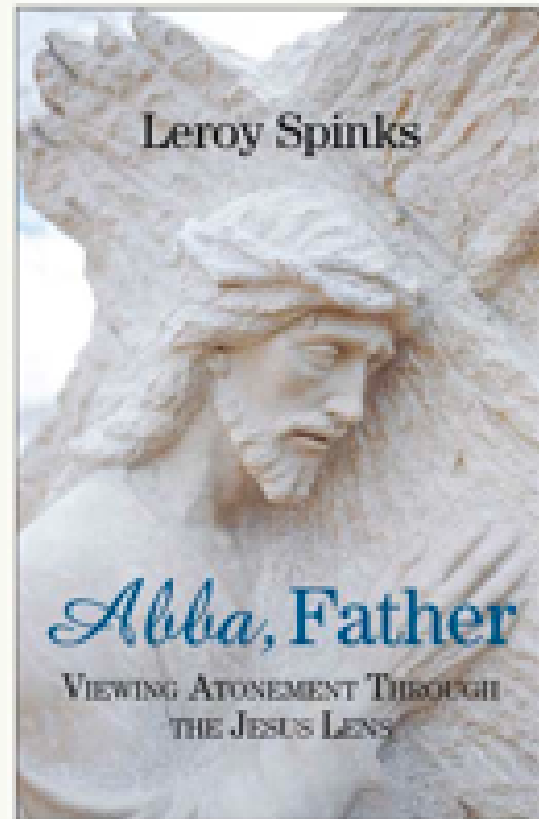
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Editor's Letter

For the first time in my 22 years as editor of this journal, most of the content within is focused on a single subject: immigration.

This is a very complex and highly emotional issue. Both compassion and hostilities abound.

While the issue is addressed in some broader ways in the pages ahead, there is no attempt to be exhaustive. Ever-changing policies — often rooted in political and economic benefits — keep even those most directly involved with migrants and refugees on their toes.

With these writings, however, we seek to bring a better understanding of the real-life issues related to migration, especially along the U.S.-Mexico border. And we get personal by engaging migrants who share their own stories and by visiting with those doing remarkable ministry with migrants in the name of Christ.

Late last year I was pondering how

various media sources and politicians portray immigration in ways that produce more heat (anger and hostility) than light (understanding and rightful responses). “The border” has become a catch phrase often uttered with great distaste and little reality.

So Mitch Randall, CEO of Good Faith Media, and I went to see at least some of what is taking place in border towns on both sides of the Rio Grande.

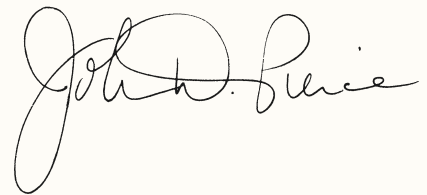
Helpfully joining us were Elket Rodríguez and Sue Smith of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship global missions, Stephen Reeves of Fellowship Southwest, and Jorge Zapata of CBF of Texas. Also, we talked with a United Methodist deaconess and others doing ministry along the border.

Their deep and trusting connections with ministry leaders in the Lower Rio Grande Valley — in addition to their language skills and knowledge of

immigration practices and policies — were immeasurable in gaining the access we needed to produce these articles.

It didn't take long to see Jesus at work through some deeply committed servants along the border — despite the complications, challenges and seemingly endless work. Our prayers and support should be with them.

Please read on!



Executive Editor

john@goodfaithmedia.org

PS: Some regular features suspended for this issue will resume in the next one.

Great Bible Study IS IN YOUR HANDS!



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

See page 21 for more information.

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GOOD FAITH MEDIA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jackie B. Riley, *Senior Copyeditor*
jackie@goodfaithmedia.org

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

Cally Chisholm, *Creative Coordinator, Publishing/Marketing*
cally@goodfaithmedia.org

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

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BRANCH RICKEY'S LITTLE BLUE BOOK

Wit and Strategy from Baseball's Last Wise Man

Cover photo by John D. Pierce. Migrant children play in the courtyard of an El Buen Samaritano Migrante (Good Samaritan Migrant) ministry shelter in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. **Story on page 6.**

Worth Repeating

“Spiritual gifts do not come in pink or blue.”

Anglican Bible scholar Michael F. Bird

“On the one hand, evangelicals wanted souls to be saved. On the other, they wanted everyone to stay in their places.”

University of Pennsylvania religion scholar Arthea Butler in her book, *White Evangelical Racism* (RNS)

“Christian nationalism will always have a king, but it will never be Jesus. He’s too nonviolent, too inclusive, too self-sacrificial, and puts the oppressed first too much.”

Pastor and writer Benjamin Cremer (Twitter)

“The most draining aspect of the pandemic has been that everything — every action, every ministry, every decision — is a battle ... There is no decision that is easy or that isn’t second-guessed or challenged.”

An anonymous pastor quoted by Martin Thielen at doubtersparish.com

“I still use the term ‘Christian,’ but ... I prefer to call us to become and live as Christ followers: persons who follow Jesus, trusting Jesus ... as we follow wherever he goes and practice doing what he does.”

Michael Smith, in a sermon to First Baptist Church of Jefferson City, Tenn.

“Those who are calling people to confess their sins and trust in God’s gracious forgiveness, the essence of the evangelical gospel, are the very ones who are afraid to confess the sins of their precious historiography and movement... Evangelicalism needs to get saved.”

New Testament scholar Scot McKnight (*Christianity Today*)

“Many people believe that increased wealth on its own will invariably bring them happiness ... What truly matters, researchers say, is how money facilitates the parts of our lives that produce lasting joy and contentment — our relationships, faith, and sense of purpose.”

From an Equitable-sponsored article in *The Atlantic* on spending and saving

“If we limit our understanding of the nation’s beginning to the British colonies, then how could Latinos and members of other groups be anything beside outsiders and latecomers who should be compelled to assimilate? The slogan ‘America is a nation of immigrants’ is supposed to make us feel included.”

Geraldo L. Cadava, history professor at Northwestern University (*The Atlantic*)

“Going for a walk, exercising, building something, gardening, playing catch, and running have all been shown to help shift our mind out of deep ruts and at times liberate us from dysphoric rumination and other types of adverse emotional traps.”

Columbia University psychologist Peter T. Coleman (Inc.)

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10 things learned or reaffirmed about immigration

By John D. Pierce

Immigration is a complex issue — one often and unnecessarily filled with misinformation and bigotry. Political drama tends to reduce the focus on this issue to those crossing the southern border.



However, entering the country in other ways and overstaying visas play major roles in the presence of those without documentation or facing a long and uncertain process. But, in recent years, attitudes toward migrants coming from south of the U.S. border have hardened.

Much of this opposition results from the misrepresentation and demeaning of asylum seekers and other migrants by politicians who use immigration as a wedge issue — stirring up white fear and resentment.

After visiting recently with numerous persons on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, reading more extensively on the subject, and talking with those whose daily lives involve navigating the ever-refashioned legal maze, I confess to still not understanding all the dynamics.

But here are 10 things I have discovered or reaffirmed about immigration, based on my recent experiences. These affirmations are present throughout the extensive coverage that follows in this issue of the journal.

1. Humans migrate; it's nothing new. Often our current immigration patterns are treated as an unprecedented and threatening “invasion.” Our nation's history and the biblical context tell us otherwise.

2. Issues surrounding migration are complicated.

There is no way to explain all the dynam-

ics at work or the legal processes that, as one person who works in this area daily said, change every two weeks. Sloganized bumper-sticker reactions to immigration are always inadequate and unhelpful.

3. Politics and economics play a larger role than realities and compassion.

“Follow the money” applies to immigration policies and practices — and the money from those who benefit from related contracts and unofficial enterprises gets applied to politicians. Therefore, what's best for migrants and the nation has a hard time competing with other interests. Not fixing a problem is politically and economically beneficial to some — most often those in power.

4. Desperate people will take desperate measures.

As you will read in the articles ahead, many migrants face only high-risk options. Their lives or those of their family are endangered. It is easy to sit in our comfort and security and proclaim what they should or should not do.

5. “What are they doing in our country?” is an unfair question.

Indigenous people are the only Americans who can rightfully raise that query. The rest of us came to what is now the United States — some forcibly and others voluntarily. Seeing ourselves as immigrants is a helpful perspective no matter how many generations have been here.

6. Selfishness is not a Christian value.

Too often Americanized Christians do not share well. Even among some first- or second-generation immigrants is the attitude that “I got mine, but that's enough.” Wanting to cut off the line just after me is

not something that aligns with the teachings of Jesus.

7. Don't confuse racism with nostalgia.

As a nostalgic person, I enjoy recalling times, people and places from throughout my life. It is a warm and welcomed feeling. It is more faithful, however, to do so with a critical eye on the ways our thinking and behaving in the past have favored those of Anglo descent over others.

8. Don't listen to the crisis mongers.

Politicians like to stage photo ops along the southern border and report on the “crisis” they “see” — portraying a fantasized scene of hardened criminals flowing across the river to harm “real Americans” and take away their jobs. Tune them out.

9. Demeaning others is not a Christian option.

Christians can hold different viewpoints on the complex issue of immigration. Followers of Jesus, however, cannot rightfully demonize or demean others without violating them and the Christian witness. Too many professing American Christians openly mock rather than minister to those seeking the same securities we enjoy. Repentance is needed.

10. Christians on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border are providing life-saving, life-sustaining ministries.

In the stories ahead you will meet some of these remarkable people. They are diverse in doctrine, politics and practice. Yet their sacrificial, even heroic, service is rooted in one common factor: the belief that Jesus calls his followers to meet the basic and ongoing physical, emotional and spiritual needs of vulnerable persons. And they do so. **NFJ**

'PA-STOR, PA-STOR!'

Crime, complexities, compassion meet migrants along U.S.-Mexico border

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Days move slowly and the ever-changing process even more so. Hopefulness can fade — revealed in the sad eyes of those living in the simplicity but safety of crowded, threadbare migrant shelters.

They await and pray for whatever opportunities might bring an end to their long journeys of suffering. They have been through much trauma getting from whatever threat drove them to flee to the northern border of Mexico — with hope for a new, safer life for themselves and their families just across the Rio Grande.

Kidnapping, extortion and rape are common themes in their stories. Rather than being seen and embraced as precious children of God, these vulnerable people are often treated as mere objects: sources of ransom on one side of the river and political pawns on the other.



Pastor Eleuterio González (right), a former federal judge, serves a vibrant young congregation in Matamoros, Mexico, that also provides migrant shelters in the border town. Jorge Zapata (left) offers support and encouragement during his weekly visits from Harlingen, Texas, where he serves in multiple ministry roles including director of Hearts4Kids.

PASTOR ELEUTERIO

Sadness turns to smiles, at least for the moment, at a migrant shelter in Matamoros, Mexico, when Pastor Eleuterio González arrives after preaching in the first of a string of worship services he'll lead that Sunday at the youthful and vibrant Iglesia Valle de Beraca (Beraca Valley Church).

"Pa-STOR! Pa-STOR!" they call out as children rush to take hold of his stout legs and their parents and other adults reach out for a supportive hand or a hug.

There is a lot of Pastor Eleuterio to go around — literally and figuratively. A former college linebacker and Mexican federal judge, Eleuterio creates an imposing yet compassionate presence.

Members of his church arrive, bringing a truckload of mattresses and some food. This is but one of four shelters the church provides in the border town for migrants who seek new lives that could begin just over the bridge into Brownsville, Texas.

"What worries me the most is seeing people in such sadness," said Eleuterio in Spanish. "We're really going to show them the love of our neighbors."

Church members shifted from feeding migrants who occupied a tent camp along the river to providing them more secure shelters in formerly abandoned buildings.

"They are helping the migrants everyday," said Jorge Zapata, associate coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas and director of Fellowship Southwest's immigrant relief ministry, who crosses into Matamoros from his home in Harlingen, Texas, each Wednesday to assist with migrant ministry and teach a discipleship class.

Produce stands surround the church's latest project: an under-construction, three-story building in downtown Matamoros that will provide a much-needed community center for migrants seeking admission to the U.S. and those recently deported.



Pastor Lorenzo Ortiz of Laredo, Texas, assisted by his sister Micaela Ortiz Albarrán, provides a pastoral presence in the migrant shelters they oversee in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.

The multi-purpose facility will offer various workshops along with space to house more than 1,000 people.

“The government worked with us... and the families are no longer on the street,” said the influential pastor of the shelters and related ministries.

The church will move its worship and other activities to the site, too, he said. Asked when the building will be complete, he replied expectantly: “We are asking the Lord for more organizations to join us.”

During his years in the judicial system, Pastor Eleuterio said he did things he knew were wrong. But he started recognizing that God wanted to do something else in his life. That calling was cemented when he nearly lost his life — being shot 13 times when someone attempted to rob him in Brownsville.

Jorge described Eleuterio as a passionate pastor whose enthusiasm and service are contagious, noting that “it is the young people carrying out the migrant ministry.”

The pastor and congregation spend

each day offering kindness and hope, while meeting the most basic physical, emotional and spiritual needs of those living with great fear and uncertainty.

“If we don’t have works our faith is dead,” said Eleuterio. “That’s why we do what we do.”

PASTOR LORENZO

Westward along the Rio Grande, Pastor Lorenzo Ortiz received the same warm greeting of “Pa-STOR! Pa-STOR!” at one of the three shelters he oversees in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. It is considered one of the most dangerous cities in North America — where migrants are at high risk outside the shelters.

Pastor Lorenzo leads El Buen Samaritano Migrante (Good Samaritan Migrant Ministry), based in Laredo, Texas, that serves migrants on both sides of the border with shelter, transportation and guidance for asylum seekers coming from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Cuba and elsewhere.

His relationships with both local police and cartel leaders in Mexico allow him to continue his service to this vulnerable population. “They [cartels] know what our churches are doing and leave us alone,” he said.

But they do keep an eye on Lorenzo’s work, including infiltrating the shelters on occasion, he said.

“They know who we are and that makes a difference,” he added. “And they know I’m not going to be corrupted.”

Lorenzo is aware of four groups doing kidnapping for ransom in the city — focusing on migrants of particular nationalities. And he’s been warned: “Pastor, we are going to check you out.”

“I wondered how Jesus did ministry under the Roman powers,” he said. “It’s the same thing.”

He told cartel leaders that he is no match for them, but simply asked: “Let me do what God wants me to do.”

Lorenzo comes from humble beginnings in southern Mexico, before moving

“My daughter, that’s what motivates me,” [Gabiella] said. “I don’t want her to go through the things I’ve been through.”

about with his family. He has been in Laredo since 1992. His pastoral presence is well received by the migrants who gather around him for words of encouragement and a time of prayer.

He tells them the truth that many Americans think they are criminals. “But we know what you are going through,” he added compassionately.

Despite tight quarters and the barest of conditions, the shelter is well organized and operated efficiently. “We have rules,” he said, noting they are followed.

In addition to meeting basic needs, a team in one upper room of the shelter uses the Internet to arrange travel to the U.S. for those migrants blessed to cross over to meet with immigration officials.

A packed suitcase with a Bible atop stands as a symbol of their readiness to find a new, safer way of life — though one young woman said, pointing to the clothes she was wearing: “I don’t need a suitcase; I’m ready to go like this.”

Each day brings its own challenges and opportunities for Pastor Lorenzo and his faithful volunteers, such as going to Monterrey, the capital of the northeastern Mexican state of Nuevo León, “to buy hundreds of shoelaces.” Shoelaces are among the items taken from migrants at detention centers because of their potential misuse.

While some businesses and nonprofits benefit financially from contracts for migrant services, Lorenzo said he and his volunteers engage in compassionate ministry for a spiritual reason.

“And God is working in all of these ministries,” he said.

‘GABRIELLA’

“If you don’t live the reality, you’ll never know how it is,” said Gabriella (not her real name). “Many in the U.S. don’t know how it is to be persecuted.”

With her daughter, she has lived for four years — the longest of tenures — in the security of a shelter in the border town

of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.

“We feel alone, but Pastor Lorenzo is helping us a lot,” she said. And the pastor added that Gabriella is a big help to him in running the shelters efficiently.

“It’s an honor to serve Jesus along with Pastor Lorenzo,” she responded.

Yet, even working with the shelters creates additional risk, the pastor said. “Her life is in danger.”

The threat of kidnapping for ransom in the city keeps these migrants from leaving the shelters unless traveling to a medical visit or other destination under supervision. Gabriella doesn’t see going to the U.S. as a chance to get rich, she said, but rather to live without constant fear.

“In four years no door has opened [to enter the U.S.],” she said with sadness in her deep brown Honduran eyes. Desperation from waiting so long has caused her to consider otherwise unimaginable choices.

Should she send her precious daughter alone across the border with just prayers and hope for a new life? Or even put her up for adoption?

“It is a thought you have,” she confessed as tears began to stream.

Thoughts of taking her own life surface sometimes, she said, but she focuses on any strand of hopefulness.

“My daughter, that’s what motivates me,” she said. “I don’t want her to go through the things I’ve been through.”

Despite years of waiting and uncertainty, she hasn’t given up yet. She dreams of the day an attorney will call to say: “You have to present yourself” to immigration authorities.

“The reward will be great,” said Gabriella, who is waiting and praying for a safe and secure life for herself and her daughter. Her story, like many others, helps answer the oft-asked question, “Why take such risks?” Because there are no available choices free of risk.

‘MATEO’

“I’m not poor,” said Mateo (not his real name) repeatedly, who lives with his family in a shelter in Nuevo Laredo.

He owns a car wash in Guatemala, he



Though still a young woman, “Sophia” experienced unimaginable trauma before reaching the migrant shelter in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. She shares her story and hopes for a better future with Elket Rodríguez of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship global missions.



Those serving in migrant ministry along the U.S.-Mexico border are well connected. Pastor Israel Rodríguez-Segura of Primera Iglesia Bautista (First Baptist Church) of Piedras Negras, Mexico, receives a photo of a mother and daughter traveling to one of his border town migrant shelters. Inset: Later at the church, he shows them their photo — providing the relief of knowing they are in safe hands.



said, and operates heavy equipment. He wants to take those skills and his family to the U.S., where they will be safe.

His father worked for the Guatemala government in opposition to guerilla forces that became the cartels in power, he said. After fleeing to the U.S., his father returned and was killed.

Mateo said he became the next target of the cartel's revenge. After being shot, he fled only to find more violence en route to the border, narrowly escaping being kidnapped along with his 9-year-old daughter.

"I want to go to a place where I can take my daughter out without danger," he said. And he worries about passing along deep trauma to her.

So far, his multiple attempts to reach the U.S. have failed. He said his Christian faith sustains him in these hard times and he prays there will be other believers who will take seriously Jesus' call to "love your neighbor."

'SOPHIA'

Also in Nuevo Laredo, a young woman moves around the shelter's enclosed courtyard in a wheelchair. At age 19 she has already experienced unimaginable trauma. Yet, somehow, a smile emerges on occasion beneath her protective facemask.

Sophia (not her real name) left the El Salvadoran capital of San Salvador at age 15 after being beaten by cartel members who sought to recruit her. Her family paid extortion money, but that was not enough.

In Mexico she was kidnapped and forced into prostitution — and then impregnated from a rape by a cartel member who took the baby at birth and let her go.

Hopping a train was her best option for getting to the northern border quickly and safely. Yet she dozed off and fell beneath the train's wheels that severed both legs.

Her life was saved through emergency surgery, and she finally arrived in Nuevo Laredo — where, inside the shelter, she is now protected. She patiently awaits a hopeful chance of finding a more permanent and safer place to live across the river.

PASTOR ISRAEL

Israel Rodríguez-Segura is the longtime pastor of Primera Iglesia Bautista (First Baptist Church) of Piedras Negras, Mexico, which provides significant ministries to migrants.

Despite the daily challenges and constant expenditure of time and resources, he maintains a good sense of humor. There is a joke in Mexico, he said in Spanish, about why the country does poorly in the Olympics.

"It is because everyone who runs well, swims fast or jumps high is already in the U.S.," he said with a smile breaking across his weathered face.

The plight of migrants, however, is no laughing matter to him. The church he has served for 37 years relocated from downtown 13 years ago to a worship center and complex on the outskirts that better allows for sheltering and serving migrants.

"Local government doesn't want migrants wandering downtown," he said, noting it's a matter of image that results in discrimination.



Baptist pastor Carlos Navarro (right) of Brownsville, Texas, shows one of the four rooms his church offers to migrants who've been released from a detention center for relocation in the U.S. to await hearings. Having come to the U.S. undocumented 40 years ago, he shares his story and ministry calling with (left to right) Mitch Randall of Good Faith Media and Sue Smith and Elket Rodríguez of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

So he and his church volunteers quietly usher women migrants to the downtown church building at a late hour to spend the night and then return them to the outskirts after an early breakfast. Facilities there provide safe and separate spaces for men and for families.

The government has limited the number of migrants they can serve, he said, “under the pretense of COVID.”

Israel said he “was raised in the things of God” in southern Mexico where his father was a pastor. But his father’s death, when Israel was just 13, resulted in a rebellious time.

But at age 17 he “had a reconciliation with God” and responded to a call to ministry at age 19. Following studies at the Baptist seminary in Mexico City, he came to the church in Piedras Negras.

The presence of migrants is not new in this border town, he said, recalling the first time one knocked on his door and asked for water. What has changed, he said, is the way migrants are viewed.

“People make them feel guilty for the situation they are in,” said Pastor Israel. And due to U.S. policy, there are many more of them in the Mexican border town.

His own perspective on and service

to migrants have evolved as well, he said, from giving water in the name of Jesus to providing food, shelter and other services in response to God’s commands.

“God told us to go, but we never went,” he said of what is often called the Great Commission. “So God is bringing them to us.”

Pastor Israel is well connected with others who minister to migrants and with migrants who eventually get to the U.S.

Over breakfast in downtown Piedras Negras, he showed a photo of a woman and her daughter who were traveling his way. It was sent by a ministry colleague further south in Mexico.

A couple of hours later, when arriving at his church facilities on the outskirts, he sees the woman and daughter sitting quietly in the worship center. Showing them their picture brings a smile of assurance that they are in good hands.

He listens to their story of escaping danger in Honduras and then shows them where they will be staying in a nearby, simple but secure space. Outside the shelter a young Guatemalan man also arrives and is warmly greeted.

Israel pulls out his phone again — and the face in the photo matches the one

standing before him. A smile accompanies a sense of relief once again.

PASTOR CARLOS

Carlos Navarro is pastor of Iglesia Bautista West Brownville. His compassion for and service to migrants are rooted in his own story.

“I was a migrant myself,” he said during a conversation in his church office. “I came in through the same situation; ... I know the context they are coming from.”

In 1982, 18-year-old Carlos came to the U.S. from Guatemala. Arriving in San Francisco, where he would eventually graduate from a nearby Southern Baptist seminary, the first gift he was offered — and rejected — was a marijuana cigarette.

It was a time when undocumented immigrants were more noticeable, he said. So he lived in a church building for nine months — pulling a foam mattress into the small space that held the furnace.

“I’m empathetic,” he said. “It hurts me [to see migrants treated disrespectfully].”

Of the demeaning caricatures of migrants, he said: “I haven’t seen animals.” Instead he describes the reality of hurting individuals and families who’ve experienced threats, torture and other violence.

“What’s a crisis if it’s been going on for 30 years?” [Cindy] asks. “...What we haven’t done is look for solutions.”

“They have to leave,” he said of their departures from dangerous situations.

Pastor Carlos said he gets accused of promoting illegal immigration, but he doesn’t get into the politics. Instead, he said, his focus is on ministering to hurting people.

In 1995 a large number of Cubans were released from the detention center at Port Isabel. The church assisted with sheltering them. When they left, officials told him: “We need you to help with other migrants.”

Pastor Carlos has served as a chaplain in facilities that housed unaccompanied minors coming across the border. He spoke their language and understood their culture context.

“This is a roller coaster ministry,” he said of the ebb and flow of ministry oppor-

tunities, some of which rise unexpectedly. In recent years, his ministry has expanded through the creation of a respite center on the church campus.

“Brownsville is not a friendly city to migrants,” he said. “They want them out the same day [they are released from the detention center].”

So he and his volunteers bring those who’ve been processed and released to the church where they are fed and provided with clothing. Bombas socks — as advertised — are aplenty.

Not every donation is as helpful as others. Some professional football and basketball teams sent uniforms not used during the pandemic — but few migrants can wear such huge sizes.

Belts, shoestrings and bras with straps are confiscated in detention in fear they could be used to harm one’s self or others. The latter was addressed, somewhat, by the lingerie company Victoria’s Secret.

The shipment was graciously rejected, however, since it contained 1,400 bras — all size 44D.

Four hotel-like rooms are available for those needing lodging before going to the bus station or airport to live with families or sponsors and await their hearings. Pastor Carlos said that his church has served migrants of 41 different nationalities.

“I give my business card to every single migrant,” he said. “There’s no single migrant member of my church [except himself], but I’ve ministered to more than 2,000.”

Pastor Carlos keeps up with those who pass through his church’s ministry in West Brownsville, asking church leaders across the nation to “do follow-up” in whatever place migrants relocate.

Recalling his own experience from 40 years ago, Pastor Carlos said he didn’t speak to anyone for three days after arriving. So he urges sensi-

tivity and building trusting relationships with migrants.

“Do it naturally,” he advised, while commending a model for meeting both physical and spiritual needs: “Jesus did it!”

DEACONESS CINDY

Cindy Andrade Johnson is a United Methodist deaconess who works with migrants as a volunteer through the Catholic-supported La Posada Providencia. Migrants sometimes call the retired educator “sister.”

She has lived in the border town of Brownsville, Texas, all her life — and tries to ignore the politicians who come down for photo opportunities, seeking to score points with their loud rhetoric of a “crisis.”

“What’s a crisis if it’s been going on for 30 years?” she asks. “...What we haven’t done is look for solutions.”

Her work varies from seeking permits for more temporary housing and additional space for clients to meet with their attorneys to taking food to migrants in Reynosa, Mexico.

“Here we live on both sides of the border,” she said, a privilege afforded U.S. citizens but not those at large from Mexico. Yet migrant and refugee ministry, she noted, is not limited to the border.

“We need to know there are migrants everywhere,” she said. “Churches can do pieces all around the country.”

Those “pieces,” she said, include providing legal help, health care, education, skills training, and the basic needs of food and shelter.

Cindy advised churches across the nation to seek out migrant families and discover how they might partner with the migrants rather than help them. Be sensitive, she said, to actions that might be demeaning.

For example, rather than buying gifts for migrant children, she suggests giving the money to parents so they can provide the gifts. And, by all means, avoid using the term “illegal” to describe another person.



United Methodist deaconess Cindy Andrade Johnson of Brownsville, Texas, a retired educator, provides volunteer service to migrants through a Catholic supported ministry.

“Migrants arriving at our southern border are overwhelmingly fleeing extraordinary circumstances that would force us to do the same to protect our families.”

Migrants in the Lower Rio Grande Valley are often advised to move as quickly as possible to other states to present their cases. “Texas politics are really bad for migrants,” she said, noting statistics showing the rarity of granting asylum in the Lone Star State as opposed to others.

U.S. citizens often hold stereotypes of those seeking asylum that are quickly disproven when relationships are established, she said. For example, migrants are often middle-class people — and migration itself is not some new or devious practice.

“Migration is within human beings; we migrate,” she said. Some migrants “just get treated differently.”

Recently, Cindy took some migrant

women shopping. The migrants were joyful. But they wondered why she would do that for them. She responded that she was simply doing what Jesus said and did — and that “Jesus was a pretty bright man.”

Cindy recalled learning of 12 pregnant women who had been put out of the ICE detention center in Port Isabel one night after another woman there had given birth. She hustled to find them places to spend the night, including taking two home with her.

The next day, she said, she gathered the women at the Posada to provide further assistance.

The broken immigration system in the U.S. is reflected in the arbitrary way some

migrants are processed and others are not, she said. There is no streamlined approach.

“Every two weeks we’re getting a new mandate,” she said of trying to stay abreast of the latest government policies related to immigration.

“Some of the laws are counterintuitive,” she added, “and there’s a bottleneck already” in the courts.

PERPETUAL CHANGES

Migrants are often criticized for not coming into the U.S. through proper channels — or the so-called “right way.” Yet those who work closely with migrants to navigate the constant and fast-changing immigration policies spoke repeatedly of a confusing, inconsistent and broken approach.

Even properly completing an asylum claim form is “tricky and complex ... and very long,” said Elket Rodríguez, a Puerto Rico native and immigration attorney who serves migrant communities along the U.S.-Mexico border through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s global missions program.

Border-based relief ministries to asylum seekers, he noted, are constantly adapting as governmental policies rapidly shift. The Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) — also called the “Remain in Mexico” policy — has created a severe need for emergency shelters in Mexico’s border towns.

Elket said MPP was designed by anti-immigrant policymakers to force migrants to abandon their aspirations to seek U.S. protection — putting them in greater danger and setting them up for failure. And the backlog for hearing and processing immigration cases is massive and growing.

“There is no reasonable legal pathway,” said Stephen Reeves, an attorney and the Austin-based executive director of Fellowship Southwest that provides significant resources to migrant ministries on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Detention centers are “a big industry,”



Elket Rodríguez and Stephen Reeves (right), both attorneys, speak with Micaela Ortiz Albarrán, the volunteer assistant director of a migrant shelter in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. Reeves is executive director of Fellowship Southwest that provides support for shelters all along the southern border.

Life moves slowly in migrant shelters where families and individuals make the best of their uncertain situations while awaiting a hopeful word that their asylum petitions will be heard.



said UMC Deaconess Cindy Johnson. “And any industry needs oversight.”

She believes immigration problems could be solved if the right people were in place. But, in the meantime, service to individuals is the best daily response.

“I couldn’t ask for a better life than to be able to serve,” she said. “That’s just my Christian faith.”

Writing for Fellowship Southwest last fall, Elket enumerated some common misunderstandings, for example, migrants simply choosing to leave their home countries in pursuit of “the American dream.”

Rather, he writes: “Migrants arriving

at our southern border are overwhelmingly fleeing extraordinary circumstances that would force us to do the same to protect our families.”

Factors driving migration include persecution, corruption, drug trafficking, organized crime, and the effects of global warming on agricultural and other businesses, he added. The rise of cartels in the 1980s produced much carnage.

“There’s a lot of money behind all of this,” said Elket, noting his reference was to those in the U.S. also, where drugs such as cocaine are bought and used by the wealthy.

However, those who live in border cities know the social and economic benefits that come from relationships with neighbors across the river — an arrangement unlike the “war zone” so often portrayed by some media and politicians.

Migration can be impacted by policies, Elket noted, but not stopped. People come to the U.S. in far more ways than crossing the Rio Grande. And even increased restrictions often fail.

“We must understand that people beyond our borders are desperate,” he writes. “They don’t have a country, a family, a job, a community or a safe place to live.”

While politicians seek to score brownie points with constituents by speaking of migrants in disparaging ways — and making unrealistic and unfulfilled promises such as erecting a “big, beautiful wall” across the entire southern landscape — the realities of migration can get overlooked.

While “Help wanted” signs fill the windows of U.S. businesses — jobs migrants would love to fill — political opposition to non-white immigrants overrides economic and humanitarian concerns.

And as media partners loudly sing those same songs of crisis and criminality, the highly personal, human dimension of immigration is often ignored.

But not by everyone, especially those who feel the call of God upon their lives to serve the vulnerable that Jesus deemed “the least of these” — not in terms of value, but in terms of greatest needs. **NFJ**

Choosing truth over fear-mongering tales about immigration

BY MARV KNOX

The chasm between the truth about immigrants amassed on the U.S.-Mexico border and the tales told by politicians who exploit them is vast. It's at least as wide as the distance between where you sit as you read this article (no matter where that is) and the border itself.

You're familiar with fear-mongering stories about immigrants — from a former president calling them rapists to a pundit claiming they're coming to take your job. You've heard much more, every bit egregious and outlandish.

In contrast, I have seen truth pooled as tears in the eyes of immigrants who told their own stories. Those stories — authenticated by their very presence in Fellowship Southwest-supported shelters up and down the border — explain why they decided to leave everything they owned and everyone they knew to build new lives in the United States.

Fellowship Southwest's immigrant relief ministry started with a 2018 text from Jorge Zapata, associate coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas, asking if FSW could help a tiny congregation in Laredo, Texas. The pastor found asylum seekers sleeping on the street and brought them into the church house. Their utilities skyrocketed 300 percent, and they didn't have nearly enough money to buy groceries for the famished immigrants.

Next, Jorge asked if we could help a church distribute food and blankets to immigrants sleeping on a Rio Grande Valley bridge between the two countries, waiting to apply for U.S. asylum. After that, another pastor needed help with rent for a small food-storage warehouse. And then the needs mushroomed as the U.S. government forced immigrants to wait out their legal asylum process in Mexico, and the pastors opened shelters to protect them from the elements and, worse, Mexican drug cartels.



Marv Knox (right) with Jorge Zapata (Fellowship Southwest photo)

Eventually, Fellowship Southwest provided immigrant relief ministry — food, medical care, shelter and protection — from Matamoros, near the Gulf of Mexico, to Tijuana, hard by the Pacific Ocean. From 2018 through 2021, we allocated almost \$600,000 in ministry aid, supplied by folks who read our articles about the immigrants' needs and wanted to help.

I'm telling you this, not to cause you to think well of Fellowship Southwest, but so you will realize the pastors in our network and those of us who support them have met thousands of immigrants who are following the longstanding legal process for seeking asylum in the United States. Their stories overlap, repeatedly demonstrating why people from other countries pack up and bring their children — they almost all come with children in tow — to the border, seeking a secure future in our country.

Pundits and politicians who exploit immigration for personal gain typically emphasize and exaggerate the factors that pull migrants to this country. Yes, they come seeking better lives. Americans enjoy alluring benefits — good jobs, strong public schools and effective healthcare, of course,

and also basic security. People from other countries know about all this, and it's definitely attractive.

But over and over and over, immigrants explained how factors in their own countries push or propel them away. They wouldn't put their lives — not to mention their children's lives — at risk were it not for horror in their homelands. They wouldn't travel hundreds of miles, much of it on foot and vulnerable to predators, simply for a bigger paycheck.

No, almost all the migrants stressed they left home because they felt pushed out. Several "push" factors recur in the immigrants' stories.

Organized crime

Reports out of Central America mention gang activity as a cause of outward migration. Horrifically, "gang" is too mild a word. They are not bands of teenagers running wild in neighborhoods; they are organized crime syndicates running towns and regions. They fill vacuums left by corrupt and ineffective federal governments.

For example, we asked Honduran parents of a little boy and girl why they

wound up in a church courtyard in Piedras Negras, Mexico.

“Crime,” the father said. The mother elaborated: “We had gang activity on our street, and I called the police to ask them to do something about it, to patrol our neighborhood. Almost as soon as I hung up the phone, someone knocked on our door. It was a gang member, who told me, ‘Never call the police again.’”

Another mother’s story, told with her arms draped over the shoulders of young sons, was echoed by innumerable other mothers: The gangs came for her older sons, telling them it was time to join up. When the boys resisted, gang members murdered them in front of her eyes. She fled before her younger sons became old enough to be “recruited” into the gangs.

Organized crime provides the roots for all kinds of terror and violence.

Murder

Standing in a shelter kitchen in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, a young woman explained why she and her husband decided to try to bring their two children to the U.S. She earned a master’s degree in education, and she and a friend set out to teach rural villagers to read. Gangs saw literacy as a threat to their dominance and warned them to stop. They refused. Then the gangs assassinated her colleague, and she and her family fled immediately.

Back in Piedras Negras, little girls ages 2 and 5 crawled around their parents’ legs in a church classroom where they lived. Their mother said they fled their hometown when the local gang murdered her father for resisting their dominance.

Rape

In the desert village of Palomas, Mexico, another mother spoke as her beautiful, brown-eyed daughter sat in her lap. A gang leader raped her, resulting in the pregnancy that produced this child. Spurning abortion, she carried the baby to term. When the gang leader learned about the child, he tried to take her away. The only thing the young mom knew to do was run for her daughter’s life.

Mothers who fled with daughters

repeatedly tell another story. They had to leave their hometowns before their girls reached puberty and became the rape property of gangs.

Young women in separate cities told stories that echoed each other, almost word for word. They fled because of domestic abuse and rape. When local police refused to act and they reached the limits of their endurance, they ran.

Extortion

Standing in the shadow of a church/shelter in another border city, a young man described how his success became his downfall. He operated his own small business — not getting rich but getting by. Then the local gang told him he had to pay tribute for their “protection.” When he couldn’t afford the ever-increasing demand for cash, gang members told him he could either pay up or leave, or else they would kill him.

All across the border, hard-working young adults repeat this man’s story. Most continue to live in fear, worried they will be stalked and either extorted or murdered.

Beyond the blunt instruments of organized crime, other factors cause immigrants to seek legal asylum in the U.S.

Persecution

People who hold minority perspectives do not feel safe — much less welcome — in communities and even countries elsewhere in the world.

Champions of democracy in authoritarian countries realize they put their lives and the lives of their families at risk when they speak unpopular political opinions.

Similarly, people whose religious beliefs do not fall in line with prevailing majorities have experienced physical, psychological and economic abuse. They recognize the only safe path for themselves and those they love is to leave home and start over elsewhere.

Extreme poverty

This is not the same as the immigration “pull” factor of a larger paycheck. Economic devastation — most typically brought on by climate change — has pushed agricultural workers off the land and to the border.

For example, protracted drought has all but eliminated coffee production in some areas of Central America. Families who worked the same farms for generations have lost their incomes, with no other opportunities for employment.

Similarly, recent unprecedented hurricanes not only have wiped out crops, but also have wiped clean formerly productive farmland, leaving landowners penniless and laborers jobless.

Into the breach, border pastors have stepped up to feed, shelter and protect immigrants who only want to save their families and offer them secure futures. Even before the immigrant surge, these pastors engaged in demanding ministry. Many of their own church members lived on the edge of, if not below, poverty. Yet they, and typically their congregations, expanded their capacity to welcome the strangers in their midst.

They take seriously Jesus’ admonition in his first sermon: “... to bring good news to the poor, ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

They are spiritual heroes, sacrificially placing their lives and ministries at risk to serve some of the world’s most vulnerable people, every one of them created in God’s image. **NFJ**

—Marv Knox founded Fellowship Southwest in 2017 after a four-decade career in journalism. He retired late last year and lives in Durham, N.C.

Needs & Responses

Those ministering to migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border welcome support in the form of funds, donated goods and volunteers. A trusted source of distributing funds and goods to the greatest needs and coordinating volunteer service is Fellowship Southwest.

To learn more about these ministries, visit fellowshipsouthwest.org. There you will find contact information and a “donate” button for making gifts to the Knox Fund for Immigrant Relief.

NEW WINE & CARING HEARTS

Zapadas choose calling and compassion over criticism

BY MITCH RANDALL

When Melba Zapata and Jorge Zapata joke with each other, one might assume they have a typical niece-and-uncle relationship found in a close-knit family — and they do.

But they are also co-pastors of New Wine Church in La Feria — just west of Harlingen, Texas, and part of a rapidly growing Rio Grande Valley region that reaches south to the border town of Brownsville. Across the highly secured bridge is the city of Matamoros, Mexico.

The young, vibrant congregation ministers within their community and with migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border.

CONTEXT

“Life along the border is amazing,” said Melba, belying common caricatures of the area. “You get many different cultures to learn from.”

Media reports can be very misleading, she added, noting that “we live as we always have.” And how is that?

“We help our neighbor in need,” she said. “We don’t see anything but neighbors ... and our job around here is to love our neighbors.”

The former youth minister believes strongly in training next-generation leadership. New Wine’s mentorship program equips young believers to grow in faith and offers ministry certificates for emerging leaders. And a part of that growth is to use



Melba Zapata, formerly the youth minister, assumed pastoral duties at New Wine Church from her uncle Jorge Zapata, who directs Hearts4Kids that serves families living in extreme poverty along the border.

one’s gifts in service.

“New Wine Church believes in taking our hearts outside the four walls of the church,” said Melba. “Jesus demonstrated the importance of being out in the community, meeting people where they are in life.”

Beyond worship, faith formation and fellowship, the church expresses its love of neighbor in concrete ways by meeting physical and emotional needs. The parking lot, for example, has served as a COVID-19 testing site.

The church site itself — with warehouse space, a large parking lot and easy access to and from Interstate-2 — is an asset for the congregation and its partner organization, Hearts4Kids.

FACILITY

Jorge still smiles and shakes his head in amazement when remembering how the church relocated to a space far beyond its capacity to afford. It was a dream — and a prayer — come true.

The abandoned recreational vehicle (RV) business had caught Jorge’s eye for some time. So, one day, he decided to call about it. He was told the building and seven acres would cost \$3.5 million.

Jorge said he felt small for even inquiring — and embarrassed to say he didn’t have that kind of money. The property owner offered a deal with a down payment of just \$50,000.

Dejectedly, Jorge responded: “I am sorry, sir, but I have no money. I am a pastor,

and I wanted the property for a church.”

The property owner suggested they talk again in a couple of weeks. But Jorge considered it not worthwhile and went about his ministry business. But the businessman couldn't get the conversation off his mind.

Battling cancer, he was searching for ways to give back to God for blessing him during his life. Two weeks after the phone call, he walked into Jorge's church office then in Harlingen, held out a set of keys and said, “The building is yours.”

HEARTS4KIDS

The complex is ideal not only for the congregation to meet for worship and other activities, but also for serving as headquarters for Hearts4Kids. The nonprofit ministry coordinates mission efforts — including teams from visiting churches — to serve children and families in the Rio Grande Valley.

A particular focus is on families living in colonias — unincorporated, extremely poor communities along the border. The goal — and challenge — is to help residents break out of the cycle of poverty.

As executive director of Hearts4Kids, Jorge outlined a wholistic approach to ministry that includes meeting physical, emotional and spiritual needs. All of these

are plentiful in the migrant communities that face extreme living conditions in both winter and summer.

Often homes are constructed merely of tarps, cardboard, sheets, plastic or other discarded materials — easily torn apart by gusting winds. The lack of insulation means no protection from the cold or extreme heat.

Meeting these physical needs leads to other ministry opportunities. When asked why they build new housing structures and provide counseling without pay, Jorge responds, “Because Jesus loves you!”

Recently, Jorge coordinated the work of a team of volunteers from First Baptist Church of Athens, Texas, that spent several days in a very impoverished community in Playa Bagdad, Mexico. They reinforced an abandoned and weakened former church building for residents who have no place to gather for worship — and, currently, no school for their children to attend.

Ministry in Playa Bagdad is an expansion of the mission of Iglesia Valle De Beraca in Matamoros (see page 6). Pastor Eleuterio González and Jorge have a close relationship, reflected in Jorge's weekly visits to assist in distributing 600 meals per day.

Student volunteers and older church members will serve 300 breakfasts and the

same number of lunches daily. Jorge stays over to lead a discipleship class in Matamoros each Wednesday evening.

RESPECT & LOVE

Hearts4Kids also provides much needed mental health services to those who experience the trauma so familiar to migrants.

“The purity of the children's minds is taken away,” said Jorge — recalling horrifying stories from migrants who traveled to the border to flee warring police and drug cartels.

Men were beaten, women were raped, and children were forced to witness both, he said. Emotional scars run deep among migrants, especially the children.

Jorge only has to look into the faces of the migrants to see his own story. Born in Mexico, his parents long ago crossed the border without documentation in search of a better life for their family. He now holds citizenship in both countries.

Both Hearts4Kids and New Wine Church have become trusted resources for those who often live in fear and uncertainty and rarely experience respect and love. Building that kind of confidence and trust grows out of deep commitments to facing challenges and showing compassion.

With quick smiles and good-natured personalities, Jorge and Melba are more concerned with their callings and mission than any external criticism.

“Some people say I hate my country because I help migrants, and others say I hate migrants because I work with the border patrol,” said Jorge. “The reality is that we are all neighbors, and Jesus told us to love our neighbors regardless. So, that's what we are doing.”

Pointing toward the border, he added: “Jesus is out there with the migrants. He has been with them on their long journey along dangerous highways. He has brought migrants here to us. What are we to do? Jesus said, ‘Love them.’” **NFJ**

-Mitch Randall is CEO of Good Faith Media.



This abandoned building is being renovated into a church for residents of Playa Bagdad, Mexico, who live in extreme poverty.

White evangelicals only faith group largely opposed to citizenship path for undocumented immigrants

By Zach Dawes Jr.

White evangelical Protestants are the only faith group in the U.S. without majority support for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, according to a Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) report published in February.

Between 2013 and 2021, white evangelical affirmation for a path to citizenship declined nine points to 47 percent. This is the largest decline among Christian groups, but they are not alone in waning support for such a policy.

There was a 13-point decline to 55 percent among non-Christian respondents, an eight-point drop to 54 percent among white Catholics, a four-point drop to 70 percent among Hispanic Catholics and a two-point decline to 59 percent among white mainline Protestants during this time.

Three faith groups defied this trend. There was a five-point increase to 75 percent in support for a path to citizenship among Black Protestants, a five-point rise to 69 percent among the unaffiliated and a two-point increase among other Christians to 65 percent.

“Among white Christian groups, white evangelical Protestants who attend religious services at least once a week have become less likely to support a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants in 2021 (45 percent) compared to 2013 (58 percent), while white mainline Protestants (62 percent in 2013; 66 percent in 2021) and white Catholics (60 percent in 2013; 57 percent in 2021) who attend religious services regularly have not shifted much in their support,” the report said.

Overall, 62 percent of all U.S.



adults supported a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants in 2021 — down one point from 2013.

In contrast to the decline in support for a citizenship path was an increase in respondents affirming that “immigrants strengthen the country because of their hard work and talents.”

Overall, there was a 17-point increase to 61 percent among all U.S. adults who agree with this view from 2010 to 2021, and every faith group surveyed saw an increase in the number of respondents affirming this perspective.

White evangelical Protestants and white Catholics had the lowest rate of affirmation at 38 percent (up 12 points) and 49 percent (up 14 points), respectively, while Hispanic Catholics and Black Protestants had the highest at 79 percent (up three points) and 76 percent (up 27 points), respectively.

When asked if “the growing number of newcomers from other countries strengthens American society,” only white Christians lacked majority affirmation of this view.

At 35 percent, white evangelicals were the least likely to agree (down three points from 2011), followed by white

mainline Protestants (46 percent; down two points) and white Catholics (46 percent; down 10 points).

Good Faith Media reached out to some faith leaders for their responses.

“Care for the immigrant is so crucial to the Christian faith that the call to care for them (along with widows and orphans) is the most repeated command of the Hebrew Bible,” said Miguel A. De La Torre, professor at Iliff School of Theology.

“I believe that whether we view immigrants as assets or threats to our nation may be directly related to our own mental health and emotional well-being.

“Our insecurities lead us to feel anxious and threatened,” said Sue Smith who serves with Latino immigrants in Fredericksburg, Va., through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. “When we feel on edge, with our mental and emotional state stretched to the breaking point, a natural reaction is to protect ourselves.”

Protecting oneself from perceived threats to one’s comfort is likely driving the attitudes found in this study, she said.

“It’s disappointing, though sadly not surprising, to see so many white Christians oppose a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants and hold more anti-immigrant views than other Americans,” she said. “I think it is in part a reaction to real changes in their own communities and a fear of loss of privilege and political influence.” **NFJ**

-Zach Dawes Jr. is managing editor for news and opinion for Good Faith Media.

This article is adapted from one posted at goodfaithmedia.org.

MUFFIN TO MINISTRY

Airport encounter leads to meeting ongoing needs

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

HARLINGEN, Texas — Eddie Bernal was working the gate for a United Airlines flight at Valley International Airport in Harlingen, about 20 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border at Brownsville, Texas.

He began a conversation with a Guatemalan woman, whose flight to California had been delayed. She was feeding a muffin to her young child.

Moments earlier she had sought to buy some food, but the vendor didn't take pesos, which was the only money the woman had. So, the muffin was graciously offered at no charge.

The woman and child had been released from a nearby immigration detention center for relocation in the U.S. They'd secured flights through family connections but had only 100 pesos (about \$5) in cash.

Eddie didn't consider that enough for a good start — so he insisted that the woman take the \$100 bill (the only cash he had in his wallet) in exchange for the pesos. She reluctantly received his generous gift and began searching through her meager belongings until a well-worn, coverless Bible appeared.

She returned to Eddie and read aloud Psalm 91, which begins with the assurance: "Whoever rests in the shadow of the Most High God will be kept safe by the Mighty One." Then she prayed for him.

"That's how this ministry started," said Eddie, who now works as a travel agent with American Express but visits the airport often.

This resulting ministry to migrants — to which he and his wife Elizabeth, a restaurant bookkeeper and manager, voluntarily give so much time — is called The House of Love and Justice.

Persons released from ICE's Port



A red bag at the feet of this woman who sits alone in the airport signals to Eddie Bernal that she has just come from the immigration detention center. He introduces himself and asks if she has any needs. She says she does not and is waiting for a flight that will connect her with family in Florida. She tells of coming to the U.S. from Nicaragua where she was endangered due to family political connections.

Isabel Processing Center often have a day or two before leaving for their next destination, said Eddie, and lack resources. They are given a red bag containing whatever belongings they had with them when detained for processing.

Often missing are shoestrings, taken in the detention centers — which along with the red bag helps identify those newly released.

Transporting released migrants from the detention center to the bus station or airport is one need the Bernals and other volunteers fill. And they look for additional opportunities to minister.

From a table in the airport, they provide helpful information and Bibles and also distribute bags with water, snacks, wipes and other supplies. Airport employees know where to find those bags beneath the table and distribute them when volunteers aren't present.

Airport administration is very supportive of this ministry to migrants, he said. But the same could not be said of the Baptist church where his family had

been engaged.

"Politics superseded the faith," said Eddie. "They were supportive until we started talking about refugees and immigrants."

Given the choice, Eddie said his family left the predominately white church with a Hispanic ministry. He noted that the years of Bible study and sermons he heard were not leading to corresponding attitudes and behaviors.

"We've all fallen short of the glory of God who forgives us through Jesus," said Eddie, of those church-based sinners who magnify a migrant's act of crossing the border without documentation.

"Let's set aside the politics and preach the gospel," he said in his soft-spoken way. "Let the Holy Spirit do the rest ... and do what God calls us to do."

For Eddie, that clear calling includes a sensitive and supportive ministry to vulnerable migrants transitioning from a detention center to another location in the U.S. where they hope to find a safer future. [NFJ](#)

This happened in my office

By Brett Younger

The coffee June makes at home is better than the tasteless brew Wendell makes at the office, but he likes drinking his second cup while standing at my third-floor window. When the magnolia trees bloom, the garden turns Advent/Lent purple. He can see the Brooklyn Bridge from the bathroom window, though new buildings are threatening to get in the way.

Dr. Fifield came to be the senior minister at Plymouth Church just before World War II began. Holding a congregation together through a global conflict is hard. Church is easier now that the war is over, but being a minister is complicated when things are changing — and things are changing rapidly.

Wendell is a thoughtful preacher who carefully chooses every word. He is a manuscript preacher whose scripts often make their way into the newspaper. Wendell spends more hours in his office than preachers who act like a lack of preparation is a virtue. He loves being at Plymouth because every once in a while, there is a holy moment.

Dr. Fifield is at his desk laboring over next Sunday's text when there's a knock at the door.

"Good morning, Wendell."

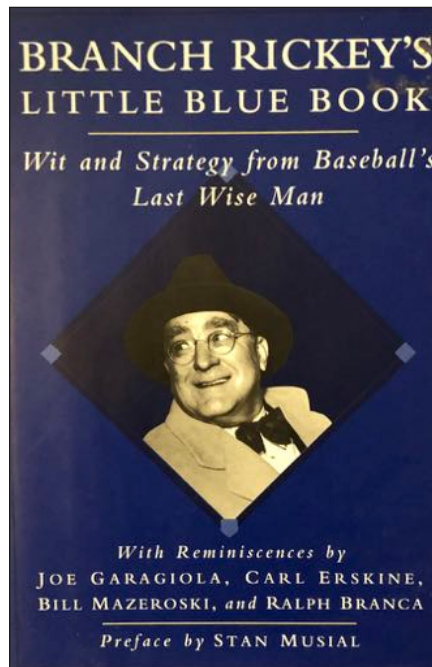
"Hey, Branch, what can I do for you?"

"I was in the sanctuary, but I wasn't getting anywhere. Can I hang out in your office?"

"I have a lot of work to do."

"Don't let me interrupt. I don't need to talk," Rickey says as he barges in. "I just need to think. You won't even know I'm here. Do you mind?"

Branch Rickey Sr., the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, paces around the office. In spite of his promise, there is never a moment when Wendell does not know he is there. The minister works quietly. Rickey paces enthusiastically, stopping only to peer



out the window. They share 45 minutes of silence, pacing, stopping, silence, pacing and stopping.

Branch breaks the silence. "I've got it." "Got what?"

"I've decided to sign Jackie Robinson!"

Rickey sits for the first time. "This is a decision so complex, so far-reaching, fraught with so many pitfalls but filled with so much good, if it was right, that I just had to work it out in this room with you. I had to talk to God about it and be sure what God wanted me to do. I hope you don't mind."

Branch straightens his bow tie, dons his worn hat, and says, "Bless you, Wendell."

Jackie Robinson begins with the Dodgers' minor league affiliate Montreal Royals, a setting with less overt racism. In 1946, Robinson hits .349 for the Royals, scoring 113 runs and stealing 40 bases in 124 games. He is in Brooklyn as the next season starts. A journalist tells Rickey that

"all hell will break loose" when Robinson takes the field for the first time as a Dodger. Branch counters, "I believe all heaven will rejoice." Robinson wins the Rookie of the Year Award and goes on to be elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Wendell assumes his conversation with Rickey is private, so he does not share it with anyone. But after Rickey dies, Wendell decides that the world should hear about the holy moment that happened in my office, so he tells his wife. In 1966, June writes an essay for the Plymouth Church newsletter, "Branch Rickey's Day of Decision."

Who knows how the story would have unfolded without this church, this minister, or this office?

I pour a second cup of coffee into my thermos and take it to the office. I like to look out my third-floor window and listen to the preschoolers playing in the garden. If I stand on the toilet in the bathroom, I can see the top of the Brooklyn Bridge peeking out over a row of buildings.

I have been the senior minister at Plymouth Church for six years, including two years of COVID. Church is more complicated during a plague. The world is changing fast.

I love being at Plymouth, because every once in a while, there is a holy moment. So far, there's been nothing as newsworthy as integrating baseball, but I think about Wendell. I sit at my desk looking for the right words. People come to hang out and pray. We ask God to help us make the right decisions. We look for ways to include victims of prejudice. We try to be part of the hard, good things God is doing.

Things like that happen in my office.

NEJ

—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 **(goodness)** beginning March 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 **Bobby Tackett-Evans**, a veteran youth minister now serving as pastor of three United Methodist congregations in Liberty, Ky.

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

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 1, 2022

Revelation 5:1-14

A Bizarre Picture

Perhaps you are familiar with a line from Robert Browning's lengthy poetic drama, "Pippa Passes": "God's in his heaven – all's right with the world!"

But is it true? If God's in heaven, is all right with the world? The book of Revelation has a lot to say about God's heavenly throne room, but John's comforting vision was given to people who were quite certain that all was not right with their world.

Writing in the late first century, when Christians were a scorned minority and sporadic outbreaks of persecution could make life fearful and despairing, John's apocalyptic visions declared that God remained in charge and would one day make things right.

Most Christians in today's world do not live under oppression, but even so we perceive a world gone wrong. Global warming is wreaking havoc with the weather. International conflict persists. Gun violence is unchecked. A deadly virus runs amuck. Endemic racism persists. Democracy is under siege. Countless personal crises add to the gloomy outlook.

If all is not right with the world, is there still hope?

John thought so.

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! (Rev. 5:12)

A scroll (vv. 1-5)

The official lectionary text for this Sunday covers only vv. 11-14 of Revelation 5, but we can hardly appreciate those verses without giving some attention to the context in which they belong. After proclaiming Christ's message to the seven churches of Asia in chapters 2-3, John turned to an imaginative description of the heavenly throne room in chapter 4, stretching language to the breaking point in his attempt to portray its glittering grandeur.

Modern readers may find the symbolism more appalling than appealing, but John's imagery was meant for the ancients' imagination, not ours.

God's throne, he said, was guarded by four exotic creatures, each "full of eyes" and hovering on six wings. Twenty-four elders sitting on lesser thrones were engaged in constant worship of God as the creator of all things (4:11). 📖 In chapter 5, the focus shifts from the praise of God to the search for someone worthy enough to break the seven seals of a mysterious scroll containing an itinerary of things yet to come. 📖

No one "in heaven or on earth or under the earth" proved able to open the scroll, John said, leading him to weep that the contents of the scroll would remain a mystery (v. 4). John's despair builds dramatic tension, but one of the

elders told him to stanch his tears, for "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so that he can open the seven seals" (v. 5).

Both images are drawn from the concepts found in the Hebrew Bible and later applied to Jesus. Jacob's blessing to his son Judah in Gen. 49:9-10 described Judah as a "lion's whelp" to whom the kingship would belong: "the scepter shall not depart from Judah." David was descended from the tribe of Judah, and God promised him that his descendants would always sit upon the throne (2 Samuel 7). After the Babylonians conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BCE, the Hebrews held to the hope that God would raise up a scion of David to rule again, speaking of him as the "root" or "branch" of David, or from the stump of Jesse, David's father (see Isa. 11:1, 10; Jer. 23:5, 33:15; Zech. 3:8, 6:12). 📖 The "lion who has conquered" is a clear reference to Jesus. But when John looked for the approach of a powerful beast that conquers with strength and violence, he was overcome with amazement: the lion was a lamb. 📖

A lamb (vv. 6-10)

Without comment on the shocking switch between what he heard and what he saw, John describes the appearance of a lamb standing in the heavenly council, but it was no ordinary lamb. It stood "as if it had been slaughtered" – but clearly alive and apparently well.

The reader has no doubt that the lamb represents Jesus Christ, who had stood amid his disciples with the marks of execution still painfully evident.

For a lamb, the mark of slaughter

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would be a slit throat, but John does not dwell on specifics, and we have no more need to try visualizing that gory image than we do trying to imagine seven horns and seven eyes on the lamb's head. We have to keep in mind that John's language is metaphorical. A lamb with seven horns and seven eyes would be beyond freakish, though many have tried to portray it graphically (as a quick Google search can show).

We gain nothing by dwelling on how the curious collection of eyes and horns might look upon a lamb's head: John's imagery was designed to signify the power and pervasiveness of Christ. From ancient times, horns have been symbolic of power. Babylonian and Assyrian iconography routinely portrayed both gods and kings with several sets of horns wrapped around their heads.

The appearance of the lamb resolves the dramatic problem that no one could break the seven seals and reveal the scroll's secretive contents. The lamb's worthiness was seen in the marks of its willing sacrifice and the strength symbolized by the seven horns. The number seven indicated completeness, showing that Christ had full power to accomplish the task.

The eyes, John says, are "the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth." We have indicated previously that the "seven spirits" before the throne appear to be a rough equivalent to the Holy Spirit, and we may understand the lamb's "eyes" in the same way. The vision declared that the lamb standing ready to unseal the scroll was worthy enough, powerful enough, and perceptive enough to accomplish the task, as evidenced by the "new song" of the living creatures and the elders in vv. 9-10. 📖 The most surprising aspect is that the lamb's worthiness and victory did not come through brute

force, but through self-sacrifice. The hymn of praise says nothing about the lamb's powerful horns or all-seeing eyes, but centers on Christ's willingness to die for the sake of the people "from every tribe and language and people and nation." This was the source of his power and the secret to his victory.

A chorus (vv. 11-14)

The voices of the living creatures and the 24 elders were soon amplified by innumerable angels ("myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands") who joined the chorus. 📖 Try to imagine the bone-chilling sound of such a heavenly chorus "in full voice," singing "Worthy is the lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and glory and honor and blessing!" (v. 11b).

As if the hosts of heaven could not proffer sufficient praise, to their voices were added every creature in heaven, on the earth, under the earth, and in the sea. Not only all people, but every creature in the universe joined to sing an eternal blessing "to the one seated on the throne, and to the Lamb" (v. 13). 📖 📖

While the song addressed both "the one seated on the throne" and the lamb who stood before it, the emphasis is on the lamb, who is declared worthy because of its atoning death. As the song reached its crescendo, the four living creatures cried "Amen" and the elders prostrated themselves before God, the creator, and the lamb who had proved worthy to open the scroll (v. 14).

We should not forget the context. The scene of overwhelming praise may be impressive, but remains an accompaniment to the dramatic action in which the lamb has been revealed as

the only one worthy to break the seven seals of the mysterious scroll.

The entire chapter, then, serves as an introduction to what will follow the opening of the scroll, a series of catastrophic judgments and descriptions of suffering that will encompass chapters 6–19, a series of symbolic judgments that focus on Rome and should not be read as literal events: the lectionary skips over them.

We'll have more to say about the grotesque and symbolic judgments in next week's lesson. For now, we should ask ourselves what profit there is in studying a text that was so specifically aimed at ancient sufferers. How might it speak to our needs in our time?

To answer this question, we return to our opening thoughts. All is not right with the world – not with our world any more than John's world. Yet, we can hold the belief that God is on the throne, that all is not lost.

While the imagery of the creator God's rule over the universe is powerful and encouraging, John's vision also exalts Christ as one who triumphed through suffering, ensuring eternal security for the believer.

The lamb's wounds, still evident from slaughter, are a reminder that suffering is ongoing. Eternal security does not equate to present protection. We face many obstacles in this life, some of our own making, some beyond our control. Trouble comes, even to the righteous. The world can be dark and hard and evil, and sometimes it seems to be spiraling into oblivion.

Though trials persist, John insists, God is on the throne. Christ has won the victory. Like people in bondage who dare to raise hope to the heavens, we can sing a new song of praise to the one who was, who is, and who is to come, trusting that God holds both the universe and our future in faithful and worthy hands. 📖 NFI

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 8, 2022

Revelation 7:1-17

A Hallelujah Chorus

We commonly see the words “terrorist” and “terrorism” these days. But few of us have faced terror in person, though news reports of appalling atrocities give us a second-hand taste of terror. Today’s text comes as an interlude in a section of Revelation so terror-laden that John’s hearers and modern readers need a break from the horror just to find hope enough to continue.

Last week’s lesson (from Rev. 5:1-14) introduced a special scroll bearing seven seals and the search for one who could break the seals and reveal its contents. Christ was introduced, first as a lion, then as a slaughtered-but-living lamb, as the only one qualified for the task. The section closed with uncountable angels praising God the creator and Christ the redeemer.

That happy note comes to an end with the breaking of the first seal and a vision of terrible judgments upon the earth, ranging from famine to pestilence to war and cosmic catastrophes that bring great suffering and wipe out large populations. ⚡

Though the judgments are symbolic rather than literal, imagining such horrors may leave hearers or readers emotionally exhausted. The interlude, then, is welcome.

They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:10)

A vision on earth (7: 1-8)

Between the sixth and seventh seals, John relates two parenthetical accounts, each introduced by “After this I saw ...” – John’s way of indicating separate visions (see also 4:1, 7:1, 15:5, 18:1). The first vision is set on earth (7:1-8), and the second in heaven (7:9-17).

The earthly vision declares that God will halt the horrors, here symbolized by destructive winds, and send an angel bearing a seal with which to mark 144,000 persons – 12,000 each from the 12 tribes of Israel. ⚡

This text is used by Jehovah’s Witnesses to contend that only 144,000 people will attain heaven, and is employed by premillennial dispensationalists to argue that 144,000 Jews will be marked for a special evangelistic purpose during the last days. ⚡ Both positions require a literalist manipulation of the texts that is not supported by an understanding of the apocalyptic (and hence highly metaphorical) nature of the texts.

John’s word pictures were probably designed to indicate a large but not necessarily specific number of believers who would be “sealed” during the coming tribulation, which he believed had already begun. The reference to the 12 tribes of Israel could indicate an understanding of the church as the “New Israel,” and does not necessarily refer to Jewish persons only (cf. Jas. 1:1).

The protection of the seal did not remove the 144,000 from suffering, but

marked them as belonging to Christ. It is likely that the number refers to the martyrs who had died for Christ, a number that was still incomplete in 5:11. As a multiple of both 10 and 12, the 144,000 may have symbolized the complete number of those who would die in the time of trial.

A vision in heaven (7:9-12)

The second parenthetical vision – our text for today – shifts John’s focus from earthly tribulation to heavenly splendor. As in last week’s text, John describes a vision of the heavenly court. There, he said, God sat on a great throne, accompanied by Christ as a lamb with seven eyes, representing the pervasive Spirit of God. The throne was guarded and served by four supernatural “living creatures” and surrounded by 24 crowned elders on lesser thrones. These were joined by countless angels who united in singing praise to God and to the lamb.

Now, John sees before the throne “a great multitude that no one could count.” He emphasizes the crowd’s inclusive nature: the people come “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (v. 9a). This recalls God’s promise to Abraham that all nations of the earth would be blessed through him and his descendants (Gen. 12:1-3, see also Isa. 49:6). Some interpreters think of the multitude as an image of the entire church through the ages, but John probably saw them as an uncountable host of martyrs. They wear white robes and bear palm branches as symbols of victory, but “they have ‘won’ only

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from the heavenly perspective of the Lamb's definition of winning: on earth they have been killed" (Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, Interpretation [John Knox Press, 1989], 131).

Although the multitude of martyrs gave their lives for Christ, even that did not gain them salvation they could call their own, for salvation is God's alone. The multitude testified: "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

As in chapter 5, where the song of the living creatures and the elders was joined by a host of angels, the cry of the martyrs swelled with the addition of all the inhabitants of heaven singing a sevenfold blessing to God.

The human celebrants seemed to be singing a responsive hymn in conjunction with the heavenly beings who devoted themselves to serving and praising God. Their function is described in v. 15 with the Greek word *latreuō*, which means both "worship" and "serve."

In biblical thought, and particularly in John's apocalypse, seven is an especially significant number, and the heavenly hosts celebrate seven specific attributes that belong to God: blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power, and might. The same list is found in 5:12, and serves as a sort of doxology.

Now, all of this is fine for John and his ancient audience, we may think, but what does it have to do with us?

Let's consider two things. First, John's visionary glimpse of glory leads us to imagine what it might be like to dwell eternally in the presence of God. It is an image of security and perfect harmony with God and all who stand before the throne.

Second, the picture may also suggest how God would have believers to live while on this earth – how the

church of the present ought to look.

We are familiar with a multitude of churches that cater to different denominational backgrounds and to preferences regarding theology, worship style, cultural attitudes, or even political leanings. In our world, that may be the best we can do, but the text suggests a day will come when the many things that separate us are overcome by the common desire to glorify the God who created all things and who saved us all in Christ Jesus.

We don't have to wait until we get to heaven to hold forth the ideal of Christian unity.

The people in this text are marked by the white robes they wear and the palm branches they bear. Is there anything that sets us apart from those who do not claim Christ? 📌

A question and a hymn (7:13-17)

After observing the majestic scene of multitudes singing praise together, the account moves to a question, as one of the elders asked John to identify the white-robed multitude. Like Ezekiel before him (Ezek. 37:3), John responded by confessing his ignorance: "Sir, you are the one that knows." 📌 The elder offers a seemingly paradoxical statement: they are persons who have come through time of struggle, having "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (v. 14). 📌

Anyone who has tried to wash bloodstains from a white shirt knows that blood is not a bleach: it does not turn things white. 📌 Again, John is speaking metaphorically. The people have trusted in Christ, whose atoning death effectively cleansed the stains of their human failings and set them right with God, no longer tarnished or torn or twisted by the world.

In modern churches, persons being baptized often wear white robes. In the early church, baptism was often a major, solemn ceremony. In some traditions, candidates engaged in a long period of preparation prior to baptism, usually on Easter. In ceremonies separated by gender, they would remove their old clothes and step naked before God into the baptismal waters. When they emerged from the water, they were given a new white robe to wear as a symbol of their new life.

Who are those dressed in white? They are people who have trusted Christ for forgiveness, and who have remained faithful through the trials and tribulations and temptations of this world, even though it cost them their lives.

The elder went on to describe the life of those who worship and serve before the throne of God. They will be secure in God's protection and free from hunger, thirst, and the desert sun.

In another paradox, the lamb will become the shepherd, guiding those he has redeemed "to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (v. 17).

Verses 15-17 appear as three three-line stanzas. They sound more like the Hebrew prophets than the later apocalyptic, and they bear a striking resemblance to the promises of Isaiah 49:10. 📌

John's vision offers the assurance of a time and a realm where God's people are at home in heaven, where God cares for all their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. 📌

This picture holds not only the hope that lies before us, but also a challenge to the life that lies around us. When followers of Jesus rise up to offer shelter, proclaim good news, and wipe away tears, we might just catch a glimpse of heaven on earth. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 15, 2022

Revelation 21:1-6

A New Day

Do thoughts of heaven cross your mind very often? I suspect most of us go through the majority of our days without a thought of heaven. But if someone we love dearly should die, it may be all we can think about.

When my 7-year-old daughter fell victim to a drunk driver many years ago, I fantasized about whether heaven would offer hot dogs and fish sticks and pony rides.

When we come to fear that our own death might be near, heaven will surely be prominent in our thoughts.

The Bible speaks descriptively of heaven in a few places, and uncounted sermons have been preached on its wonders. The truth, however, is that we have no real idea what heaven is like, though our imaginations can run wild. We may visualize heaven as a homecoming where loved ones live together in harmony, or as a place where angels sing, ambrosia abounds, and we can play every day.

Those thoughts are about as helpful as the book of Revelation. John's apocalyptic writing is metaphorical and symbolic throughout, so we should not regard his language-stretching vision of jeweled walls and pearly gates and golden

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." (Rev. 21:5a)

streets as a literal description, but mainly as a place of beauty beyond human imaginings.

In addition, what John describes in Revelation 21–22 is pointedly denoted as a “new heaven and a new earth.” Whatever heaven might be like now, John suggests, it is not the same place or dimension to be experienced in eternity. What the present heaven and the new heaven have in common is that God is at the heart of them.

The Bible does not tell us all we want to know about heaven, but it tells us all we need to know. It tells us that we can hold to the hope that life for the believer does not end with our last breath, but remains open to joy.

A new dwelling (v. 1-2)

We can imagine that heaven had been on John's mind for a long time. He had experienced hardships and persecution. Perhaps he had lost friends to death in some of the more severe outbreaks, and had heard of others. Sporadic episodes of persecution reportedly included public torture, with Christians being burned as torches or fed to the lions in the Coliseum. One early church legend says that Roman officials tried to kill John, but could not, and so they just banished him to the island of Patmos.

It is easy to see why John thought so much about heavenly things. The Hebrew Bible preserves an old tradi-

tion that God created the earth so that everything was “very good” (Gen. 1:31), but it fell under a curse when humankind turned against God's way (Genesis 3).

When injustice reigned or enemies threatened and the situation looked particularly bad, Israel's prophets sometimes spoke of a new or renewed earth where closeness to God would be restored. Isaiah of Jerusalem envisioned a new age of peace in which all creation would live in harmony with God (Isaiah 11), and a later prophet writing in Isaiah's name predicted an entirely new creation: “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isa. 65:17).

John was certainly familiar with these ancient hopes, and amid the dire straits of his day, he believed they were about to be fulfilled. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth;” he said, “for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more” (v. 1).

John was convinced that God would soon draw earthly history to a close and set everything right. All that had become cursed and crooked would be restored and made straight, for there would be a new earth. The reasons for a new heaven are less obvious, but the ancients often thought of the two together. “A new heaven and a new earth” is John's way of emphasizing God's creative power to make all things new.

A new heaven and earth would be necessary, John said, because the old heaven and earth “have passed away.” In the previous chapter, while describing a judgment scene in which God

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would sit on a great white throne, John said “the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them” (Rev. 20:11b).

Of special significance is John’s insistence that “the sea was no more.” The sea was a prominent source of fear in the ancient world. Maritime travel was dangerous and uncertain. Sea dragons or serpent-like monsters such as Leviathan were thought to inhabit the depths (Job 26:12; Isa. 27:1, 51:9-10), making the sea a fearful place.

The sea symbolized chaos and the threatening power of un-creation, which could only be held in check by God. In the new heaven and earth, the frightening sea would be no more. 📌

In addition to a new heaven and earth, John’s vision included a new Jerusalem: “and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (v. 2).

The Jerusalem of old was the city of David, the home of the temple, the heart of every major religious festival. But it was also a city that could stone prophets and crucify Jesus. Luke’s gospel portrays Jesus as weeping for the recalcitrant people of Jerusalem (Luke 13:31-35). Perhaps the new Jerusalem’s descent from heaven is a reminder that only God can restore the city’s holiness and transform it into a dwelling place fit for eternity. 📌

At first (and maybe, at last), this text seems confusing, and it is helpful to remember that John is using word pictures, metaphorical language that often shifts its boundaries.

John speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, of a new and holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to the new earth. After this, however, the distinctions fade, and the new heaven, earth, the city, and believers seem to meld together. The new Jerusa-

lem is not a city but is the bride of Christ, the body of believers. Through all the shifting images, the point is that, in the new age, God’s dwelling will be with God’s people.

A new presence (vv. 3-4)

John describes a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

Here is the most important aspect of John’s message. What the new heaven and new earth look like or where they are located or how big they are is immaterial. God will live among God’s people: that is what truly matters. 📌

That God’s “tent” or “dwelling” would be among mortals is a mind-boggling concept. To imagine God’s presence, we will no longer need a tabernacle or an altar, the Ark of the Covenant or the holy of holies, a cross on a steeple or stained-glass windows. Rather, God will dwell among us in some way beyond our present ability to imagine. The covenant relationship so longed for between God and Israel will finally be fulfilled (Exod. 6:7, Lev. 26:12, Jer. 7:23). 📌

Living in the full presence of God will mean living in the absence of death, John says. Mourning and crying and pain, in one way or another, all have a connection with death – the death of relationships, the death of dreams, the death of innocence, the death of trust, the death of loved ones, the death of self. Death, in some form, is at the heart of every pain. 📌

The Bible has nothing good to say about death. 📌 That’s why it is such

good news to hear that God will do away with it. Without the deathly fear of darkness and separation, there is no more cause for mourning or tears or pain. The ultimate sign of the presence of God is the absence of death.

A new word (vv. 5-6)

God’s final word is always a word of hope. “See, I am making all things new.” The New Testament speaks of how Christians become a “new creation” when we trust in Christ and ask Christ’s spirit to live in us (2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15). We do not become immediately perfect, but despite human weakness, we grow in the “inner person” as a new creation, secure in Christ until the day of his appearing (2 Cor. 3:18, 4:16-18; Col. 3:1-4). John now envisions this same transformation on a cosmic scale as all things are redeemed and made new.

G.B. Caird once described John’s vision of a corrupt world’s miseries giving way to a future hope this way: “the agonies of earth are but the birth-pangs of a new creation” (*The Revelation of St. John the Divine* [New York: Harper & Row, 1966], 266).

John declares as God’s own testimony that “these words are trustworthy and true” (v. 5). There will come a day when all the former things are past, when God will bring all things to an eternal conclusion in which the greatest needs of his children are eternally met: “To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life” (v. 6).

John has more to say about the believer’s eternal home (Rev. 21:7–22:21), but the most important thing has already been said. God is present. Death is absent. The noise of running water is not the sound of tears, but the eternally bubbling spring of the water of life. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 22, 2022

Revelation 21:9–22:5

A Life-Giving River

Do you ever fantasize about what your perfect home or an ideal vacation setting might be like? What's the most ideal spot you can imagine? Some might go for a quaint cabin by a peaceful stream in a verdant forest, while others dream of a downy bed with fluffy pillows in a luxury hotel. You may even conjure up a private villa on the beach of a tropical island.

In today's text, John does his best to describe the grandiloquence of heaven by means of a vision he reports receiving. In doing so, he stretches metaphor to the limit with images of gigantic jewels, golden streets, verdant trees, and a crystal river highlighting a new Jerusalem – an eternal dwelling place for God and for God's people.

Today's lectionary text begins at 21:10, then skips to 22:1-5. Because we want to get the larger picture of John's image, we'll include all of 21:9–22:5.

The city of God (21:9-21)

In last week's lesson, we saw how John described a new heaven and a new earth, with a new Jerusalem descending from heaven to rest on an earthly mountain – probably an idealized version of Mt.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. (Rev. 21:9-22:5)

Zion (21:1-5). ⚡ ⚡

In today's text, an angel takes John on a tour of the city (21:10), which glowed like clear jasper because of the presence of God (21:11), John said, with 12 gates arranged with three on each of the square city's four sides (21:12). The gates, not inlaid with pearl but constructed from single massive pearls (21:21), were inscribed with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel (21:13).

The city rested on a foundation of 12 gigantic gemstones (21:14, 19-20) a collection similar to the 12 jewels found on the high priest's breastplate in Exod. 28:15-20. A notable difference is that, while the gems in the priest's breastplate were inscribed with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel, the enormous jewels on which the new Jerusalem rested bore the names of the 12 apostles.

Some interpret this to mean that the church has supplanted Israel and thus will inherit the promises once given to Israel, a view called "supersessionism." (For more on this, see "The Hardest Question" in the online resources.) It is more likely that the vision portrays God's eternal dwelling as including those who entered through both the old and the new covenants: while the foundation stones bear the apostles' names, the 12 gates – where people enter the city – are named for the 12 tribes of Israel.

The significance of the number

12 continues with the description of the holy city's size: the angel showed it to be shaped like a cube, measuring 12,000 stadia on each side. English translations range from 1400 to 1500 miles for this dimension, but the significant thing is not the precise size but the symbolism behind the number 12,000, another allusion to the 12 tribes and/or apostles. ⚡

The number 12 again comes into play with John's assertion that the city's bright jasper wall measured "144 cubits," or about 72 yards (21:12, 17-18). Whether this refers to the height or the breadth of the wall is unclear: John doesn't say. A wall more than 70 yards high might seem immense to us, but it would appear tiny outside of a city more than 1,400 miles tall. It is possible that John was referring to the width, but earlier he had described it as a "great, high wall" (21:12).

Again, the significance is in the numerical symbolism: 144 is the product of 12 times 12, perhaps another indication that both Israel (represented by the 12 tribes) and the church (represented by the 12 apostles) will both have a role and a place when heaven comes to earth.

The bejeweled nature of the city also calls to mind Isaiah 54:11-12, where the prophet saw a day when God would secure the storm-tossed city of Jerusalem: "I am about to set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of rubies, your gates of jewels, and all your wall of precious stones."

The materials and design aren't an exact match, but both Isaiah and John

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saw the comforting image of a new Jerusalem built of the strongest and most precious materials imaginable. 📖

The city of light (21:22-27)

John's description of the city bears many similarities to Ezekiel's apocalyptic writings, but v. 22 brings a sharp shift in emphasis. In Ezekiel's vision of a restored Jerusalem, the temple is the focal point of the city. In fact, the bulk of Ezekiel 40–48 is dedicated to an elaborate description of the renewed temple, its measurements, and its personnel.

John's vision of the new Jerusalem, however, has no temple at all, "for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb" (21:22). The purpose of a temple in Israel, as throughout the ancient Near East, was to represent the dwelling place of the deity.

In the new Jerusalem, no temple is needed because the city itself is God's dwelling place, with the throne of God at its heart. In Ezekiel, "the glory of God filled the temple" (Ezek. 43:4-5), while for John the entire city is filled with God's glory (21:11).

As the city needs no temple, neither does it need the sun, the moon, nor lamps, because "the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (21:23). This image recalls Isaiah's vision of a time when "The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory" (Isa. 60:19; see also 60:1-2, 20). 📖

Note John's careful and constant association of the Lamb (Christ) with God. The work of one is the work of the other: though he speaks of them in separate terms, the full image of deity includes both God (the Father) and the Lamb (Christ, the Son). 📖

As a city of light, the new Jerusalem will attract the kings of the nations to bring their glory into it (21:24-26), even as Isaiah had predicted: "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Isa. 60:3, also 4-11). 📖

The river of life (22:1-5)

John's vision again recalls Ezekiel as the angel guide shows him "the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city" (22:1-2a).

Ezekiel had also described a river, one flowing from beneath the renewed temple, with lines of trees growing on either side (47:1-7). The river would bring life, for "Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes" (47:9).

Moreover, the trees on either side of the river would bear fresh fruit every month, with their fruit offering food, "and their leaves for healing" (47:12).

The city of John's vision features a "river of the water of life" pouring out from beneath the throne of God and the Lamb and flowing down the middle of the main street, with fruit-bearing trees on either side. 📖

As in Ezekiel's vision, the trees bear different kinds of fruit and produce year-round, providing both food for eating and leaves that bring healing to the nations. 📖 While one might think of making herbal poultices from the leaves to bring physical healing, the image is almost certainly metaphorical. In the shade of the trees of life, by the river of life, all who gather will find whatever healing and health is needed for life.

In vv. 3-5 we find earlier images

repeated. Accursed things are excluded from the Holy City, the throne of God and the Lamb is there, God provides a constant source of light for the city, and rules forever.

Of particular interest is the note in v. 4 that, as God's servants offer worship, "they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads." The Hebrews believed that anyone who saw God's face would die (Exod. 3:6, 20:19, 33:20-23), and thus that no one had ever seen God (John 1:18, 1 Tim. 6:15).

In the Holy City, however, believers experience a new intimacy. Standing or kneeling by the river of life and beneath the trees of life, there is no death, and all may finally behold God's face without fear.

That worshipers would have the name of God written on their foreheads recalls Rev. 3:12, 7:1-8, 9:4, and 14:1. Being marked with God's name is a striking way of saying that the inhabitants of the new Jerusalem are truly God's people, living and ruling with God for all time (22:5).

John's vision of the eternal city offers words of both warning and of hope. We are reminded that those who continue to reject God's way have no place there. Since John was writing to Christian people who were facing the temptation to "do as the Romans do" so they could escape persecution, these words would urge them to remain true to their faith, even at the cost of their lives.

At the same time, thoughts of a glorious future in store for believers – with special attention given to those who are martyred for their faith – could engender courage to stand strong in perilous times.

Are we any less in need of a similar message, words of both caution and of hope? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

May 29, 2022

Revelation 22:6-21

A Desperate Hope

Waiting: it's not our favorite thing. We've all had the experience of waiting for someone who left us cooling our heels and wondering if they'd ever arrive.

Today's text may leave us with a similar feeling. In the epilogue to the book of Revelation, John quotes Jesus as saying "I am coming soon" no less than three times, and it seems clear that John expected "soon" to mean in the near future, within his lifetime.

Yet, more than 1900 years later, there is no sign of Jesus' coming, though self-styled prophets have often found some reason to argue that the "signs of the times" point to the "second coming" in their generation.

What do we make of this? Should we be expecting Jesus any day now, or not?

An announcement (vv. 6-11)

We have previously noted that Revelation has the character of an apocalypse framed by elements of a letter. As such, it contains a prologue (1:1-8) and an epilogue (22:6-17). These "bookends" share similarities that remind the reader of the book's most important themes.

The epilogue includes three speakers: Jesus, the angel, and John.

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let everyone who hears say, "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. (Rev. 22:17)

Sometimes it is difficult to be sure who is speaking – the early manuscripts did not include punctuation such as quotation marks, so modern translations may differ. ↓

The "he" who speaks in v. 6 is probably the same angel who had taken John on a tour of the new Jerusalem, assuring him that the words of testimony he had received were "trustworthy and true," and clearly including John in the exalted company of the prophets.

"See, I am coming soon!" (v. 7) marks a shift in speaker as Christ takes the floor. It is not an angel's coming, but the return of Jesus that gives hope to John's readers.

This is the first of three predictions in the epilogue that Christ will arrive soon (see also vv. 12, 20), though each brings with it a different emphasis. In v. 7, the prediction is followed by a beatitude or blessing on "the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book," that is, who pays heed to John's warnings and lives with the courage and hope needed to remain faithful in trying days. ↓

With v. 8, John himself speaks, testifying that he had seen and heard the things written in the book, vouching for their accuracy. As if to emphasize his honesty, he admits to having been reproved by the angel when he fell at his feet as in worship: the angel told him to worship God alone (v. 9).

↓ The angel's instructions that John

should not seal up the prophecy are in direct contrast to a quite different instruction in an apocalyptic section of Daniel (Dan. 8:26; 12:4, 9). The last six chapters of Daniel appear to have been written by an anonymous person in about 175 BCE, when the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes was wreaking havoc upon the Jews and doing his best to eradicate Judaism.

The author who encouraged the distressed Jews to persevere wrote as if Daniel had seen the visions nearly 400 years before – but had been told to "keep the book sealed until the time of the end" (Dan. 12:4). The writer presented his work as the "unsealing" of the ancient prophecies, whose secrets could finally be revealed. He portrayed his day as "the time of the end," though the end did not come. ↓

In contrast, John openly claimed to be the visionary and author of his apocalypse. He also wrote as if he truly believed the end was near. Thus, John was compelled to publicize his work as quickly and as widely as possible.

The angel's words in v. 11 are curious: "Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy." Was John to simply accept that evildoers would remain evil while the righteous remained just? Was it too late for the wicked to repent?

The saying is based on Dan. 12:10, which says that many would be purified, cleansed, or refined, while the wicked would remain firm in their wickedness. The statement in Daniel focuses on faithful Jews who would be purified, cleansed, and refined. It suggests little or no hope that the

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wicked would change their ways.

Similarly, the angel's words offer little expectation that sinners will be converted by the severe warnings revealed through John. The statement, in fact, is in the imperative mood: let the wicked remain wicked, the angel says, while the holy remain holy. Still, this does not mean there would be no opportunity for change, either for the wicked to turn toward Christ, or for Christians to fall into apostasy.

An invitation (vv. 12-17)

The possibility of change becomes apparent as Jesus speaks again, offering an affirmation of John's testimony, a witness to himself, a blessing upon righteous believers, and a clear invitation for all who wish to come and drink from the water of life.

Christ's second announcement that "I am coming soon" is joined by an affirmation that "my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work" (v. 12). This does not suggest a return to a works-righteousness theology. The work of the faithful is to put their faith in Christ and to live accordingly. Believers facing trials were tempted to turn away from their faith, but John insisted that Christ would arrive soon with their recompense in hand.

Jesus' reference to himself as the Alpha and Omega (v. 13) echoes 1:8, where the same term was used with reference to God. This is yet another of Revelation's affirmations that God and Christ are inextricably bound together.

Verse 14 offers a benediction to those who "have washed their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by its gates" (compare 7:14). These are contrasted with those who may not enter the city but remain without: "dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and idolaters, and everyone who loves and

practices falsehood" (v. 15; compare similar lists in 21:8, 17).

With vv. 16-17, we come to some of the most memorable words in John's remarkable book. Jesus affirms again that he is responsible for the message, and identifies himself as "the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star" (v. 16).

The first title draws on Isaiah's prediction of a coming one as both a shoot and a root from the stump of Jesse, David's father (Isa. 11:1, 10). This prediction came to be understood in messianic terms. Thus, for Jesus to claim the title "son of David" was to acknowledge his identity as the messiah.

Jesus' self-description as "the bright morning star," which may refer to Num. 24:17, is not found elsewhere in the New Testament, though Jesus elsewhere refers to himself as the light of the world.

In v. 17 we find the beautiful, repetitive words of invitation that make Revelation a book of hope and of warning. The first two lines may be understood as a call for Christ to return, or as the first part of an invitation that concludes with an opportunity for all to choose life.

John sees a time when Christ's work is done, the gates of heaven are opened, and "anyone who wishes" may come and "take the water of life as a gift."

The beauty and simplicity of the invitation do not obviate the importance of repentance and faith, but simply focus on the universal availability of salvation to those who thirst for it, who come for it, and who receive it as a gift.

A warning (vv. 18-21)

The last few verses bring a change in tone as John pronounces a curse upon

anyone who adds or takes away from what he has written (vv. 18-19). This was not an uncommon practice, and its intention was obvious: to maintain the book as John wrote it, without change.

People in the ancient world took curses seriously. Tomb inscriptions often concluded with a curse directed at anyone who disturbed the bones of the diseased. Documents were sometimes sealed with ceremonial curses on any who might change them.

Following the curse, John returns to a more positive conclusion, again affirming that his words are directly from Christ, who asserts, for the third time, "Surely I am coming soon" (v. 20a).

John responds with an exclamation, "Amen. Come Lord Jesus!" John indicates that he is ready, willing, and hopeful that Christ will indeed come, and come soon.

How should modern believers respond to John's book of Revelation? We do not live in the same sort of desperate times that plagued John's hearers. And, we must acknowledge that John's predictions of Jesus' quick return did not materialize. Does this mean that John's book is not inspired or useful for believers of today?

Contemporary Christians misuse the book of Revelation if we dwell too much on its apocalyptic predictions, anticipate a literal fulfillment of John's metaphorical images, try to construct a timetable for Jesus' return, or draw building plans for the new Jerusalem.

We can, however, find in John's word-pictures beautiful images of the Christian hope. We can rest secure in the power of God and the Lamb to rule the universe and redeem those who hear and follow the call to trust and faithful discipleship. Surely, we can join John in saying "Amen" to that. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 5, 2022

John 14:8-17


An Eternal Advocate

Some promises seem too good to be true, like this one: “If in my name you ask me for anything,” Jesus said, “I will do it” (v. 14).

Could that possibly mean what it sounds like? Did Jesus offer his followers an upgrade on finding a genie in a lamp, with unlimited wishes?


A quick, surface reading might suggest that Jesus’ promise was akin to winning a billion-dollar lottery, but there has to be more to the story, right?


Right.

Context is everything, and these words of Jesus come from a particular setting that must govern our understanding of the promise. The story is in the gospel of John, an account of Jesus’ life that differs significantly from what we find in the more similar gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Fourth Gospel was written later than the others. It has a distinct literary style and a decidedly more theological bent, focusing on the central theme of Christ as the incarnate Word of God, one with the Father, who makes access to God available in a radically new way. 

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. (John 14:12)

Jesus and the Father (vv. 8-11)


John describes a lengthy farewell conversation between Jesus and his disciples. In the final hours before his arrest, Jesus emphasized the significance of his having been sent by the Father – while also being one with the Father – to initiate a new way of relating to God. Today’s text follows immediately on what some scholars describe as the pinnacle of John’s theology, Jesus’ insistence that “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (vv. 6-7). 

It was Philip, John says, who didn’t yet get the point, and who asked for a clearer picture: “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied” (v. 8). Jesus’ reproachful response reflects both patience and exasperation: “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (v. 9). 

What Philip and the others didn’t get is that Jesus himself was the ultimate self-revelation of God, the closest any human could come to seeing God. And so he asked: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (v. 10a).

As John puts it, Jesus’ identity

was so enmeshed with the Father that their works were indistinguishable (v. 10b). Jesus had done what he could do to reveal God’s presence through both word and works; now it was up to the disciples to believe: “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe because of the works themselves” (v. 11).

John’s gospel makes much of various “signs” that demonstrated Jesus’ divinity and called for belief. It concludes with a word to readers that “these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). 

Jesus wanted his followers to believe due to his word alone. Failing that, he called them to believe in response to the mighty works they had seen. Even skeptical observers, according to Nicodemus, had recognized that “no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God” (3:2).

It’s no surprise that Jesus’ critics rejected his claim, but the disciples also found it hard to believe. This, however, is the central thrust of the Fourth Gospel’s message: that Jesus, through his life and works, death and resurrection, revealed the love of God to humankind as plainly as it could be done.

This revelation opened the door to a new way of relating to God: as Jesus could speak of a mutual indwelling relationship with the Father, so his followers could speak of being in Jesus and Jesus being in them. Later in the same conversation, Jesus insisted that he would not leave the disciples as “orphans,” but would be reunited with

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them. “On that day,” he said, “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (v. 20). 📖

Jesus and his disciples (vv. 12-14)

To think of Christ dwelling in us is astonishing: what Jesus went on to say in vv. 12-14 could be even harder to grasp. After challenging his followers to believe in him – in part because of the works he had done – Jesus solemnly declared “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (v. 12).

Does this mean believers will have the power to work even greater miracles than Jesus, and whenever they like? The next two verses, on the surface, seem to suggest that: “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it” (vv. 13-14).

The New Testament testifies to some mighty works being done by the disciples, but not at the drop of a hat, and there is little evidence of widespread miracles since then. Does that mean we’re lacking in belief, or lacking in our understanding of what Jesus meant? When Jesus spoke of “the works that I do,” it seems clear that he had more than miracles in mind: his primary work was to reveal the depths of the Father’s love, and it was about to culminate in Jesus’ “hour,” the climactic events of crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

When Jesus spoke of the works his disciples were to do in vv. 12-14, he did so in the future tense: they would do these works after his time on earth was finished and he had returned to the Father. While on earth, in his incarnate ministry, Jesus could reveal God’s power through miraculous signs and

speaking of dying and rising again, but his hearers could easily remain skeptical. Once Jesus had finished his course, however – after he had been crucified and buried, after he had been raised from the dead and revealed himself to many people, after he had ascended to the Father – then the disciples would have the full story to tell.

Empowered by the Spirit, the disciples’ works could be greater than those of Jesus because they could declare the complete story of God’s saving revelation in Christ. Through their witness, far more people would come to follow Christ than Jesus had won over during his time on earth.

But what about vv. 13-14 and the apparent promise that Jesus would do whatever the disciples asked of him? We note first that in both verses, Jesus qualified such requests by the condition that they should be asked “in my name.” Asking in Jesus’ name is to ask what Jesus would ask. It rules out any selfish request, any desire to build one’s own reputation as a miracle-worker, or any petition outside of what God desires. To ask in Jesus’ name is to ask in accordance with Jesus’ will – and what Jesus wants is revealed in the next few verses.

Jesus and the Spirit (vv. 15-17)

Those who follow Jesus – those who Jesus said would do even greater works than he – are those who demonstrate their love to Jesus by keeping his commandments (v. 15). Earlier, Jesus had summarized his teaching in a “new commandment,” namely, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (13:34).

Showing love for Jesus involves more than singing praise songs or humming “Oh, How I Love Jesus” or wearing a cross around our necks.

We show our love for Jesus by loving the people Jesus loves, even when it is hard, even when we don’t get everything we pray for.

We are not alone in our efforts, however. Jesus promised his disciples that he would send “another Advocate, to be with you forever” (v. 16). The word Jesus used (transliterated as “Paraclete”) could also be translated as “counselor,” “helper,” “encourager,” or “comforter.” Jesus had been a Paraclete to the disciples as he had taught and exhorted and counseled them during his earthly ministry. After his departure, he said, he would send another Paraclete, identified in v. 17 as “the Spirit of truth.” 📖

Earlier in the conversation, Jesus had identified himself as the way, the truth, and the life (v. 6). After Jesus had completed his mission on earth, the Spirit would continue his revelatory work, keeping the truth of Jesus present through the lives of believers. “The world” had rejected Jesus and would also reject the Spirit, but believers would know the Spirit “because he abides with you, and he will be in you” (v. 17). 📖

On Pentecost Sunday, we remember the gospel challenge to follow Jesus by living as he lived, loving others unselfishly and trusting in the presence of his Spirit to lead us in the right way. We may often feel lost in this world, separated from others and useless as instruments of the kingdom. But we are never so lost that Jesus cannot find us, never so far away that he cannot hear us when we call, never so incompetent that God cannot show saving love to others through us. The promises of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit remind us that we are valued and useful participants in God’s ongoing kingdom because we know Jesus – and more importantly, Jesus knows us. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 12, 2022

Proverbs 8:1-36

Listen to the Lady

When you think of “wisdom,” what comes to mind? A bearded guru on top of a mountain? A noted professor and author? A trusted advisor to the president?

For the sages of Israel, “Wisdom” looks more like a savvy grandmother who always knows what to say.

Within the circle of Israel’s elite educators – men who valued wisdom above all else – the epitome of wisdom was typically portrayed as a woman of near divine stature. Because the word for “wisdom” in Greek is *sophia*, some modern writers refer to personified Wisdom as “Lady Sophia,” or just “Sophia.”

One reason this text is used for Trinity Sunday, which celebrates different images for God, is that some have seen the personification of Wisdom as another way of speaking about the Holy Spirit at work in the world.

When describing the biblical personification of Wisdom as female, some scholars use terms such as “Woman Wisdom,” while others prefer the more traditional title “Lady Wisdom” as a nod to her lofty stature, and we’ll follow that custom.

Whatever the name, it is refreshing to find a biblical text that speaks of God with feminine imagery. To some it may seem shocking, but others may

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? (Prov. 8:1)

find it liberating.

Lady Wisdom makes several appearances in the book of Proverbs. In Prov. 1:20-33, she takes a harsh tone, crying out to the “simple ones” who don’t heed her instructions. Proverbs 9:1-6 pictures her as building a pillared house and preparing a banquet before sending out servant girls with an invitation for naive folk to enter and find both wisdom and life.

Wisdom teachers contrasted Lady Wisdom to the temptress Dame Folly, “the foolish woman” who sits on her doorstep and calls to those “without sense” to turn in there, saying “Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant” (Prov. 9:17).

Today’s text portrays Lady Wisdom in a considerably more majestic fashion, describing her as God’s first creation who then worked with God in creating the universe.

How should we understand this personified portrayal of Wisdom? Scholars hold differing views. Did the sages think of Wisdom as a hypostasis, an attribute of God embodied as a divine woman? Does their language reflect some vestige of belief in a goddess of wisdom, similar to the Egyptian goddess Maat? Ancient Hebrew wisdom writings often show similarity with Egyptian wisdom. Since the image does not persist outside of a few wisdom writings, it is best to think of it as a straightforward literary device or metaphor, an abstract way of talking about wisdom. Formal education in Israel, such as it was, was likely

limited to royal or wealthy young men. Personifying wisdom, especially as a woman, could have made the subject more appealing or understandable to them: and it made for good poetry.

In this context, we keep in mind that “wisdom” does not denote an accumulation of knowledge, but the insight to use knowledge correctly and make good decisions. The lectionary text includes only vv. 1-4 and 22-31 of this impressive poem, but the figure of Wisdom is significant enough to warrant a broader look.

Wisdom’s call (vv. 1-11)

“Does not wisdom call?” asked the sage, “and does not understanding raise her voice?” (v. 1). In vv. 2-3, the writer portrays Lady Wisdom as roaming the city, positioning herself at intersections, gates, and doors, appealing for attention: “To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it” (vv. 4-5).

It is not knowledge she promises to teach, but prudence, not a collection of facts, but insight. From Wisdom one can learn “noble things” and “what is right,” truth as opposed to wickedness (vv. 6-7).

Others may twist the truth or distort the facts for selfish ends, but Wisdom’s words “are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them” (v. 8). Today we may use the expression “Tell it to me straight,” and that is precisely what Wisdom promises to do: her words “are all straight to the one who understands, and right to those who find knowledge” (v. 9). Such instruction is better than silver, gold, or jewels, the text says: no tangible wealth can compare with the

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acquisition of wisdom (vv. 10-11).

Does that ring a bell? We have all known people who were smart as a whip, but as mean as a snake. Possessing intelligence and using it correctly are two different things. The science fiction writer Isaac Asimov famously said, “The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.”

Wisdom is not about gaining knowledge, but using what we know in the right way, making right decisions.

Wisdom’s virtues (vv. 12-21)

The next section expounds on the theme that wisdom involves prudent living and careful use of knowledge (v. 12). A favorite mantra of the wisdom writers is “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:9, 9:10). Verse 13 plays on that theme, highlighting the dichotomy between the goodness of wisdom and the wickedness of folly: “The fear of the LORD is a hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.”

These words could have been written for our time. We live in the age of “fake news,” “alternate facts,” and lies both large and small. Obstruction of justice and obfuscation of motives are as common as they are convincing to those who share the same biases. Pride and arrogance feed the attitude that we can make truth what we want it to be.

These are things that Wisdom – standing in as God’s representative – despises. What we need is “good advice and sound wisdom,” insight and strength (v. 14). If government officials of any age are to do what is right and uphold justice, they must follow the ways of Wisdom (vv. 15-16).

Job, in a state of disillusionment,

complained that Wisdom was hidden and could not be found (Job 28:12-13, 20-22), but the writer of Proverbs 8 imagined Lady Wisdom saying, “I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me” (v. 17). Finding wisdom brings rewards in abundance: riches and honor, wealth and prosperity, “fruit” that is better than the finest gold or choicest silver (vv. 18-19).

The promised riches are not silver and gold or real estate, of course. The acquisition of wisdom is better than worldly wealth, for it leads on “in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice” (vv. 20-21). That is where the wise want to be, for they recognize that the greatest treasure is to know the love of God and to live in it (vv. 20-21).

Wisdom’s creation (vv. 22-31)

Wisdom’s speech shifts to a different theme with v. 22, reflecting on her antiquity: the poem goes back to creation itself. “The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago” (v. 22). “I was brought forth,” Wisdom declared, before the earth was brought into being, before ocean depths and mountain heights were separated, before fertile soil covered the earth (vv. 23-26).

When God “established the heavens” above the waters and “assigned to the sea its limit” with respect to the dry land, “I was there,” Wisdom said (vv. 27-29). What is more, vv. 30-31 imply that wisdom joined with God in the work of creation, at least with respect to humans: “then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” 🍷🍷

Wisdom’s gift (vv. 32-36)

Having established wisdom’s credentials, as it were, the sage has her return to the earlier theme of calling for people to learn from her, except this time they are her children, perhaps an implication that wisdom was involved with their creation, or at least in the sense that she became their teacher. “And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways” (v. 32).

Those who listen and learn wisdom find happiness (vv. 33-34), and more than happiness: “For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD” (v. 35). Wisdom, then, is seen as the key to life, the kind of life that pleases God.

Those who refuse to follow wisdom miss out on life and have bleaker prospects: “but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death” (v. 36).

The chapter division is unfortunate, as the call of wisdom continues in 9:1-6, where Wisdom builds a house with seven columns, prepares a sumptuous feast, and invites the “simple” and “those without sense” to come and eat of her fare, to “lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.”

Do we need to set aside the pride that leads us to think we know it all, and seek deeper wisdom? Are there ways in which we, like Lady Wisdom, can work alongside God in creative roles? Can we rejoice in other people to the point of wanting them to live in a just world and know the peace, the happiness, the life that comes through knowing and following God’s way, especially as it has been revealed to us through Christ?

Her invitation remains open. [NFJ](#)

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 19, 2022

Psalms 42–43

Don't Give Up

Today's text may remind readers of Chubby Checker's 1963 "Limbo Rock," a tune that challenged dancers to line up and work their way beneath a stick held progressively closer to the floor. The song asked, "How low can you go?"

The author of today's psalm felt as low as any person can possibly go, so low that no one metaphor could express the depths of his despair. The result is three rounds of touchingly beautiful misery, concluding with an attempt to bargain his way out of it.

The three-part poem appears as two psalms that have been separated, but it should be read together. The psalm is a lament, containing the typical elements of entreaty and complaint along with expressions of trust and praise. 📖

By the dry wadi (42:1-5)

Psalms 42 and 43 are one of 13 to be labeled a "Maskil," which is of uncertain meaning. The Hebrew word is related to a stem that describes wisdom or skill. Some have argued that "maskil" psalms were designed to impart wisdom, but none of the overt wisdom psalms have "maskil" in their superscription. The NET keys in on the aspect of "skillful" or "artistic," and calls it a "well-written psalm." 📖

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. (Ps. 42:11)

The superscription attributes the psalm to the Korahites, a group of temple singers, and it was indeed well-written, a poignant lament in three strophes bound together by a common chorus. The author was skilled at painting word pictures to convey his feelings, which were heavily weighted with sorrow but tempered with hope. Some scholars have argued that the psalmist was voicing a prayer for the community, but it seems intensely personal, and thus should be seen as an individual lament. 📖

The setting of the psalm is unclear. An obvious situation in life could have been an experience of exile following Israel's defeat by the Assyrians in 722 BCE or Judah's fall to Babylon in 587 BCE. The intense longing of the poem suggests a time when the temple was still standing, but it had become off-limits to the psalmist. He did not ask God to rebuild the temple, but to lead him back to it. We cannot know the precise circumstances, and don't need to. It is enough to know that he longed for the spiritual refreshment of temple worship, but it was no longer possible. In being cut off from public worship, he felt cut off from God, too.

Could there be a more touching image than an innocent deer, parched with thirst, searching for water in a desiccated land? (v. 1). The picture is not necessarily silent: the word translated as "longs" (NRSV) or "pants" (NET, NIV 11) can imply a vocal

component. Imagine the deer panting loudly, a cypher for the poet's sobs. The same verb is used in Joel 1:20: "Even the wild animals cry to you because the watercourses are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness."

Desperate thirst serves as a metaphor for the poet's deep yearning "for God, for the living God." He cries "When shall I come and behold the face of God?" (v. 2). The psalmist thought of the temple as the locus of God's special presence. To worship amid throngs of the faithful, to smell the incense and see the smoke of sacrifices, to hear the singers' voices raised in praise – that was the experience that brought him the sense of appearing before God and experiencing God's presence. 📖

Such worship had been denied him, however, rendering him desolate, subsisting on tears as he wept through day and night while scoffers laughed "Where is your God?" (v. 3).

The poet could remember former days of worship, how he had joined the congregation in happier times, singing and shouting praise in a festival spirit (v. 4). The translation of this verse is uncertain at many points, and it's more likely that the psalmist had been a participant rather than a leader, but the general thrust is clear: his thirst for the kind of worship he remembered was palpable, and its absence cut to the heart of his being. 📖

Verse 5 brings us to a thrice-repeated chorus in which he expresses honest sorrow with trembling hope: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise

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him, my help and my God” (v. 5).

The psalmist was depressed, sad, mournful. Yet he kept reminding himself to hold on to hope, to trust that the day would come when God would restore him to a place of praise.

Beneath the waves (42:6-11)

The fleeting hope of v. 5 surrenders to a new round of misery in vv. 6-10. The psalmist remembers God “from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar” (v. 6). Why mention these places, if not as a hint to his location? It appears that he has been forced to live far from Jerusalem, and not allowed to return.

“Land of Jordan” does not refer to the modern country of Jordan, but to the headwaters of the Jordan in the far north of Israel, where Mount Mizar (which appears only here in the Old Testament) was apparently a peak in the Hermon range, from which snowmelt feeds the Jordan. That area is part of western Syria, though the modern State of Israel has occupied much of it since the Six Day War in June of 1967.

Waterfalls could be found there, especially in the rainy season. Water is no longer a metaphor for scarcity in the poem, but now suggests being overwhelmed by a raging river, a thundering waterfall, or crashing waves in the ocean or the Sea of Galilee (v. 7).

For the ancients in Israel and elsewhere, the sea symbolized the frightening waters of chaos that only God could control. The psalmist felt overwhelmed, swamped, drowning in his despair of ever worshiping in the temple again. Yet, he was determined to retain some element of confident trust: “By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my

life” (v. 8).

Those words sound more like the pious repetition of a credal belief than real confidence, for he immediately questions whether God still cares: “I say to God, my rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?’” (v. 9). The unidentified enemy is likely the power that impelled him to live so far from Jerusalem.

When the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE, many inhabitants fled to Judah, but others were forced to leave their homes and dwell in other countries. Had the psalmist been exiled to Syria, distressed in knowing that the temple still stood, but he could not get to it?

The pain was like a deadly wound, he says, compounded by the taunting of his adversaries, who again “say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’” (v. 10). The taunt leads him again to the sad dialogue with his own soul, and the attempt to convince himself that hope remained, that one day he would praise God as before (v. 11).

Surrounded, but hopeful (43:1-5)

Psalms of lament often move from complaint to petition, and this one is no exception, though the current arrangement has the petition as a separate psalm. The psalmist prays boldly for vindication from people who are ungodly, deceitful, and unjust. “Deliver me!” he cries (v. 1), or as we would say, “Fight for me!”

We hear his pain, and his brash accusation: “For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off? Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy?” (v. 2).

The poet feels betrayed. God

hasn’t delivered the goods as he expected. Would it help if he made a vow? He decides to ask for something from God, and to promise something in return. He goes beyond complaining and crying to bargaining with the only chips he has left.

First, he asks boldly: “O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling” (v. 3).

Then, he promises: “Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God” (v. 4).

Was the poet also a musician, or was the promised harp solo a metaphor? No matter: he believed that his testimony, his promise of public praise at the altar, would be pleasing to God, and might motivate God to hear his lowly plea and lift him up. We might expect the vow to conclude the psalm, but for the sake of structure he repeats the chorus in drawing his composition to a close. He remains downcast and disquieted, but still holds fast to hope. That’s all he has: it has to be enough.

Who among us, who have once felt close to God, have not had times when we sensed more distance than presence? For the psalmist, the key to getting close to God was not just in prayer, which he could do anywhere, but in worship with God’s people. There he sensed the presence of God in the communion of the saints, in the praise of God’s people, in the assuring or challenging words of the prophets and priests.

We may share the poet’s sense of distance from God, but few of us suffer from his inability to join the community in worship. Might this downcast poet’s experience offer clarity to those who have abandoned the community of God’s people, and wonder why they no longer feel close to God? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 26, 2022

Psalm 77:1-20

Don't Forget

Blessed are those who have never wept despairing through days and nights, as the poet behind today's text has done. Then again, maybe not. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). In that case, the poet behind Psalm 42–43 would qualify for a state of extra blessedness.

The lectionary text skips over the most poignant and perhaps significant part of the poem (vv. 3-10), but we will not: we must follow the writer to the deepest question behind his inconsolable anguish.

The poet consciously structured his lament in four unequal strophes set apart by "Selah," a Hebrew word that remains untranslated because we don't know what it means. His language employs a wide range of divine names as he cries, questions, and struggles to trust in God. 🇺🇸🇺🇸

The first waves of Hebrews returning to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile faced one of the greatest disappointments of all time. The city was in shambles and overgrown, the neighbors were hostile, and rain had become scarce. Anyone who had returned with rosy expectations could have become disillusioned in such circumstances.

The psalm could possibly be read as a community lament, but it is so

I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD; I will remember your wonders of old. (Ps. 77:11)

intensely personal that we will profit more from reading the psalm as the prayer of an individual, but whose experience spoke to the needs of the community.

Sleepless nights (vv. 1-3)

We don't know what led the author of Psalm 77 into such despondency, which manifested in a visceral sense of despair and sleepless nights. The NRSV's "I cry aloud to God, aloud to God" in the NRVS could be literally rendered as "My voice to God I cry out, my voice to God, that he may hear me!" (v. 1). The word translated as "voice" can also be translated as a loud cry, a shout, or even thunder. The image is not one of quiet sobs, but of loud moaning aimed in God's direction.

His complaints persist through "the day of my trouble" and through nights when "my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted" (v. 2). This is a person who knows pain, and he embraces it. He has not sought to deaden it with alcohol, or to obscure it by getting lost in work or exercise or video games: he feels the pain deep within, and he will not hide from it.

His inner ache is most troublesome because it comes from a sense that God has gone missing: "I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints" (v. 3). Many of us have known what it is like to love someone dearly, to devote ourselves to them,

depend on them, and have them show the same commitment to us – until they didn't. We felt the loss of relationship keenly, and never more than when we thought about them, when every happy memory became a dagger to the heart.

Hard questions (vv. 4-9)

For the psalmist, that was God. He felt that God had not only abandoned him, but also had afflicted him with such pain that he could not close his eyes to sleep, with such trouble that he could not put cogent words together (v. 4). He has been reduced to a quivering, blubbing mass of misery.

His misery was compounded by memory of past times when God was faithful, stories from antiquity (v. 5). His brain remained on high alert through the night, trying to make sense of his situation (v. 6), and wondering why God seemed so far away: "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable?" (v. 7) 🇺🇸

This is the heart of the matter, asked most pointedly in v. 10: Has God changed? "Has his steadfast love ceased forever?" (v. 8a). The psalmist would have known the classic description of God's character from Exod. 34:6, a self-revelation to Moses that was often quoted in scripture: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (see Num. 14:18-19, Deut. 5:10, Neh. 9:17, Psa. 25:6-7, and Jon. 4:2). Had God forgotten the meaning of steadfast love? The same word (*chesed*) is used here, and its meaning speaks to a faithful love that doesn't stop. But the psalmist no longer felt it. "Are his

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promises at an end for all time?” (v. 8b). “Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” (v. 9). The psalmist’s fear that God had forgotten to be gracious, and that God’s anger had countered God’s compassion all reflect vocabulary from Exod. 34:6, where God is merciful (the same Hebrew word as “compassion”), gracious, and slow to anger.

That is who the psalmist believed God was supposed to be: merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. What can one do when it no longer seems true, when the once merciful and gracious God appears to have gotten angry and stormed away?

Helpful musing (vv. 10-15)

The third strophe opens with that thought crystalized most clearly: “And I say, ‘It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.’” (v. 10). Had God changed? That was the psalmist’s deepest fear. His present experience led him to wonder if all he had heard about God through the years was either not true, or was no longer true. Such thoughts can be devastating. It’s one thing to learn that there is no Santa Claus living at the North Pole, no Easter Bunny, no Tooth Fairy. But is God just another childhood fantasy, something parents and other adults tell us to instill a fear of hell and keep us in line?

Many of us have faced that fear, and it can be traumatic. Such questions often arise when wrongful expectations run aground on reality. Well-meaning parents, teachers, or preachers may have led us to believe not only that God is always with us, but also that God has promised to always protect us from harm and bless us with good things. Such expectations are not biblical, but often absorbed, if unconsciously. Then, when God does not step in and protect

us from sickness or betrayal or losing a job, we may think God has abandoned us or forgotten the promises we had come to expect.

We may find ourselves doubting the whole religious enterprise, wondering if God is no more than a cosmic Santa Claus foisted on the foolish. That seems to be where the psalmist found himself, but then something happened. Perhaps he began to question his doubts, or maybe he thought that writing it all off was too easy a solution. He decides to turn once again to the community’s historical memory of God’s acts, but with a more open mind.

“I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD,” he said. “I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds” (vv. 11-12). He recalled the stories of deliverance at the heart of Israel’s identity, and his recollection sparked a new conviction that what he had heard and experienced was true: “Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God? You have displayed your might among the peoples. With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph” (vv. 13-15).

The shift is remarkable. Earlier, recalling “the days of old” had brought him only misery and questions, but now he finds renewed confidence that God had not abandoned the redemption business after all. The bitter fear from v. 10, that “the right hand of the Most High has changed” has given way to conviction that “With your strong arm you redeemed your people.” The renewal of belief provided hope that God would deliver him, too.

Hopeful memories (vv. 16-20)

The psalmist’s hope turns to powerful language in the closing verses, as his loud cries in the night are replaced

with visions of divine thunder and lightning overcoming the waters of chaos, bringing order to the world in an act of divine creation (vv. 16-18).

For the ancients, no enemy was more feared than the uncontrollable sea. Perhaps the poet looked about at the simple beauty and wonder of the world around him, and he found hints of God’s presence in the created order.

More personally, he recalled the central story in Israel’s communal memory, how God had delivered the ancestors from Egypt, leading them safely though the sea “by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (vv. 19-20).

A key to understanding may be found in the last line of v. 19: “Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.” Perhaps the psalmist had been depending too heavily on some tangible evidence of God’s presence, and he needed the reminder that even in the defining act of delivering Israel at the sea, God’s footprints were not visible.

The unseen “right arm” of v. 10 and the delivering “strong arm” of v. 15 had become apparent in “the hand of Moses and Aaron” (v. 20).

God’s presence is often most apparent in the lives and the loves of other people. Perhaps the psalmist had encountered a friend who reminded him of that. Or maybe he had joined in a service of worship and experienced the shared faith of the congregation.

The psalmist’s experience could speak to our own times of questioning. In the old, old stories, and in the company of God’s people, perhaps we might also learn that we’re not as alone as we had thought. **NFJ**

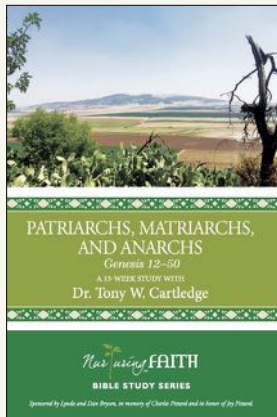
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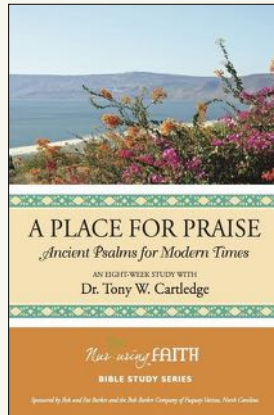


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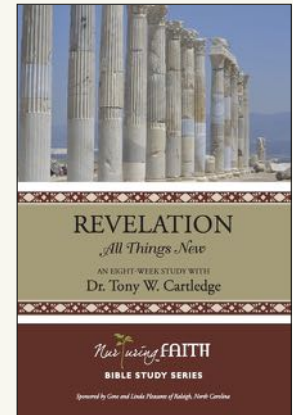
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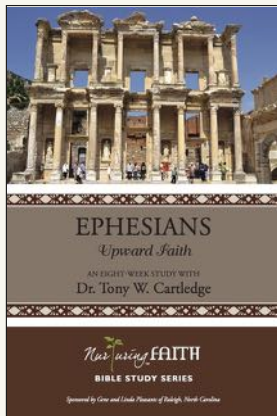
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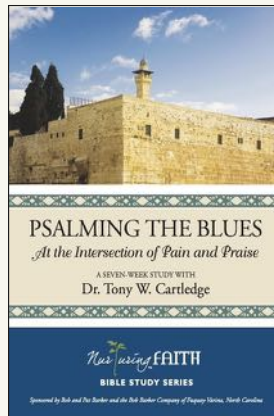
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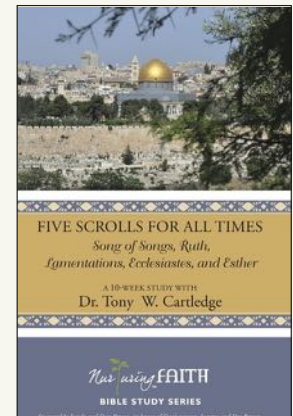
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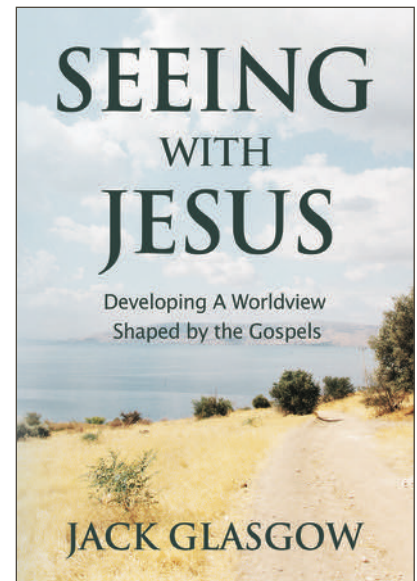
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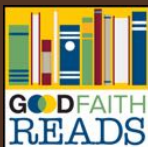


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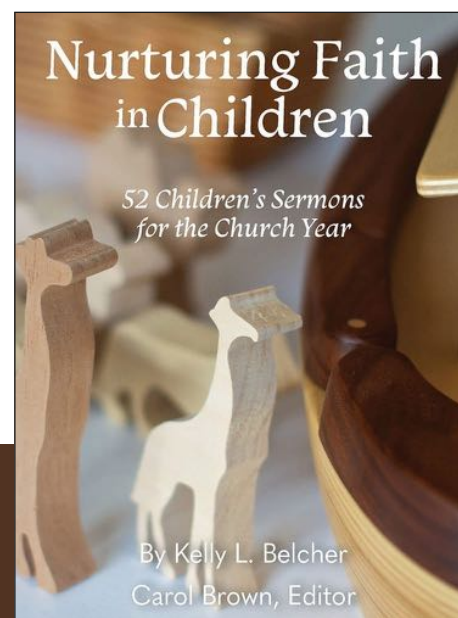
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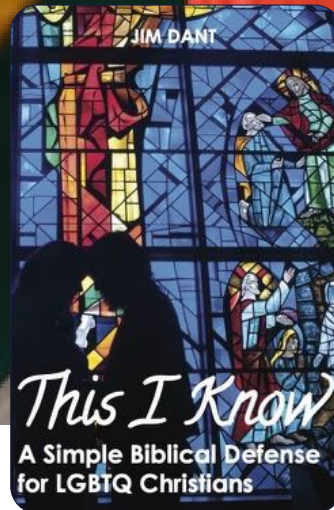
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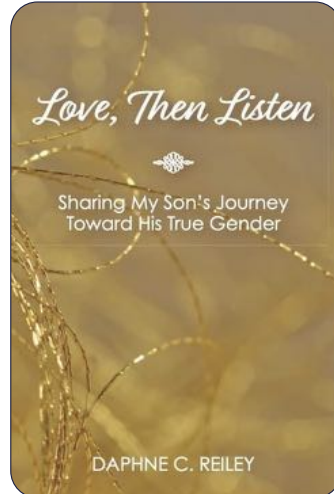
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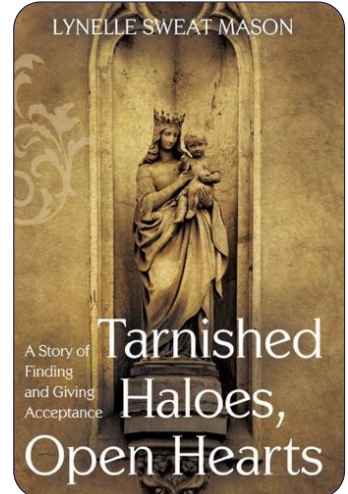
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BY JOHN D. PIERCE

WINGATE, N.C. — Christopher B. Harbin, who serves as pastor of two United Methodist congregations in suburban Charlotte, grew up in Brazil where his parents were Baptist missionaries.

Along with his wife, Karen, Chris has served as a missionary in Michigan, South Carolina, Mexico and Brazil. He has taught theological education courses and written extensively.

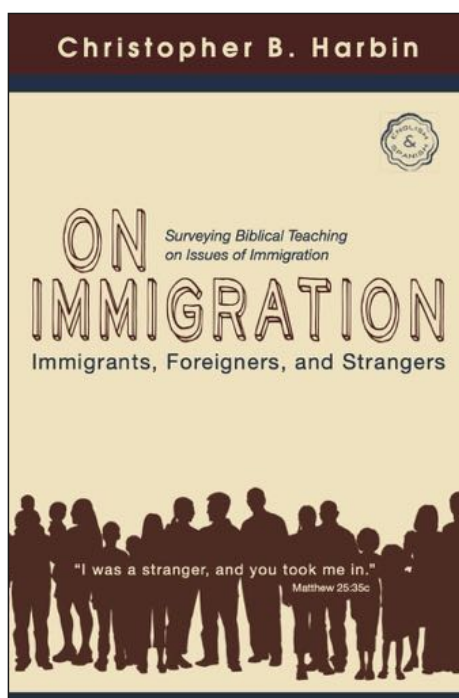
His bilingual book, *On Immigration*, is a survey of the Bible's teachings on immigrants, foreigners and strangers. Published by Nurturing Faith in 2015, it is available at goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore.

Editor John Pierce asked Harbin about some of those issues in the following conversation.

NFJ: Your book is a thorough survey of the Bible's many related texts about the proper attitude toward and interaction with immigrants. What is the overarching biblical message?

CH: The overarching biblical message about interacting with immigrants falls pretty much in line with Jesus' comments about loving our neighbor — followed by his story of the Good Samaritan which defines neighbor specifically to include those we would look down on for being different, strangers, impure, foreign, and less deserving than ourselves.

We see this theme in refrains like "remember your forefathers were stran-



gers in the land of Egypt;" in Jesus' talk of gathering the lost; and in the many stories of immigrants and foreigners added into the history of Israel, specifically in the line of Jesus' genealogy.

NFJ: Can you give us a peek into one biblical text that speaks to the treatment of immigrants or foreigners?

CH: Abraham's welcome of travelers in Genesis 18 presents his righteousness through how he treats immigrant strangers. As he sees three outsiders coming towards his camp, he rushes out to meet them and begs for the opportunity to serve them with a meager dose of hospitality, if they have found him worthy.

He offers bread and water, but urges Sarai (Sarah) to bake 100 pounds of flour into bread, kills a fatted goat, and sets out milk, yogurt, and cheese for these guests. From the amount of food, we should imagine the three men traveled with quite a retinue, which Abraham was thankful to receive, feed and serve.

This account is followed by a starkly contrasting story in which these same travelers arrive in Sodom only to be pounced upon by the locals as ripe for abuse. Abraham's welcome and hospitality are juxtaposed to Sodom's wickedness and eventual destruction.

The contrast centers on how they treated outsiders. Abraham comes out as righteous, while Sodom is condemned for its wickedness.

NFJ: Discussions about immigration today tend to bring more heat than light. How do you see those who claim biblical authority dealing with this issue?

CH: More than anything, I have seen a great reluctance to look at the scriptures for an appropriate response to the issues around immigration, and how we address them in the political arena.

Many voices claiming to hold to biblical authority either ignore the issue of immigration when looking at the Bible or speak to the issue from a standpoint of politics and bow to fear of the other. I have seen much attention focused on a couple of passages that call for obedience to civil authority, placing responsibility squarely on the backs of immigrants and foreigners.

That attention, however, ignores the injustices that governments the world over have brought down on immigrants, minorities and peoples they can consider other. It also ignores the prophets who called those in power to find themselves accountable for their injustices.

We would do well to hear some prophets like Amos calling down other governments for their atrocities against immigrants and then shifting our focus onto our own complicity.

NFJ: What do you say to those who ignore this concern because it's deemed polarizing and "too political"?

CH: The gospel of Jesus is deeply political. It is not, however, partisan. Politics is about how we wield power, for good or for ill.

God has definite ideas about how power should be exercised. God calls us to treat one another with love, grace, dignity, compassion and mercy. The prophets repeatedly call us to work for justice, which they defined as meeting the needs of all.

We may not like the ramifications of that message, but that is Jesus' good news, particularly for "the least of these." This definitely has political implications, for it responds to those who wield power, calling them to account for the welfare of those on the short end of the stick.

This is only a partisan message insofar as the political leanings of some would disregard the needs of another slice of humanity. Granted, Jesus was killed by politicians who felt his message of inclusion was a threat to their grasp on power. Anytime the gospel disrupts the status quo it will be perceived as a threat.

Our silence, however, simply encourages oppression to continue. If we remain silent in the face of injustice, we make



Christopher Harbin, pastor and author of *On Immigration*, a 2015 Nurturing Faith publication.

ourselves complicit in it.

This is essentially the same challenge Mordecai lay on Esther's shoulders, reminding her that while it might be dangerous to her personally, she had a responsibility to speak up on behalf of others.

NFJ: To what degree and in what ways do the various biblical texts address immigration? And how do the cultural contexts of those times align with ours?

CH: Biblical texts often refer to immigrants, strangers, foreigners and sojourners as an extension of the class often summarized by "widows and orphans" or "poor."

A consistent refrain is that Israel should "remember [being] strangers in Egypt." As they had been mistreated by others, they were to rise to the occasion and do better.

At times, the text simply denotes that people who are important in the life of Israel are actually outsiders. The inclusion of Ruth in the canon of scripture is itself interesting, as it describes how a hated Moabitess found

her way into the lineage of David as his grandmother.

This is a reversal of the concept that no one from Moab was supposed to find redemption and participation in the life of Israel under Yahweh. The message is clearly there, but it requires that we read with understanding.

In Jesus' day, we find him traveling in and out of Israel as though borders were nonexistent. He takes pains to offer grace and healing to unclean people in the Decapolis and in Syrophenicia. He goes out of his way to speak with a Samaritan and overstay his journey to minister to the people of her village.

All of the New Testament is written by or from the perspective of people who became immigrants or refugees by the time of Jerusalem's destruction in 70 CE.

The oldest statement of faith in Hebrew scripture is, "My father was a wandering Aramean..." (Deut. 26:5) — in reference to Abraham who became a nomad, perpetually an immigrant through the majority of his life.

The entirety of the scriptures is soaked in a context of immigration and redemption from oppression as a minority living within a larger nation. You don't get exile without immigration. You don't get an exodus from Egypt without immigration. You don't get Jesus' flight to and return from Egypt without immigration.

In short, without immigration, there is hardly anything left in the Bible for us to read. In a religious landscape in which the gods of the nations were understood as having geographically limited power, Yahweh tells the people to multiply and fill the earth, and then claims sovereignty wherever they may happen to live.

Fulfilling this call requires immigration and movement across all sorts of geopolitical boundaries.

"The gospel does not charge us with protecting or elevating a culture, but with placing even culture under subservience to Christ."



NFJ: How closely tied are the issues of immigration and racism? And how should the larger biblical theme of justice be considered?

CH: Racism as we tend to consider it did not exist until we created the concept of a white race in the 1500s to undergird transatlantic slavery. At its roots, however, it is simply the concept of the other, the outsider, the stranger, the immigrant, the foreigner.

Racism is essentially one more expression of xenophobia, in which we consider ourselves superior to them, by whatever classification we use. Paul abolishes these notions under the banner of Christ by saying there is no valid distinction between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free.

Those were huge categories in the social and cultural milieu around him, and

yet he waves them all away under the grace and inclusion available in Christ Jesus.

Biblically, the concept of justice is that all should have access to what is necessary for life, to have their needs met. Jesus talks about this in terms of God feeding the birds, clothing the lilies, and sending rain upon the fields of the righteous and unrighteous alike.

When we turn to immigration, it is important to note that in the proscribed redistribution of the land every 50 years, the children of immigrants were to be included alongside everyone of proper lineage. Yahweh's provision was for all persons, without regard to their background or genealogy.

Doing what is right (justice) means that all people belong with equal status and value before God. Doing what is right must follow the concept of Micah's justice and

mercy alongside Deuteronomy's loving my neighbor as myself.

As Jesus' extension of defining neighbor includes the Samaritans, it extends to any and everyone we could ever meet. If loving my neighbor is second only to loving God, there is no possibility of being righteous and just without extending full justice and belonging to all.

NFJ: Many white American Christians see immigrants as a threat to their cultural dominance — and there are preachers who misuse the Bible to justify such fearful responses. How are you seeing that being done?

CH: This is an issue that has crept up generation after generation. It was those filthy Italians who were going to take the country to the dogs. Then it was the Irish, or the

“I have seen a great reluctance to look at the scriptures for an appropriate response to the issues around **immigration, and how we address them in the political arena.”**

“In short, without immigration, there is hardly anything left in the Bible for us to read.”

Chinese, or the Germans, or the Poles, or the Islanders.

Or it was the savages who originally lived in the land from whom it needed to be rescued and redeemed. We could go back to earlier European history and find more of the same.

The problem is, the Bible does not impose or prop up a culture we are to protect against outside influences. We often look at music as culturally defining, yet it changes generationally, apart from the influence of outside cultures.

There is also no musical notation passed down to us in the scriptures. None of the instruments we use in worship were created for worship. Furthermore, we don't even speak the language Jesus used with his disciples, and language is even more basic to culture than our musical expressions.

If we are seeking cultural dominance and protecting our way of life, we would do well to consider that our way of living did not arise out of scripture and that dominance is a category of violence, not in the love of God.

Ancient Hebrew culture is foreign to us. The Jewish culture of Jesus' day is something we would most likely find offensive. The gospel does not charge us with protecting or elevating a culture, but with placing even culture under subservience to Christ.

NFJ: How has the issue of immigration been a part of your personal experiences, and what can we learn from your perspective?

CH: When we talk about immigration, not all experiences are alike. I have been an immigrant for close to half of my life, but my experience has been privileged.

I was born in the U.S. and went overseas as a child, and returned overseas as an adult with options. Everywhere I went overseas I was seen as representing the most powerful

nation on earth. I was seen as wealthy and educated, and respected as being somehow superior to the majority of people I encountered in the developing world.

I was superior for them because I had a way out. I was not trapped by my documentation status, and could rely on my government to go to bat for my welfare. That is not the experience of most immigrants.

Most immigrants represent a people with a minority status having less power, fewer resources and fewer opportunities. My education was respected overseas, while most immigrants have their qualifications ignored in their new home.

We have medical professionals, lawyers and engineers sweeping the floors in our hospitals, while my degrees were looked at with great respect in Brazil and Mexico. Back in the U.S., however, my overseas experience opens doors for me in immigrant communities and closes them in non-immigrant settings.

As a developed nation, we tend to look down on the developing world as having lesser value. One's experiences overseas are looked at from the eyes of a tourist.

NFJ: What do you hear from immigrants that we all need to hear?

CH: We are too quick to generalize what we know little about. Not all Latinos are Mexican. Not all Latinos speak Spanish. In fact, there is no good term that works for all Spanish-speaking immigrants.

Spaniards are not from the Americas. Latino includes Brazilians, who generally don't speak Spanish. Many immigrants from Central America are neither Latino nor Hispanic, as they are indigenous peoples, some of whom only learn Spanish after arriving in the U.S., if at all.

Rather than make assumptions about people, ask open questions:

What would you like me to know about where you have come from? What do

you most miss from home? What brought you here? How long has it been since you have seen your family? How can I be part of making your transition to this place easier? How have you seen God active in your journey? If your cousin's child wanted to immigrate, what would you want them to know?

NFJ: How can your book be helpful to those who want a better understanding of immigration in light of the biblical revelation?

CH: When we look at the Bible as a whole, its message looks different than what we might see in isolated phrases or a particular verse. What I have tried to do is locate all the texts that use language specific to immigrants, strangers, refugees and foreigners so that we might look at them all together.

Then I have looked for passages that deal in more depth with stories about particular immigrants. Many of these do not use the specific vocabulary, but the context explains that the passage deals with a non-native person or people.

When we look at the range of issues raised, we see immigration in a more complex light than we might find on an array of bumper stickers.

Every book of the Bible has some relationship to immigration. If nothing else, it was written by, about or to people who were or recently had been immigrants, foreigners or refugees.

If we are honest with our approach to the Bible, we are the outsiders looking in on literature that belongs to an immigrant community, a people in exile, or a band of refugees seeking to establish themselves in a new environment.

It will be hard for us to fully appreciate the Bible without recognizing its deep ties to immigration. My book will help open the door to give greater appreciation to that background. **NFJ**

Land grabbing, then and now

BY TONY CARTLEDGE

Russia's greedy invasion of Ukraine put the world in a tizzy, and for good reason. Land grabs are always ugly.

Russian czar-for-life Vladimir Putin has a penchant for that. His war machine took the Crimean Peninsula away from Ukraine and "annexed" it to Russia back in 2014, mainly to control important ports on the Black Sea, including Sevastopol.

That move broke any number of treaties and was widely condemned as against international law. Sanctions were levied, but nothing changed.

Like a schoolyard bully taking away a smaller boy's candy, Russia got what it wanted and pretended that it was what the people of Crimea wanted, too.

Reading about the nasty business introduced me to the word "irredentist," which has nothing to do with getting X-rays of your teeth. A Wikipedia article about the annexation of Crimea noted, "As early as 2010, some analysts speculated that the Russian government had irredentist plans."

Irredentist refers to a situation in which a political movement or people group occupies a territory that they consider — based on history or legend — to have originally been theirs, but had been lost and needed to be returned, or "redeemed" (the word is from the Italian *irredento*, meaning "unredeemed").

Crimea had once been part of the Soviet empire, and Putin wanted to have it back in the USSR (with apologies to the Beatles' 1968 tune). Keep that word in mind: "irredentism."

Putin's continuing land-grabbing efforts, while pretending he's doing so for justifiable and even humanitarian reasons, are ugly business — as is the support he gets from some American political leaders and others.

Fortunately, most Americans are not

cheerleaders for Putin. On principle, we recognize that occupying someone else's land — just because you can — is not kosher.

Or is it?

Many people who are quick to condemn Putin are unmoved by the State of Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank, where groups of settlers — often financed by Americans — move into Palestinian territory and start building houses, which grow into towns and cities.

The Israeli government then builds roads and army camps to protect the settlers, disrupting travel and daily life for Palestinians. When the land adjoins Israeli territory, as in East Jerusalem, the government "annexes" the land.

Israeli settlements and annexations break just as many international laws and treaties as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It's blatantly wrong, but few people get up in arms.

Why? Irredentism.

Israeli activists claim that all the land belongs to them because God promised it to Abraham, and because the kingdoms of Israel and Judah controlled the land for a few hundred years — more than 2,500 years ago.

That argument is as bogus as Russia's claim to Ukraine, but most American Christians give the Israelis a pass, assuming that they must be biblically justified in taking the land.

In sermons and devotions, many still cheer the exploits of Israelites who invaded and occupied Canaan, believing they had a divine mandate to do so. It was a bloody business, the way the stories are told, conquering and burning cities, killing and enslaving people who were minding their own business.

Why does that not bother us? Why can we get all riled up about Russia invading Ukraine while still celebrating the Israelites'

"Would Jesus endorse the kind of bloody warfare or vengeful actions described in the conquest narratives or the imprecatory psalms?"

Did any aspect of Jesus' teaching even touch on restoring land to Israel?"

.....
conquests in Canaan, or turning a blind eye to Israeli settlements in the West Bank?

The answer: uncritical irredentism.

The Hebrew Bible contains many stories about the Israelites and their enemies. Readers are often unaware that most of these stories were written long after the fact and designed to justify the Israelites' claim to the land. The stories need to be read with a critical eye, not just a devotional one.

Did God really endorse the takeover of Canaan? These biblical stories were written by people with their own agendas. They testify to the people's beliefs, but that doesn't mean they accurately reflect a divine point of view.

Would Jesus endorse the kind of bloody warfare or vengeful actions described in the conquest narratives or the imprecatory psalms? Did any aspect of Jesus' teaching even touch on restoring land to Israel?

No. While many had longed for a military messiah who would return Israel to the world stage as an independent power, Jesus proclaimed a vision of human kinship and service, a kingdom of God, characterized by love.

If we want to be irredentist, let's try recovering that metaphorical land. **NFJ**

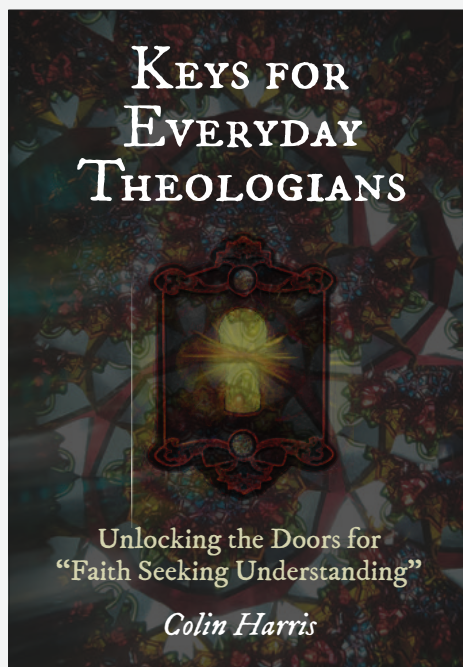
— Tony W. Cartledge is contributing editor and Bible study writer for Good Faith Media, where this column first appeared online.

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From Lost to Found

A conversation with author Karen González about immigration

BY ALYSSA ALDAPE

Karen González is an immigration activist and author who works with World Relief. Her writings come out of her personal experiences and those of others, and are rooted in the biblical context of migration and teachings about how to faithfully respond to those who migrate.

Good Faith Media's Alyssa Aldape talked with González about her experience-based writings on immigration. The following conversation has been edited for space and clarity.

AA: Karen, please tell us about yourself, where you are from and where you are now.

KG: I am originally from Guatemala and moved to the U.S. with my parents when I was almost 10. So I'm not fully second generation or first gen.

I'm more 1.5 — that in-between generation — because I do remember living in Guatemala and what that was like. My family migrated during the civil war in Guatemala like many Guatemalans did.

My first life was as a high school English teacher. I did it for seven years and then went overseas for a couple of years. It was overseas where I understood what my parents experienced when they moved.

I lived in Russia and Kazakhstan, so it was a vastly different environment. I realized this is what it's like to have to learn another language, learn a new culture, and to not be independent because you don't know how things work.

That experience gave me so much empathy for what my parents and many adults went through. And it was also my first experience with realizing the inequities in the world and how people really coveted a Canadian, American or European passport.

I realized I had hit some kind of jackpot to have one of those passports and to know of the doors it opened.

When I came back to the U.S. I had a major crisis of faith, so I went to Fuller Seminary and that was a transformative experience for me.

Initially, I went to figure out if the gospel really "worked" everywhere because the evangelical gospel I was handed did not work in the former Soviet Union. Honestly, I went to figure out if this (Christianity) was for real or not.

AA: What compelled you to write about the topic of immigration?

KG: After I left Fuller Seminary, I began to work with World Relief. Part of my job was to go to churches and talk about God's heart for immigrants, to get churches to support the work we did.

What I noticed was that all the resources we used, and that were available, were primarily written by white men and women. Which is fine and it was important for them to talk about their work in caring for immigrants, but there had to be a place



for us to advocate for our own communities too.

And I knew about a lot of people who cared deeply about immigrants and immigration who were doing really good work, and that's what led me to write my first book. There had to be the lived experience in this wider conversation.

I would talk to friends and family asking, "Why isn't anybody writing this?" Their response to me was, "Well, you write it." So it came from my experience working in this world and seeing the lack of our voices in the conversation.

"What I began to see in reading theologians of color is that there's also a trajectory of being oppressed to being free — and from being a stranger (an immigrant) to being part of the family of God."

AA: Tell us about that first book, *The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible, and the Journey to Belong* and also your upcoming book, *Beyond Welcome*.

KG: *The God Who Sees* is made up entirely of stories. While writing the book I found a Native American proverb that says, “Tell me a fact and I’ll learn, but tell me a story and it lives in my heart forever.”

In the book there are narratives of six biblical characters who had the experience of being a foreigner in some way. These include people who had experienced forced migrations, like Ruth, Hagar, and Jesus and his parents.

Then there are people who go on their own accord, like Abraham and Sarah. Then there is the case of when Jesus crosses over to a gentile country in which he is the foreigner in the interaction with the Syrophenician woman.

These biblical characters make up six chapters of the book, and then the other five chapters come from my own migration story from Guatemala to the U.S., and how that story intersects with my story of faith. And I tell that story through the five sacraments of the Catholic Church.

The book also contains a lot of data on the topic and definition of terms we often hear but don’t necessarily know what they mean. And, most importantly, I talk about how immigration is a social and economic issue, but also an important biblical issue because it’s about people who are made in the image of God.

The God Who Sees is very much a 101 on immigration. *Beyond Welcome* is like a 201 conversation.

We tend to center our response to immigrants around white culture and understanding. *Beyond Welcome* is an invitation to center immigrants in the Christian response to their needs.

My goal with this book is to elevate the discourse of the church beyond, “We welcome refugees.” It comes out Oct. 18, 2022.

AA: Is there one particular story you use as a cornerstone for your work?

KG: In the story of Ruth and Naomi, you see two vulnerable women. One is from a despised foreign nation, and yet she is loved and welcomed just as God’s law says.

She is allowed to glean in the fields and to provide for her mother-in-law. Also, she is invited to the table with the workers, and Boaz tells the workers not to insult or assault her.

That tells us those things must have happened to people in vulnerable situations like hers.

In the book of Ruth, you see people doing exactly what God’s law said — and ... everyone thrives. No one acts out of a notion of scarcity or fear of immigrants, but out of abundance.

AA: For so many people who grew up connected in some way to the immigrant experience, it’s easy to understand that God loves and wants us to love the foreigner. But it can be difficult for some to see that in the biblical narrative. What is your theological framework for writing about immigration?

KG: I was always taught that the gospel had a trajectory from being lost to being found. What I began to see in reading theologians of color is that there’s also a trajectory of being oppressed to being free — and from being a stranger (an immigrant) to being part of the family of God.

I noticed their reasons for migrating were the same then as they are today. Sometimes it was fleeing danger like Jesus and his parents, and sometimes it was economics like for Naomi and Ruth who were a family unit despite the deaths of their husbands.

Even in the scriptures you see characters blaming a person’s ethnicity as the problem. Potifer’s wife called Joseph “that Hebrew you brought here.” It’s the first thing she devolves to.

I began to make these connections with new eyes, but also to see how God over and over reminds the delivered ones to love the immigrant because they knew what it was like.

God creates protections for immigrants, from leaving crops in the corner of the fields to providing a sabbath for everyone. I wish

I could tell you these findings happened in seminary, but they didn’t. They happened when I began to read the Bible while working with immigrants.

In the Bible, I read a story of God who speaks to immigration. So my framework is through what God tells the Israelites about how to treat the immigrant. You must do justice, and you must have love for the immigrant.

There’s a lot we try to force on the Bible — like a framework for dating which is ridiculous because that practice didn’t exist. But immigration is something the Bible actually speaks to.

The Bible isn’t silent on immigrants, migration or xenophobia. We just don’t get taught about it in most churches.

We are not taught to read the Bible through immigrant eyes; we’re only taught to read the Bible usually through a white, Western, male perspective.

AA: Good Faith Media’s tagline is, “There’s more to tell.” As a writer and truth-teller, what is your more to tell?

KG: My “more to tell” is that I used to think I had to do everything.

I work with a Christian organization that works with immigrants and refugees; I write about it and also need to go out and do activism; and I need to stay connected to the news and be prepared for what’s coming in terms of policy.

Honestly, it was a lot. A really wise friend, Chanequa Walker-Barnes, helped me to understand that writing is activism, and I didn’t have to do everything. In fact, writing is the work I’m offering.

For me, that was very formative. She told me that my ideas would go farther than I ever will. She released me from the pressure I felt to do everything.

It is easy for women of color to take on so much and to care for so much. So, releasing the need to do it all was God’s gift to me.

NFJ

-Alyssa Aldape, a contributing writer for Good Faith Media, lives in Washington, D.C.

Who do we worship?

By John R. Franke

As Christians, we gather for the worship of God on a regular basis. We lift our voices in the praise of God, listen to the scriptures proclaimed, confess our sins, receive the promise of forgiveness, and share in the solidarity of communion with God and each other as we enjoy the company of those who share our religious commitments.



These are wonderful and sacred practices around which we build our lives. Yet even as we engage in these actions, we must continually ask ourselves, “Who do we worship?”

At first glance this may seem like a strange question. Of course, we worship the God made known in Jesus Christ and witnessed to in the Old and New Testaments. But do we? Just because we gather and practice a set of longstanding and approved rituals does not mean we are worshipping the God of Jesus.

In Amos 5:21-24, we read that God hated and despised the festivals and solemn assemblies of the people even though they sought to worship in the prescribed ways. It was because they were failing to act as people formed by God’s character and actions in the world. What God truly desires is not “correct” worship, but rather worship that results in “justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

The church is called to be a community of justice, a people whose life together constitutes a sign, instrument and foretaste of love, justice and righteousness in the world because we worship a God of love, justice and righteousness who delights in these things.

We read in Jeremiah 9:23-24: “Thus

says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act

with steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.”

Those who understand and know the Lord will live in accordance with those things in which the Lord takes pleasure. But if we resist the work of love, justice and righteousness while we make a great show of worshipping God on Sunday mornings (or any other time), scripture tells us that God is not pleased.

The church gathers frequently for worship, but it is not always clear who we are worshipping when we do. Is our worship of God shaped by the One who delivers people from bondage, the One who hears and responds to the pain and desperation of the poor and the oppressed, the One who gives hope to the migrant, the widow and the orphan?

Or are we worshipping a god of our own making who is primarily concerned with enabling us to achieve the American dream of a comfortable, upwardly mobile life for ourselves and our families? A god who seems to care more about our bank accounts, mortgages, investments and stock portfolios than the suffering of those around us.

Who do we worship?

If the God we worship is truly the God of justice made known in Jesus Christ and testified to in the scriptures, then the members of the community that worships this God will appropriately

organize our lives to reflect the concerns and desires of the One we call Lord.

If our lives and witness are shaped by the triune God, then we will inevitably and increasingly come to participate in the mission and purposes of God in the world, the establishment of a community where everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid.

Where that is not the case, it is worth asking ourselves whether or not the object of our worship is really the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who became incarnate in Jesus and lives on with us through the Holy Spirit. Who do we worship?

How many churches are organized to support the status quo of our society? How many Christian communities are filled with those living comfortable religious lives with little real concern for the desperation and hopelessness of those around them?

In his book, *Who Will Be a Witness?* Drew Hart writes: “Comfortable mainstream Christians opt to ignore the passage calling for justice (which suggests we would have to order our lives differently) for the less inconvenient act of charity. Nothing is more praised in status quo communities than abhorrently wealthy people donating proportionately small amounts out of their abundance while remaining committed to never changing the broader conditions and systems that make such charity necessary in the first place.”

Compare this with the teachings of Jesus. Who do we worship? **NFJ**

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



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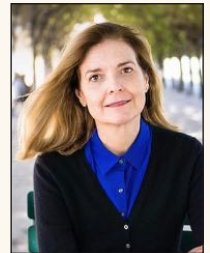
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Can I get a witness?

By Larry Hovis

Along with *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Leave It to Beaver*, *Gilligan's Island* and many others, I grew up watching reruns of *Perry Mason*, starring a young, slim Raymond Burr. With his secretary Della Street and the detective Paul Drake, he would spend every episode defending an innocent client accused of wrongdoing, usually murder.

The climax of each episode involved Mason, in full-blown criminal defendant mode, relentlessly questioning a reluctant witness in an effort to uncover the truth. In *Perry Mason*, like most courtroom dramas, the testimony of witnesses is crucial. Guilt or innocence, and therefore often life or death, is at stake for the accused.

The word “witness” can be a noun or a verb. As a noun, it refers to a person who personally sees or experiences something. In a legal setting, it is a person who gives testimony based on personal knowledge. It is often paired with the word “bear,” as in “to bear witness.”

In the church experience of my youth, witness was used in a very different way. We were challenged to be about the business of “witnessing,” which meant to share our faith in such a way as to convince others they should accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Witnessing was usually accomplished by using certain tools, such as the Four Spiritual Laws or the Roman Road. Rather than using our own words about our personal experience, it required memorizing, or at least rehearsing, the words or concepts of another.

Nowadays, most like-minded Baptists have rejected that particular approach to evangelism. Unfortunately, we have, for the most part, not replaced it with an alternative. Thus, we left evangelism to those whose understanding of the

Good News of Jesus can be very different from ours.

In Acts 1:8, as he is about to ascend to heaven, Jesus says to his gathered disciples, “You shall be my witnesses.” What does it mean for the followers of Jesus to be witnesses in the 21st century?

One way to be a witness for Jesus in the 21st century is to live as citizens of the kingdom of God.

The question of the disciples that prompted Jesus’ command to be his witnesses is found in Acts 1:6, about whether he would, at this time, restore again the kingdom of Israel. But Jesus had already made it clear that God’s kingdom was neither otherworldly nor the province of a single earthly government.

In response to the inquiry of the messengers of John the Baptist about whether he was the Messiah who would bring in God’s kingdom, Jesus responded: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt. 11:4-5).

“Go and tell what you hear and see.” In other words, be witnesses. In our time, witnesses of Jesus seek to find, experience and share stories of God’s in-breaking kingdom through everyday instances where the neediest are made whole.

Rather than insisting on privilege for ourselves, Christian witnesses actively advocate on behalf of the voiceless and powerless, whom Jesus called “the least of these.” And when we do so, we offer testimony that these activities are actually the work of God.

Another way to be a witness for Jesus in

the 21st century is to assemble publicly with other believers to worship God.

Recently I traveled with my wife to preach in a partner congregation. After spending Saturday night in a hotel, we had breakfast the next morning at Panera Bread.

The restaurant was full. By all appearances, few diners were on their way to church. My wife and I — dressed in our Sunday best — were an anomaly.

I had preached in this church many times. Historically, it was a leading church in its community. Due to COVID and other factors, attendance was only a fraction of what it had been only a few years before.

I concluded that the vast majority of people in that community probably were not attending any church that day. I said to the congregation:

“Don’t underestimate what you are doing today. In our time, the act of assembling with others for public worship is in itself an act of witness. Today, it is countercultural to leave your home on a Sunday morning, go to the church house, and spend an hour or so with other Jesus-followers to lift up our voices in praise, offer our prayers, and hear the proclamation of God’s word. What we do here together this morning stands in sharp contrast to the way much of the world lives.”

What does it mean to be a Christian witness in our time? Advocating for the least of these, assembling with others for public worship: These are good starting points that might even persuade Perry Mason. **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)

Two ways to say, and hear, the same thing

By David Hull

Not many people quote Chuck Colson and William Sloane Coffin in the same breath.

That is one of the problems in the church today: we draw lines between liberal and conservative and tend to camp out on one side or the other.

If we really believe 1 Corinthians 12, however, there is something of value in all who proclaim Christ as Lord. Just as James and Paul had different approaches to following Jesus (see Acts 15) in the early days of the church, so today we often have two ways to say the same thing about the church. Are we listening with both ears?

Colson was a leading conservative, evangelical voice in our country. His infamous involvement in the Watergate affair turned into a wonderful Christian ministry that grew to an international scope. In his book, *Being the Body*, co-authored with Ellen Vaughn, he writes:

“So we need not despair. The simple truth is our greatest hope. As we live as his body on earth, God will use us for his purposes. As we exhibit the characteristics of his church throughout the ages, consuming the Word of God, celebrating the sacraments, loving one another in holy purity, the world around us will be changed. If faith is at war with fear, if catastrophe can turn from death to resurrection, if hope can triumph over despair . . . if there was ever a time for the church to be the church, it is now. Go light your candle!”

Coffin was chaplain at Yale University for many years before becoming pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City.

Known as an activist for civil rights and for world peace, he has been labeled a “liberal” by many people. In his book, *Credo*, he also writes about the church:

“It seems to me that in joining a church you leave home and hometown to join a larger world. The whole world is your new neighborhood and all who dwell therein — black, white, yellow, red, stuffed and starving, smart and stupid, mighty and lowly, criminal and self-respecting, American or Russian — all become your sisters and brothers in the new family formed in Jesus. By joining a church, you declare your individuality in the most radical way in order to affirm community on the widest possible scale.”

Could it be that both men, coming from different sides of the church, are saying the same thing about the church? What does that say to us?

The church is big enough for a wide array of Jesus followers. I can learn from people such as Colson and Coffin and a host of others. You can too. In a world where we want to get our politics and our news from only one trusted source (who happens to confirm our own opinions), the church is a place for us to wade in the deep waters of all the truth that God wants us to know.

Jesus selected Matthew, a hated tax collector who was in cahoots with the Romans, and Simon, a Zealot who was working to overthrow the Romans. He put both men in a small group of 12, and this group became the church.

Our Lord must have thought there was room for diversity in the church. That means the church needs Colsons and Coffins and

people like you! It is not either/or; it is both/and!

I had a brief opportunity to get to know Bill Coffin. In 1981 I was writing a thesis about the preaching of the pastors of Riverside Church. At the time Coffin was the pastor there. He graciously welcomed me into his office for a lengthy interview.

He took me around the church building. I still remember his loving touch on every staff member and church member we encountered on our walk. He was a radical activist, but he was also a loving pastor. Most of all, he was a passionate preacher.

I never met Chuck Colson, although I have friends who knew him well. They have told me of his strong faith and profound influence on their lives.

Colson and Coffin are not living anymore. They have moved on to the “church eternal.” I am grateful that I was able to learn from both men. My faith is broader, deeper, and stronger because of their influence. They provided for me two ways of saying the same thing about the church.

We don’t have to agree on all points of theology, biblical interpretation and missional expression in order to be the church. We can still be brothers and sisters in this new family formed by Jesus even if we disagree on some things.

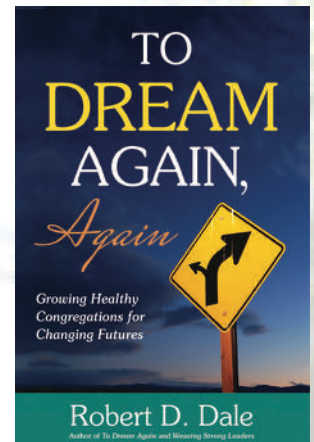
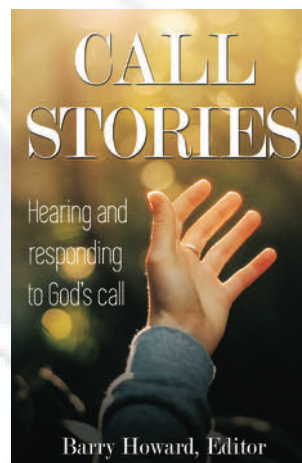
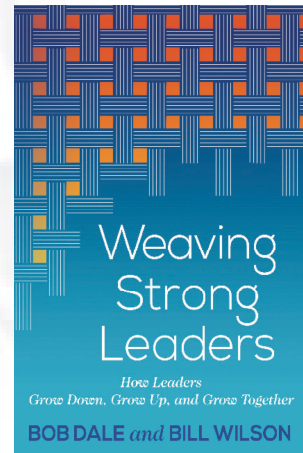
What are you doing in your church to listen out of both of your ears? After all, you want to make sure you hear at least two ways of saying the same thing. **NFJ**

*-David Hull is a consultant with the
Center for Healthy Churches.*



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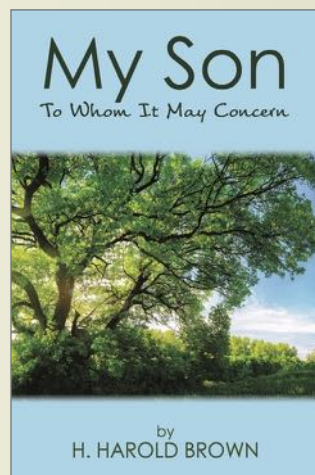
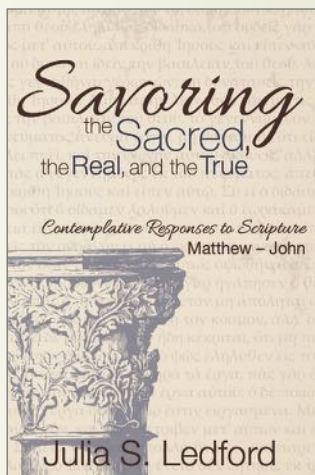
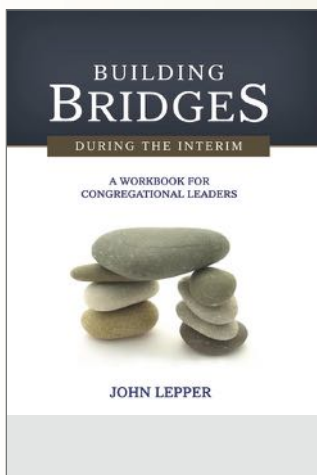
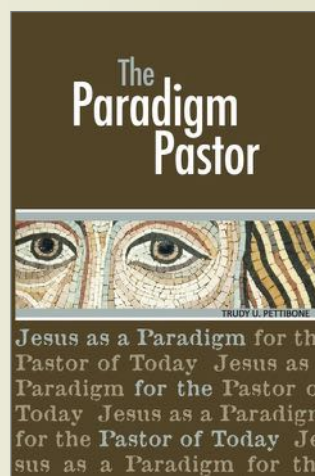
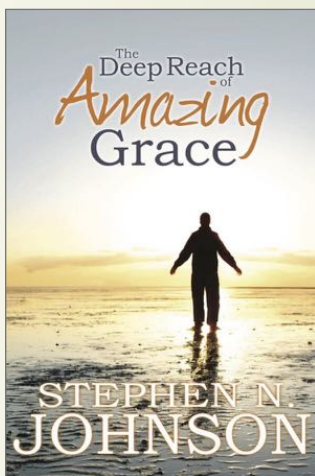
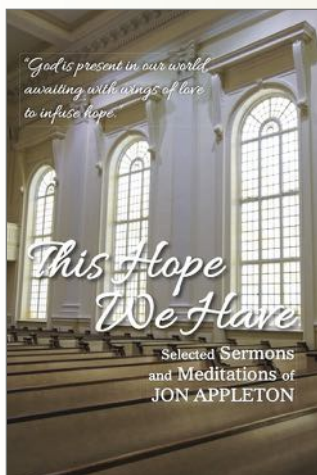
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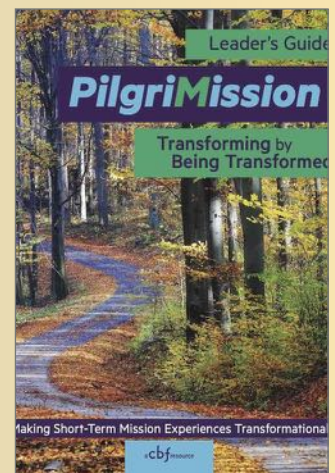
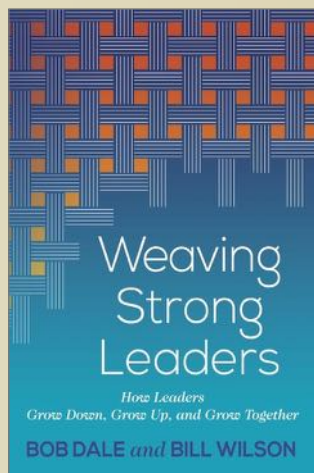
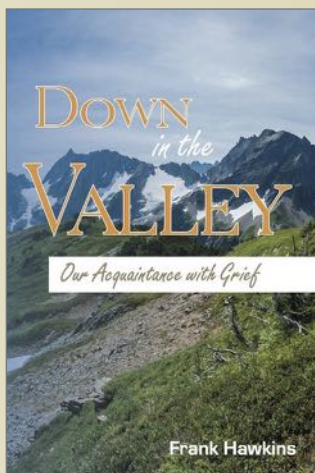
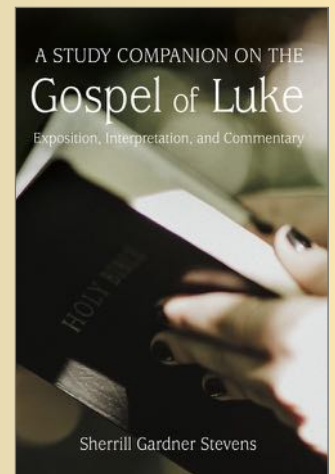
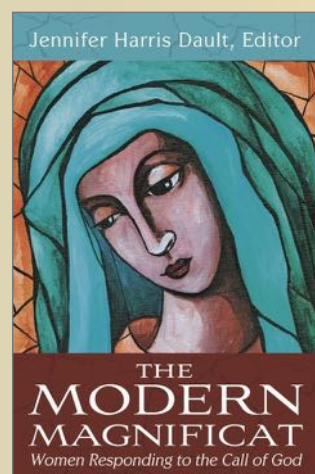
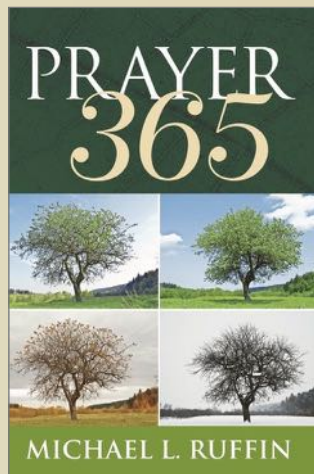
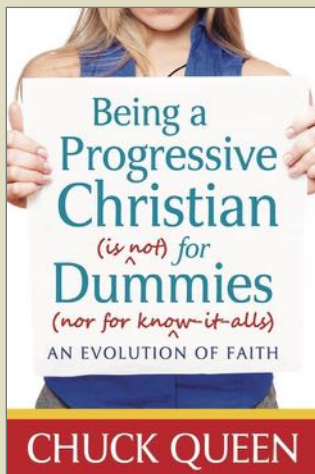
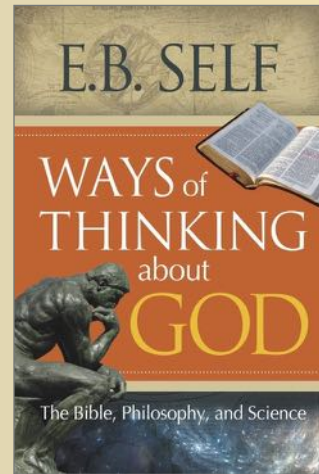
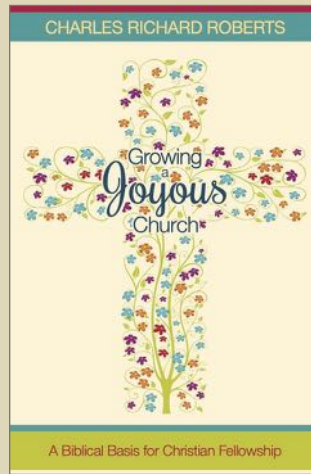
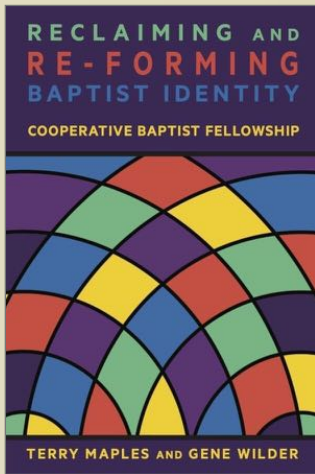
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WRITING TOWARD THE GOOD

Merrill Davies roots her engaging stories in historical research

STORY & PHOTO
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

“I don’t write to sell books, but to influence people toward the good,” said author Merrill Davies at her home in Rome, Ga. Of course, those books are readily available for sale and well worth reading.

When writing her unfolding stories, Merrill seeks to do more than put well-chosen words in the right order on a page. She invites readers to learn and live through the people, places and experiences she writes about — with topics ranging from an old harp that crossed the Atlantic to a better understanding of homelessness.

VARIETY

If indeed variety is the spice of life, then Merrill’s collection of writings is well flavored. Her first book, *The Welsh Harp*, is a novel that was self-published in 2012.

The story is based on a large harp her husband Bill’s grandfather and father brought to Kentucky, when emigrating from Wales in 1903. It tells of a young girl’s adjustment to an unfamiliar life and her persistent desire to play the harp.

Merrill’s 2013 book, *The Truth about Katie* (Martin Sisters Publishing), she said, features “a teacher who disappears for a few years and then returns to her family and friends, trying to figure out what made her panic and flee.”

The book, she said, is “about forgiveness, and how someone can move beyond what got them off track — if people will give them a chance.”

Homelessness is the context for *Our Pebble in the Pond* — released by Martin Sisters Publishing in 2016. This fictional



Novelist and poet Merrill Davies has always loved writing. But it was during retirement that her first novel was published, with more to follow.

account is rooted in Merrill’s real-life experiences of working with persons who experience homelessness.

“I was trying to show that homeless people aren’t identified by their homelessness,” she said. “They are unique people who can’t find a place to stay.”

Merrill knows such people through the homeless shelter in Rome, Ga., named for her husband Bill, a retired minister and advocate for those who struggle with issues leading to homelessness.

For *Becoming Jestina* (2018, Nurturing Faith), Merrill turned to longtime friend Jane Tucker who lived out a “Rosie the Riveter” experience during World War II. The story, “based loosely” on Jane’s life, required the two to visit Savannah, Ga.,

for Merrill to learn the history in which to accurately place the story.

Merrill’s book of poetry — *Branches of Love* (2019, Nurturing Faith) — didn’t start out to be a book. It grew out of her spiritual disciplines.

“I started writing poetry during Lent,” she said, “and I got carried away.”

Merrill’s latest book, *The Best Version of Alice*, is newly available from Nurturing Faith. The story was inspired by the real-life experiences surrounding a local boy who lost a leg and then an arm to cancer.

Other students, said Merrill, spoke of him as “the one who always helped us.” Then the tables turned.

“I thought it was better to tell his story from the viewpoint of someone [Alice, the

central character] who was inspired by him,” she said.

By focusing on teens in a time of challenges and opportunities, Merrill said the book’s message is that “schools and communities can surround people and help them become their best.”

HISTORICAL FICTION

As for *The Welsh Harp* and *Becoming Jestina*, Merrill is now doing research for a future book of historical fiction. Such stories need to be rooted in a historical period, she noted, and that requires homework.

During her visit to Savannah, when writing *Becoming Jestina*, Merrill sought to learn more about life there during World War II and the women — filling the role of “Rosie the Riveter” — who were welders in the local shipyards.

“I needed to know where things were and what was available at the time,” she said. “I spent a lot of time looking at a Savannah map from the 1940s to know what streets and stores were there.”

Readers follow the story of a young woman navigating the world of military production at wartime, while also learning a great deal about life in the 1940s when Americans were called to sacrifice in defense of freedom.

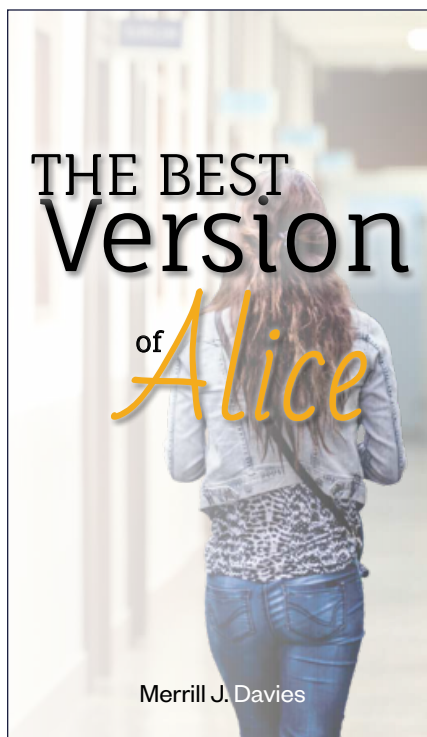
The dangers, the bravery and the social upheaval of the times play out in the life of a teen forced to grow quickly into a young woman while wondering what kind of future might be in store.

Firsthand accounts from Merrill’s friend Jane Tucker, who welded on Liberty Ships at Southeastern Shipyards in Savannah, were essential to developing the story in its proper context — and providing fodder for the plot and characters.

An upcoming trip to Tulsa, Okla., where Merrill’s father “just sorta disappeared” — and lived for seven years in the 1930s — will provide the needed historical context for her next novel.

“He worked for Texas Oil,” she said, “and I’ve got to figure out what a day in his life was like.”

That time period preceded his return to his hometown of London, Ky., where he met and married Merrill’s mother. As a



Merrill Davies’ fourth novel, *The Best Version of Alice*, is now available from Nurturing Faith, the book-publishing imprint of Good Faith Media (goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore).

teen, Merrill learned a family secret: that her father had been married earlier.

Merrill said his tales from those years were limited — including his going to live musical performances by Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. She looks forward to visiting the venue where those shows occurred.

Getting those facts and settings right is very important to Merrill, who noted: “You can’t really write about what happened somewhere without going there and doing research.”

TIME & TALENT

“I’ve always loved to write,” said Merrill — tracing that feeling back through the decades.

While athletes and band members sported their letter jackets, Merrill earned her letter by writing extensively for the high school newspaper in Beattyville, Ky. “I learned a lot by writing for the school paper,” she recalled.

When their high school teacher took Merrill and other student journalists to the annual journalism clinic at the University of

Kentucky, her interest in writing was further stirred.

At Union College in Barbourville, Ky., she majored in English with minors in French and education — leading to a teaching career. After marrying Bill, she taught in Louisville, Ky., while he was in seminary.

During his ministry positions in Nashville and Athens, Tenn., Merrill worked in publishing roles as a copyeditor and advertising representative — and did some writing while raising their two daughters. A graduate degree in literature and certification in educational leadership aided her return to teaching.

After settling into Rome, Ga., their longtime home, she would teach English for 27 years at Armuchee High School. In addition, she served as yearbook advisor, coached debate teams and oversaw literary events — passing along her love of storytelling and effective communication to others.

“My writing has been influenced by my training in journalism,” said Merrill, describing her style as “very direct and clear.”

Her values, she said, are not forced onto her stories. Yet she is often surprised to see their presence played out in her books.

“I write out of a Christian perspective,” she said. But in the same way that she isn’t preachy in her personal life, she said, her writings likewise reflect those deeply held values in more subtle ways.

In the 1980s Merrill took a course on writing for children and youth. The final assignment was to plan a book-length project.

That’s where *The Welsh Harp* was first conceived — with the plot and characters developed. But the completion and publication of that book would wait until after retirement.

Then she got on a roll: “Once I got started writing fiction, it just continued.”

And continuing it has — with *The Best Version of Alice* freshly off the press and historical research underway for the next story to be told. **NFJ**

Questions Christians ask scientists

Does skepticism, which is important to the progress of science, play a role in the life of faith?

BY PAUL WALLACE

“Why do you believe what you believe?” asked Fr. McCafferty. The question was put to me — and my fellow high school juniors — with great emphasis by the old Irish Marist priest, our philosophy teacher.

This was a Catholic high school, so he eventually got around to God. “Do you believe in God?” he asked us sharply. “And if you do, why? Do you believe in God because your parents believe in God?”

It was one of my first forays into the world of serious questions, and I was thrilled they were asked out loud and discussed freely. Fr. McCafferty’s questions resonated with me and excited me with the prospect of learning by digging down into my own viewpoint, of questioning myself, of testing my perspective.

My natural skepticism, my tendency to ask a lot of questions, had lain dormant until then. Fr. McCafferty was the first to give it the green light.

Skepticism is not cynicism. It is not just a bad mood. Skepticism is a posture of persistent questioning, doubt and uncertainty. It seeks not to burn everything down but to find ideas and approaches that work. Skepticism is a search for what is real.

Scientists place great value on skepticism. Without it scientific progress stalls, discoveries remain hidden, and old limited or incorrect ideas persist.

The habit of questioning constitutes a great part of scientific integrity, and it is every scientist’s responsibility to question not only others’ theories but also their own — especially their own, in fact.

“A scientist’s first principle is that you must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool,” said American

physicist Richard Feynman in his 1974 commencement speech at the California Institute of Technology.

“I’m talking about a specific, extra type of integrity that is not lying, but bending over backwards to show how you’re maybe wrong, [an integrity] that you ought to have when acting as a scientist,” he added.

So scientists must be skeptical in general, but their skepticism should be particularly focused on their own observations, experiments and results. Eventually, as Feynman says, “the truth will come out; other experimenters will repeat your experiment and find out whether you were wrong or right.”

However, scientific skepticism is bounded by clearly marked limits. It does not apply to all things under the sun.

For example, you will never hear a scientist, speaking as a scientist, turn her skepticism back on the scientific method itself. She will not, as a scientist, be skeptical of her scientific skepticism, because once she starts critiquing the general method of science, she is no longer doing science but philosophy.

Scientific skepticism is not a universal acid. It stays in its lane, purposeful, focused, controlled, directed only at the objects of scientific inquiry: physical and biological features of the universe and scientific theories about them.

The role of skepticism in Christian life is less clear. On one hand, questioning what you have been told is necessary for growing up.

Children in religious families are taught to believe a great number of unbelievable things, many of which show up in the first few pages of their Bibles: six-day creation, talking serpents, forbidden fruit, a global

flood, all those animals on a boat, and so forth.

At some point most children ask questions, and many of these questions have answers. For example, the answer to the question asked by so many 12-year-olds — “Was there really a talking snake?” — is *no*. And beyond this no lies a whole world of biblical scholarship, theology, poetry and meaning, waiting to be pursued by any who care to know more. This no is easily contained within the bounds of orthodox Christianity.

On the other hand, how long can this continue? We can say with confidence that the words of Genesis 1–3 do not pass the test of historical, scientific accuracy, and we can rest there if we choose.

But some are more curious than others, and press on: Were Adam and Eve real? How about Abraham and David? How about the prophets? How about Jesus?

And did all those miracles really happen? And if those people weren’t real and if those miracles — in particular, the miracle of the Resurrection — didn’t happen, what are we talking about here?

Lots of work has been done on these questions also, but the waters get deeper and clear answers grow scarce as you go. Not only that, but this kind of skepticism brings you up against the boundaries of Christianity, for the faith of many people stands or falls upon the Resurrection.

Perhaps questioning the Resurrection is out-of-bounds for Christian skepticism, just as questioning the scientific method is out-of-bounds for scientific skepticism. You are perfectly free to be skeptical about the scientific method but when you are, you are no longer acting as a scientist. And you are perfectly free to be skeptical about the

“You should present your questions to God and to the world as a prayer, as an expression of your humanity and of your good God-given desire to know and understand.”



Resurrection but when you are, you are no longer acting as a Christian.

This is the perspective of many believers, and they have scripture to support it. “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain,” writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:14.

Others have longer lists of non-negotiables: the virgin birth, other miracles, the historicity of the whole New Testament. Still others claim that, if you do not believe in the literal, historical, physical accuracy of the entire Bible, starting with Genesis 1:1 and ending with Revelation 22:21, then you are not a Christian.

But nearly every Christian holds some belief or set of beliefs that, if shown to be false, would bring down their faith. This being said, I for one believe skepticism is one way to love God with all your mind.

But please note, and this is of absolute importance: your questions must be your questions. They cannot be questions asked by other people. They cannot be the mere

fashion of the day. You must own them.

They must spring from your mind and your heart as truly as any thought or desire ever does. And if your questions scare you, then you must ask them.

You should present your questions to God and to the world as a prayer, as an expression of your humanity and of your good God-given desire to know and understand. And when answers come, however they come, you can begin to stand on your own small patch of solid ground.

The skeptic’s journey of faith is for the skeptic. It is not for everyone. But for me, for Fr. McCafferty, and many others, it is the only way to be true.

Finally, I would like to put in a good word for trust. We believe many things on simple trust.

For example, how do you know that the earth goes around the sun? I’m not asking for appeals to authority; I’m asking what *evidence* do you have? The answer is that you have none.

No experience, no evidence of your

senses, no chain of reasoning guides your conclusion. You believe it because someone — probably your 3rd-grade teacher — told you it was true.

And that’s fine. Most of what we believe, we believe because it was told to us by someone we trusted.

What I would like to suggest, however, is that if we rely too much on that kind of knowledge, we could find in the end that we have never really learned anything. The love of God, our tradition, and our own personal faith is not contingent on us denying our true questions.

Paul wrote, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).

I believe Paul would include our questions and our doubts on this list. **NFJ**

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.

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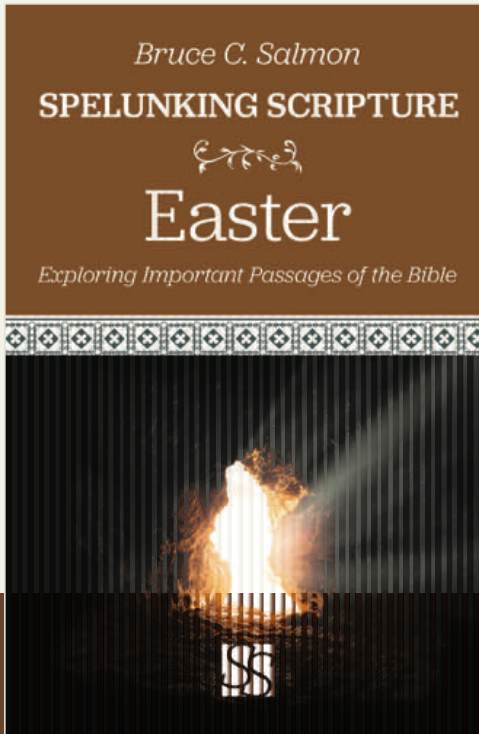
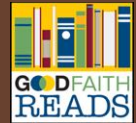
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