

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2022

# NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

Christmas  
past and  
present

[goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org)



## *Moses and Me*

WALKING WITH HARRIET TUBMAN

### **Five Words:**

The far-reaching impact of a short, poetic line

### **Leave or Stay?**

A conversation with author Brian McLaren

*A publication of Good Faith Media*

# *Give a gift that delivers all year!*

*Be generous, thoughtful and helpful by sharing a gift subscription to*

## *Nurturing Faith Journal*

- An inquisitive friend
- A thoughtful student
- A ministry colleague
- A relative who “has everything”
- Someone who might better understand your faith

**These are just some of the people you could gift with a subscription to this journal!**

Visit [goodfaithmedia.org/journal](http://goodfaithmedia.org/journal) and note the section on “gift subscriptions” or call (615) 627-7763.

# Editor's Letter

**W**ords matter. They have the capacity to heal or hurt, inform or mislead, inspire or bore, clarify or confuse, infuse anger or create peace.



Therefore, we are stewards of the words we speak and write. However, the effectiveness of words is tied to both the deliverer and receiver.

Filling each issue of this journal with mostly words (and complementary images) is a selective process. Unlike digital offerings, print media has strict limits on the number of words per page and pages per issue.

So what words will you find in this issue? Ken Sehested reminds us of the

humble beginnings and the widespread effectiveness of five words issued 50 years ago by the founding editor of this journal.

Tony Cartledge's words in the center-spread, weekly Bible studies offer insight and inspiration. And now he is providing more good words in a recently released commentary set that covers every possible biblical text for every Sunday in the three-year lectionary cycle.

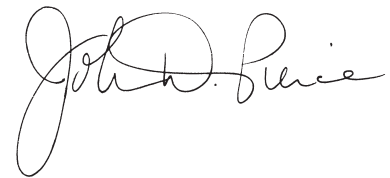
Spiritual director Ruth DuCharme reminds us to sometimes stop talking so much in order to retreat and listen. And Starlette Thomas' walk with Harriet Tubman reminds us that our actions do speak louder than our words.

Brian McLaren always has something relevant, important and honest to say. That is true of his latest book, *Do I Stay*

*Christian?* — as well as my conversation with him that appears in this issue.

Page after page are words designed to help us stay informed, think through timely challenges and reconsider what it means to follow Jesus faithfully when so many people deflect to other priorities — even deeming them to be Christian.

So please read on and consider what words you might add to the ongoing conversation.



*Executive Editor*  
[john@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:john@goodfaithmedia.org)

## 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.*

## OUR TEAM

### JOURNAL STAFF

John D. Pierce, *Executive Editor*  
Bruce T. Gourley, *Managing Editor*  
Tony W. Cartledge, *Contributing Editor/Curriculum Writer*  
Jackie B. Riley, *Senior Copyeditor*  
Cally Chisholm, *Creative Coordinator, Publishing/Marketing*  
David Cassady, *Church Resources Editor*



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

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

### GOOD FAITH MEDIA

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

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

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

### Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Interns:

Machaela Murrell

Christine Young



## OUR MISSION

*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.

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

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

### GOVERNING BOARD

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

### ADVISORY COUNCIL CHAIRS

Skye Perryman, Washington, DC (News & Opinion)  
William Neal, Fayetteville, GA (Publishing)  
Gary Skeen, Duluth, GA (Development & Marketing)  
Laurie Weatherford, Winter Park, FL (Experiences)  
Jake Hall, Macon, GA (Videos & Podcasts)

For a complete listing of the Strategic Advisory Board, visit [goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org).

*Nurturing Faith Journal* (ISSN 1072-7787) is published bimonthly by:  
Good Faith Media, P.O. Box 721972, Norman, OK 73070.  
**Subscription rates:** 1 year, \$24; 2 years, \$42; 1 year groups of 25 or more, \$18; 1 year groups of less than 25, \$24; 1 year Canada, \$42; 1 year foreign, \$100. Periodical postage paid at Macon, Ga. 31213 and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address corrections to: P.O. Box 721972, Norman, OK 73070 • (615) 627-7763 • © 2022 Nurturing Faith • All rights reserved.





**THE LIGHTER SIDE**  
**“Sleeping in Church”**

*By Brett Younger*

# INSIDE

VOL. 40, ISSUE 6  
 NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2022



## THOUGHTS

- 5** Yeah-but Christianity  
*By John D. Pierce*
- 12** The manifold witness of scripture  
*By John Franke*
- 13** Moses and Me: Walking with Harriet Tubman  
*By Starlette Thomas*
- 14** What if embracing the unknown leads to congregational thriving?  
*By Andy Hale*
- 16** When trying to please everyone pleases no one  
*By Anonymous*
- 18** Striving to be the light  
*By Mitch Randall*
- 48** Do you have to believe in hocus-pocus to be a Christian?  
*By Keith Herron*
- 58** Christmas calls for our attention and intention  
*By Autumn Lockett*
- 60** Sermon preparation of the first order  
*By John D. Pierce*
- 62** Questions Christians Ask Scientists: What science question do you have for God?  
*By Paul Wallace*
- 46** Good Faith Media internships bring fresh voices, learning experiences  
*By Zach Dawes Jr.*
- 47 HEARTACHE AND HOPE**  
Author advises churches to honor disabled children and their families  
*By Libby Carroll*
- 52 A LASTING LINE**  
Five powerful words in a lengthy, 50-year-old poem live on  
*By Ken Sehested*
- 54 RESTORATIVE POWERS**  
Prioritizing the spiritual benefits of retreat  
*By Ruth Sprayberry DuCharme*
- 56 REVELRY TO REFLECTION**  
Moving from Christmas Past to Christmas Present  
*By Bruce Gourley*

## FEATURES

- 6 LEAVE OR STAY?**  
A conversation with author Brian McLaren  
*By John D. Pierce*
- 40 RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS:**  
Part two: Barack Obama (2009—2017)  
*By Bruce Gourley*

Cover photo by Starlette Thomas of Michael Rosato’s Harriet Tubman-centered mural, “Reflections on Pine,” in Cambridge, Md.

# Worth Repeating

*“The call of the Christian is not to be biblical; it is to be Christlike.”*

— The New Evangelicals (Twitter)

“We have to really be careful about who we hate. Because 10 times out of 10, it’s going to be somebody Jesus loves.”

Bible study teacher Beth Moore (Twitter)

“[M]inistry is far more about listening than talking. Listening turns out to be the most basic form of respect that we have to give. Arrogance talks. Caring listens.”

R. Kirby Godsey, chancellor and former president of Mercer University (Baptist News Global)

“The main danger to conservative churches does not come from bad laws — it comes from Christians who don’t understand the distinctives, the demands and the ultimate appeal of their own faith.”

Michael Gerson, former speech writer for President George W. Bush (*Washington Post*)

“Christianity is not a faith that’s ‘becoming’ a global religion; it has been a global religion since Acts 8.”

Pastor/author Jerome Gay Jr., writing about the whitewashing of Christianity (*Christian Standard*)

“Because God’s glory is revealed in creation, we should be intentional about caring for [God’s] artistry.”

From a National Association of Evangelicals report on the scientific evidence of climate change and needed responses (MSN)

“The biggest danger our country faces to remaining a democratic republic is overzealous Christians who want ‘the church to direct the government.’ If they succeed, America will not survive as a free nation because Christian nationalism is neither Christian nor patriotic.”

David Currie, rancher, ethicist and retired director of Texas Baptists Committed (Good Faith Media)

“[Frederick] Buechner reminded me not to fear becoming or letting go because God was there at each point — in the terrible and the beautiful.”

Alyssa Aldape, contributing correspondent for Good Faith Media, in tribute to the theologian/writer who died in August

“Throughout my years as a pastor, I have tried to nurture a church culture where heritage and new vision collaborate and cooperate in the same fellowship. When heritage and vision separate, both are left lacking.”

Pastor Barry Howard of Atlanta’s Church at Wieuca (Good Faith Media)

The place to go in between issues of Nurturing Faith Journal is:



[goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org)

NEWS — ANALYSIS — BOOKS  
EXPERIENCES — RESOURCES  
PODCASTS

# Yeah-but Christianity

By John D. Pierce

“Yeah, but...” has been deemed two of the worst used words in combination.



Jeff Haden, contributing editor for *Inc.*, said the combo tends to show resentment of someone else’s success.

The Urban Dictionary defines a “yeah-but person” as someone who “cannot and will not be happy or satisfied under any circumstance...” Such persons, the dictionary notes, tend to have the least amount of information on a given subject but speak with the loudest voices.

Marvin Knittel, writing for *Psychology Today*, notes that “yeah, but” (or “yabut”) is a control mechanism. When employed, it seeks to control the conversation while discounting the perspective of another person — without actually addressing the issue at hand.

“It can raise its ugly head in a simple discussion,” he writes.

However, “yeah, but” can also apply to professing Christians who claim Jesus as savior but always find an excuse for not doing what he said his followers were to do.

It is a deflective rationalization in search of an escape route from the true marks of Jesus followers. Yeah-but Christianity allows for downplaying or dismissing Jesus beyond the single role of eternal savior.

Jesus’ teachings — especially the ones that call for an uncomfortable degree of

love, grace, faith and sacrifice (which are most of them) — are unacceptable because they are inconsistent with the self-focus and discriminatory preferences of numerous and influential Americanized Christians today.

The approaching seasons of Advent and Christmas provide an opportunity for us to go beyond the sentimentality to the confrontational reality of God becoming flesh. In doing so, we can see beyond a baby in swaddling clothes to the fullest revelation God has ever offered humanity.

And what is clearly revealed in the fuller revelation of Jesus does not square with what is often espoused as Christianity today: a political ideology of resentment, pretend persecution and restricted grace (which isn’t grace at all).

When Jesus tells us to “Fear not,” to love your neighbors and even enemies, to include those whom society excludes, to welcome strangers and to give of yourselves sacrificially for others, our only appropriate response is faithfulness.

Jesus is not lord if his teachings, even

commands, are met by a dismissive, “Yeah, but what he really meant...”

While Haden, writing for *Inc.*, was not addressing spiritual matters, one particular insight can be well applied to Christian discipleship.

He suggests separating those two words: “yeah” and “but” in our sentences. We can do so in these ways:

“*Yeah*, actually doing what Jesus said is hard, *but* it is the way we are called to live.”

“*Yeah*, I wish Jesus had not told us to love so many people, *but* he did.”

“*Yeah*, keeping Jesus limited to the manger, the cross and the empty tomb avoids dealing with what he calls his followers to be and do, *but* that would miss the whole point of how we are to live.”

It is easy to slip into ways of thinking that conflict with what God revealed in Jesus — and finding false justification for doing so.

Spiritual practices — leading to what Paul called the renewing of our minds — are the protective measures for keeping our focus on living in the Way of Christ.

One such practice would be staying alert to the ways we and others excuse our departures from that faithfulness. Let us beware of “yeah-but Christianity” that explains away Jesus.

We are called to say, “yes” to Jesus — not “yeah, but...”

Perhaps that’s why Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, just before telling his followers to turn the other cheek, love your enemies and other hard things, said this:

“All you need to say is simply, ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ Anything more than this comes from the evil one” (Matt. 5:37 NIRV). **NFJ**

*Yeah-but Christianity allows for downplaying or dismissing Jesus beyond the single role of eternal savior.*

# LEAVE OR STAY?

A conversation  
with author  
Brian McLaren

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Former pastor and popular author Brian D. McLaren tackles relevant issues head-on with thoughtfulness and often a soft laugh.

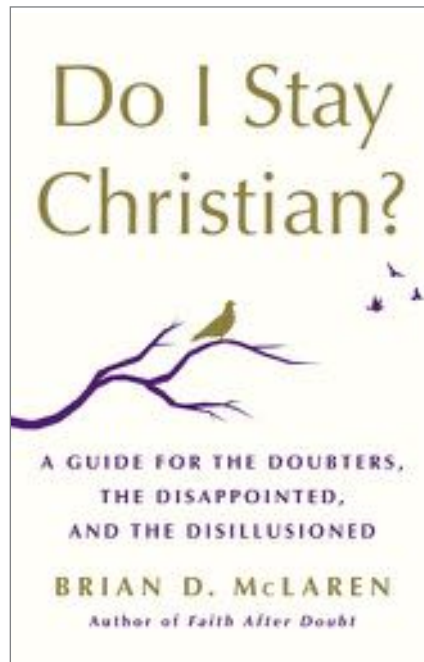
On the heels of his 2021 book, *Faith After Doubt* (St. Martin's Press), McLaren's latest book tackles an overriding question for many professing Christians who see so little of Jesus in the most public displays of Americanized Christianity.

*Do I Stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned* (2022, St. Martin's Press) is McLaren's welcome-mat invitation to ask that hard and defining question without a prescribed answer.

Instead, he illuminates the path, probes with the right questions, and helps readers to find their own space and words for articulating what choice they make.

Editor John Pierce talked with McLaren about his book and related topics for those navigating the Christian faith at a time when the espoused values of Christianity are often hard to reconcile with the public expressions of those claiming such allegiance.

**NFJ:** *Brian, did writing this book ever feel like you were refereeing a match between staying Christian and leaving — and, if so, was it hard to remain fair?*



**BDM:** I suppose it did feel like that to a degree, but there's another way to say how it felt. When I write I don't have a problem and a solution when I begin.

I have a problem, and the writing process is where I try to work my way out of the problem, through the problem to a solution. But sometimes I have to admit, in the writing process, I wondered if I would get to any resolution at all.

**NFJ:** *Let me see if I've got this right: White Americanized Christianity, as you noted, is markedly patriarchal, racist, greedy, toxic, rigid, unthinking and regressive — but don't run away, right?*

**BDM:** Yeah, when you put it that way, I think that's a pretty fair summary of what I'm saying. But here's the thing: What are we going to do about those problems in white American Christianity?

Running away is understandable, but the problems remain. Some people need to run away, and I understand why they need

to. But those of us who stay, I hope we will stay to do something about those realities.

**NFJ:** *Those driving white Christian nationalism — Franklin Graham, Robert Jeffress and others — are just not timid at all. They use every resource available to advance this perversion of the Christian faith.*

*But it seems those on the other side who know better — including many pastors — don't speak up very loudly because, unlike us, they have much to risk. I'm sure you, as a former pastor, are sympathetic. But how big of a problem is timidity in countering this toxic Christianity?*

**BDM:** In May I was asked to speak in Harry Emerson Fosdick's pulpit [First Presbyterian Church, NYC] 100 years after he gave his famous sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" I was asked to reflect on the 100 years since that sermon.

One of the things I said is that fundamentalists have played for the last 100 years like they were losing and, as a result, they have won — and moderates and liberals have played like they were winning and, as a result, have lost.

I think timidity is part of it, but I also think it was a false sense of security — and it was the sense that we're the good guys, so of course we'll be okay. But that's not how history works.

The famous conservative British statesman Edmund Burke is credited with saying all that's necessary for the forces of evil to win in this world is for enough good people to do nothing.

So I think timidity is a huge part of it.... But we're going to have to wake up. We are facing existential threats on every side, and maybe one way to say what cures us of timidity is to find out there are bigger things to be afraid of than we're already afraid of.



**NFJ:** *I remember in the early '80s the original Jerry Falwell quoting that Edmund Burke line to rally his "good men."*

**BDM:** Yes, yes, yes. We talk about doctrinal fundamentalists, but a lot of other Christians have been institutional fundamentalists.

They assume their institutions were God-ordained and infallible. And what we're seeing in religion — and in economics, in government and in education — is that our institutions are way more fragile than we thought.

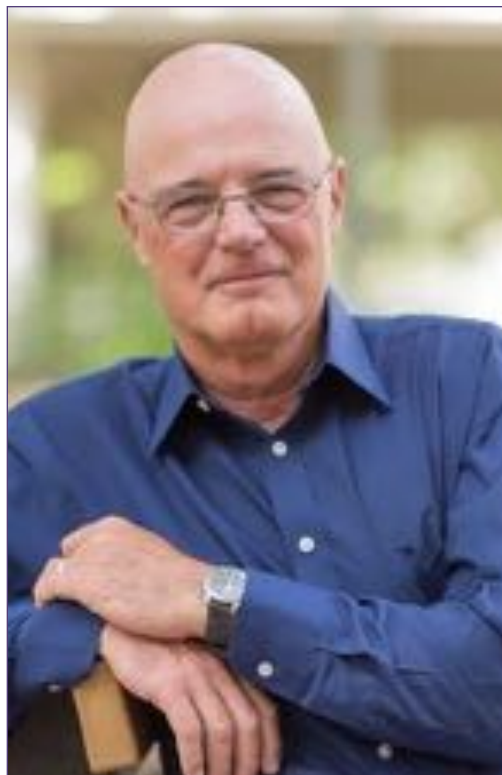
**NFJ:** *In your book you quote the late, great Howard Thurman saying, "By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight the slave undertook the redemption of a religion that the master had profaned in his mist."*

*Is the emergence and flourishing of the African-American church a model (perhaps a lab) for redirecting/renewing Christianity rather than rejecting it over how it's been abused?*

**BDM:** Yeah. Let me speak very, very personally on this. I don't think I would be a Christian if I hadn't discovered an insight that came from Black theology. And it is a profoundly theological and biblical insight.

It's the insight that the primary narrative of the Old Testament is the narrative of the Exodus, and the Exodus narrative makes the audacious claim that the God of the universe hears the cries of the oppressed at the bottom of the pyramid and is willing to upset society and upset the comfort of those in power to liberate the people at the bottom.

When I saw that, it was like the dominos began to fall. Because I realized the



word "salvation" — that I had been taught — meant salvation from hell and salvation from an angry God and salvation through penal substitutionary atonement.

That whole framework of salvation actually meant "liberation" in the Bible, and when I saw that it really gave me a way to stay Christian because the old way stopped making sense.

That insight then was picked up by Latin American theology, and many Asian and feminist theologians see that. If there's a future for Christianity for people like me, it's because of that fundamental insight.

You realize, of course, the slaves would hear the Bible read to them because for a long time it was a crime for anyone to teach them to read. Sounds like what a lot of fundamentalist political and religious

leaders are doing in our education system now.

They're not forbidding people to learn to read; they just won't let them read certain books. But when slaves heard the biblical story, and they heard this story of Moses and Pharaoh and the children being liberated from slavery, that's the story that made the most sense to them. So they saw what the rest of us had been trained to not see.

**NFJ:** *So we stopped reading the Bible from the oppressor's perspective and started seeing ourselves as the oppressed?*

**BDM:** Exactly right. Then I realized how, once you see it, the scales start falling from your eyes — and you realize why it takes so much work to keep people reading the Bible from the oppressor's vantage point.

**NFJ:** *You touched on something in Chapter 15 that I think is probably at the core of what keeps me staying, and that is I am just not going to let them have Jesus. Does that drive you?*

**BDM:** Yes, it really does. It really does. And the way many Christians use Jesus, it feels like a hostage situation.

It feels like they sort of captured Jesus and put a gun to his head and forced him to say the very opposite of what he said and did in his life.

I mean, really, to think that in America today Jesus is seen as the kind of guy who would carry around an AR-15 so that he could shoot the government officials who are coming to crucify him rather than be defeated because, after all, it's all about winning.

It's blasphemous. It's ridiculous if it weren't so horrifically dangerous. And, of course, this is what con artists and authoritarian demagogues do. They try to camouflage their bad behavior behind the cloak of the best person they can find — so Jesus becomes their whitewash.

*That whole framework of salvation actually meant "liberation" in the Bible, and when I saw that it really gave me a way to stay Christian because the old way stopped making sense.*

**NFJ:** *A few years ago we talked during the Mercer Preaching Consultation in Chattanooga about what we [Good Faith Media] call the Jesus Worldview Initiative. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has now developed a congregational resource on that topic.*

*It all started with my reaction to a press release from Barna Group that said that only 17% of “practicing Christians” had a “biblical worldview.” Yet neither the definition of a professing Christian nor a biblical worldview had anything to do with following Jesus.*

*These folks are able to redefine Jesus — or completely shift the emphasis from him — by using “biblical worldview” or “Christian worldview” and choosing different so-called essentials of faith.*

*At the church level it seems more productive to advocate for Jesus than to argue political and theological points with people. I’m just wondering if you are sensing that at all.*

**BDM:** Yes, and first of all I applaud you for having that insight about how that term “worldview” has become a Trojan horse to bring in a whole world of dangerous ideas.

I grew up in a fundamentalist home and never heard the term worldview. The first time I heard it was from very strict, hardcore Calvinists.

Now I realize that the “Christian worldview” was part of what they used to justify apartheid in South Africa and ... was a word with deeply political overtones and a deeply political history, as is the word “biblical” and the idea of inerrancy.

Robert Dabney, a Presbyterian [defender of slavery], said the way to support slavery is to say that abolition is against the

Bible. So “biblical” became a code word for pro-slavery. I mean this is history, so we have to realize that these words have subtext to them.

**NFJ:** *I learned that “worldview” was once a descriptive term to denote how those in biblical times perceived their world culturally and scientifically. Now it’s become a prescriptive term for how some authoritarians define Christianity, even without Jesus.*

**BDM:** Yes, exactly. So the idea of following Jesus as a challenge to that kind of biblical worldview or Christian worldview, I think is a very smart and wise approach.

I think if people were to take it seriously, it would lead them to a really good place. Unfortunately, for so many people, Jesus has been domesticated by the biblical worldview or the Christian worldview so when they hear the word Jesus, Jesus has already been defined.

And, in some ways, Jesus has already been disposed of because all we want Jesus for is to be born in a manger and die on a cross and come again to kill all the people we don’t like.

Romano Guardini, a Catholic scholar involved in Vatican II, said the church is the cross upon which Jesus is still being crucified. In this sense, you might say, the biblical worldview and the Christian worldview are the cross on which Jesus is crucified and buried so that he’s conveniently out of the way.

**NFJ:** *Are you seeing shifts in the kind of conversation those of us who are interested in theological things are having? I used to get into debates and discussions about finer points of theology and just no longer care about that*

*because there seems to be something more basic here.*

*We are talking about how a political ideology in contrast to the life and teachings of Jesus has been labeled Christian.*

**BDM:** Yes. I do, I do. I think we have four common responses to the current milieu, the current situation, the current crisis really.

One is the complicity where we have a lot of people who just go along with this populist, increasingly fascist approach that is happy with insurrections — a group of people who want to turn that TV series *The Handmaid’s Tale* into actuality — so you have complicity.

Second, I think you have a group of people who do what I call “walking on eggshells.” They just don’t want to say anything that will offend anybody on any side.

What that ends up doing is it requires them to have a narrower and narrower frame of things that are permissible to say, and it makes it all pretty bland. But I understand why they’re doing it.

Then third, you have those who say we’ve got tension and we’ve got to work this out. They at least name the tension, but they don’t really take a stand.

Then I think you have the fourth category of people who are saying this is our opportunity to rediscover what Jesus was all about.

The word I would use is not reform, but renaissance ... a kind of thinking about what the Christian faith is for — and what it could be going forward.

**NFJ:** *Here’s a bundle question: Are the expressions of Christianity as we know it getting better or worse? Is rehabilitation possible? Or, is death with the hope of resurrection more reasonable? Is it helpful to not expect too much from human communities — even, or especially, when labeled Christian?*

**BDM:** So those are exactly the kinds of questions I’m grappling with in this book, as you know. I think we should expect things to get better and worse.

*Unfortunately, for so many people, Jesus has been domesticated by the biblical worldview or the Christian worldview so when they hear the word Jesus, Jesus has already been defined.*

# The word I would use is not reform, but renaissance ... a kind of thinking about what the Christian faith is for — and what it could be going forward.

I think we make a big mistake if we expect that everything will get better or that everything will get worse. I think in the coming years we will see the ugliest expressions of Christianity certainly of our lifetime, maybe in centuries.

I think things are not anywhere near the bottom. I think we have not begun to see how low white Christian nationalists will go.

One of the reasons I stay Christian is because I have to stay in the struggle to provide an alternative to what I think is already in the works. But when these things get worse it wakes up some percentage of people to get better — and I think as we see some things get worse, we will see others get better.

What this will mean — and we are already seeing this but will see it increasingly — is that there will no longer be one thing called Christianity.

There are multiple Christianities in the world, and they will be doing opposite things. Some will be killing. Some will be protecting life.

Some will be advocating to abandon the environment and use it up as quickly as possible because it will hasten Jesus' coming back, and others will be advocating preserving the earth for deeply spiritual and Christian reasons.

On every issue, Christians will be on opposite sides. It's already true and it will become even more true going forward, I think.

**NFJ:** *That sounds very divisive for churches that aren't clearly identified on either side.*

**BDM:** When I talked about the four different streams, I think the two middle streams — that I call “walking on eggshells” and

“holding the tension” — are temporary locations.

**NFJ:** *Wow. My favorite observation is when you note in the book that there is choice other than “staying Christian compliantly” or “leaving Christianity defiantly.”*

*That option, you say, is “to stay defiantly” — and that doesn't mean being ungracious. What does it mean?*

**BDM:** Well, it's interesting. We were talking about a Jesus worldview.

Jesus didn't start a new religion. Jesus was born a Jew and Jesus died a Jew. He stayed Jewish.

He didn't say, “Hey, guys here's my secret: we're going to start a new religion and name it after me.”

He was a faithful Jew, but he was defiant. He had the nerve to say, “You have heard it said but I say to you....”

He didn't mince words when he talked about the religious leaders. He didn't call prostitutes and drunks and tax collectors broods of vipers and whitewashed sepulchers.

He reserved those words for the religious leaders of his day who were corrupting and polluting the beautiful faith of Abraham and the beautiful faith of Moses.

And he saw it being his job to not just restore to some past glory that Abraham and Moses had, but to fulfill the potential that was still unfulfilled. And that's very much what I think it means to “stay defiantly.”

**NFJ:** *Finally, the latter section of your book felt like an altar call. Indeed, it is “decision time” for many of us.*

*You give some good examples of how people — whether they choose to leave or stay — can state clearly and constructively*

*what that decision is for them. And you do so without prescribing a particular decision. What value do you see in “renouncing and announcing” in this way?*

**BDM:** I'm a 66-year-old white guy who grew up in a middle-class family — Christian and privileged in every way imaginable. I can afford to be complacent because I'm the last one to be threatened.

But if I have friends who are Black or Brown or Asian, if I have friends and family members who are gay or who have physical or mental disabilities, or who are poor — and if I care about those people in my life — then I'm faced with a decision.

Do I hoard my privilege, or do I use the privilege I've been given on behalf of the people I know and love who are really, really threatened in this time?

And it even extends beyond my fellow humans because I love the outdoors and realize that every stream is threatened, and our oceans are threatened, and our forests are threatened, and every living creature in them is threatened.

So if I love this good earth, then suddenly I realize I'm either going to hoard my privilege and try to make it till my death just concerned about myself or I'm going to say, I'll use my privilege on behalf of people and places and things I love.

**NFJ:** *Thanks so much, Brian. Our readers will appreciate what you have to say here, and I'm sure many will be interested in reading your book as well.*

**BDM:** Thanks for the good work you're doing, and “staying defiantly” has real meaning for all of us, but I know for you guys. I really appreciate it. **NFJ**





# SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF JESUS

Building upon Good Faith Media's Jesus Worldview Initiative – that seeks to reemphasize the following of Jesus as the defining mark of Christianity – a new, eight-week congregational resource for children, youth and adults has been developed by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

**Seeing Through the Eyes of Jesus** invites congregations into deeper faithfulness with each other and equips congregations to offer a positive and transformative witness to Jesus.



“We have developed this unique resource because we know we live in a time when so many cultural, social and political pressures distract us from seeing ourselves, one another and the world through Jesus’ eyes.”

— CBF Executive  
Coordinator  
Paul Baxley



“Through conversations with multiple pastors and lay leaders, it became clear that a call to follow the risen and living Jesus is more important now than in recent memory in our shared faith journey.”

— Project  
Manager John  
Mark Boes



To learn more about this Jesus-prioritized resource – and how your congregation can participate – visit [cbf.net/eyesofjesus](http://cbf.net/eyesofjesus).



## For individual or group study!

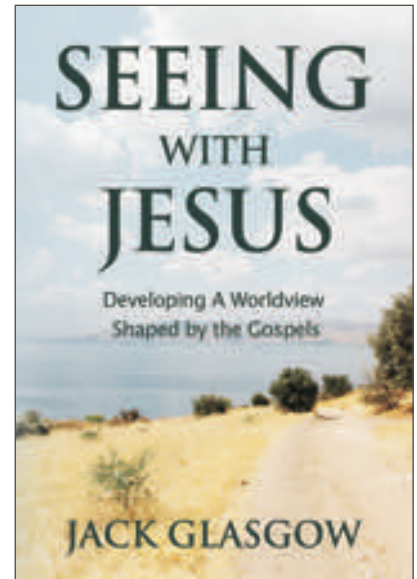
“Christians, congregations and the larger Christian community have the capacity to center their thoughts and actions around the thoughts and actions of Jesus. A gospel-informed, Jesus-centered faith is both imminently possible and urgently needed.”

—Author Jack Glasgow



“In *Seeing With Jesus*, Jack Glasgow masterfully breaks down into significant pieces practical but deeply spiritual guidance for living with a Jesus worldview... The study of verses you may think you’ve known is surprisingly revealing. There is meat in every sentence, and you will want to read this more than once.”

—Jackie Baugh Moore, Vice President,  
Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation



This book (available at [goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore](http://goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore)) is made possible through a Baugh Foundation gift to support the continuing development of the Jesus Worldview Initiative.

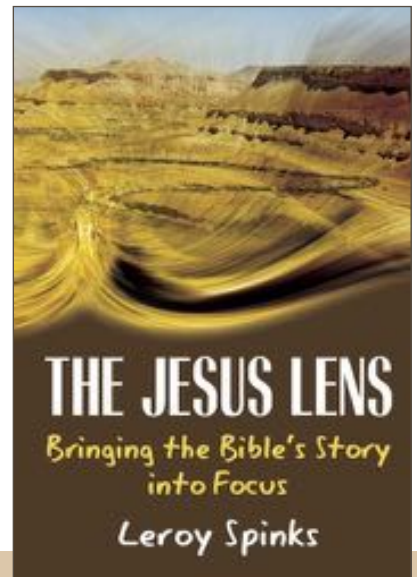
## Bring the Bible back into focus

*The Jesus Lens: Bringing the Bible's Story into Focus* by Leroy Spinks pays attention to the story of how the Bible came to be written.



“If we read the Bible as a technical treatise in which every word stands on equal footing, we distort the meaning of scripture. If, on the other hand, we read every sentence of the Bible through the lens of Jesus Christ, we come to see God in all the glory we earth-bound and time-bound creatures can stand.”

—Author Leroy Spinks



Good Faith Reads features brief interviews with Jack Glasgow and Leroy Spinks — available via [goodfaithmedia.org/good-faith-reads](http://goodfaithmedia.org/good-faith-reads) or by searching wherever you go for podcasts.

# The manifold witness of scripture

By John R. Franke

In my last two columns I explored the idea of the Word of God in three forms: the act of revelation, the Spirit-inspired witness to revelation in scripture, and the Spirit-guided proclamation of that witness in the life of the Christian community.

In my last column I concluded that the self-revelation of God is accommodated to the contingencies of finite human experience and received among diverse communities over long periods of time in a variety of historical and social settings. Here I will consider the implications of this for scripture as a collection of inspired witnesses to the self-revelation of God.

The notion of divine accommodation means that in fulfilling its purpose to form witnessing communities, scripture functions as a map that effectively guides our journey into the knowledge and intentions of God for our lives and the world.

It pragmatically points us in the right direction without the necessity of being photographically precise or drawn exactly to scale. The application of divine accommodation to scripture as the written word of God points to the contextual character of the Bible itself.

One of the implications of the contextual character of the Bible is its plurality. Canonical scripture is itself a diverse collection of witnesses or, put another way, a manifold witness to the revelation of divine truth.

In fact, the Bible is not so much a single book as it is a collection of authorized texts written from different settings and perspectives. Each of the voices represented in the canonical collection maintains a distinct point of view that emerges from a particular time and place.

In other words, the Bible is polyphonic, made up of many voices. These many voices function together under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit to form diverse witnessing communities to the good news of the gospel.

In this way, scripture is the constitutive and normative witness for the formation and proclamation of Christian community. At the same time, it is also the first in an ever-expanding series of presentations of the Christian faith throughout history for which it is paradigmatic.

In this multifaceted and diverse collection of writings, each offers a distinct perspective that contributes to the whole such that none of the works included can be understood properly apart from their relation to the others. The Bible contains a diversity of literary forms such as narrative, law, prophecy, wisdom, parable, epistle and others.

And within each of these forms, we have the expression of numerous canonical perspectives.

In addition to diverse literary forms, scripture contains diverse law codes, chronologies, ethical and theological assertions, and four gospel accounts.

The presence of four different accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus offers the most straightforward and significant demonstration of plurality in the biblical canon. The inclusion of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, each with its distinctive perspective, alerts us to the pluriform character of the gospel.

This stands as a powerful reminder that the witness of the Christian community to the gospel of Jesus Christ can never be contained in a single universal account. Instead it is always perspectival and characterized by a diversity of forms

in keeping with the tradition of the biblical canon.

Attempts at systematizing the biblical

witness to the gospel by reducing it to a manageable and formulaic form are not faithful to the shape of the canonical witness. Like the problematic notion of a cultural melting pot in which numerous distinct cultures come together and form one new universal culture made

up of all the others, something of value is always left out or excluded.

When we attempt to ease the difficulties of the multiple perspectives in scripture to make matters more compact, clear and manageable, we suffer the loss of plurality and diversity that is woven into the very fabric of scripture and, by extension, the divine design of God.

This reminds us that a single description of the Christian faith can never be adequate and sufficient for all. The multiplicity and plurality of the biblical witness stands against such a notion.

The Christian faith is pluralistic by its very nature. Its universality is not to be found in a single statement of faith deemed to encompass all people at all times, but rather it spaciouly includes a plurality of experiences and perspectives. No single voice or interpretive approach will be able to do justice to this diversity.

In other words, the shape of scripture reminds us that we are not only dependent on God for faithful gospel witness, but also on each other. We cannot bear this witness alone. We need each other. In this way we bear the image of the triune God.

NFJ

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



# Moses and Me: Walking with Harriet Tubman



By Starlette Thomas

The birth of an icon is celebrated 200 years later. This year, I walked in her footsteps.

**A**raminta Harriet Ross was called “Minty” as a child but later went by Harriet, as it was her mother’s name. Harriet Tubman would become “Moses,” the conductor of the Underground Railroad, an intimate system of resistance to American slavery with secret routes and safe houses supported by anti-slavery activists before 1863.

This year marked 200 years or so since her birth. (Her exact birthdate is unknown. Edward Brodess, her owner, did not keep accurate birth records.)

Born near Bucktown, Md., to Benjamin Ross and Harriet Greene, Tubman did more than dream of freedom. While married to John Tubman, who was a free man, she shared her plan to escape slavery. But he did not support her and threatened to tell if she did.

Small in stature at five feet tall, under-educated, and chronically ill after suffering a brutal blow as a teen from an overseer, none of it stopped Tubman from securing her freedom. From Maryland to Pennsylvania, she followed the North Star and traveled by way of the Underground Railroad until she found her own.

When Tubman arrived, she said, “I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything... I felt like I was in heaven.”

But she didn’t stop there. Brave and clever, she turned around and went back to free hundreds more from slavery, including family members. Tubman said, “I could have freed thousands more slaves if they knew they were slaves.”



Starlette Thomas connects with Harriet Tubman during a journey to sites associated with the passionate liberator of people.

After The Fugitive Slave Act, a part of the Compromise of 1850, was passed, a bounty was placed on her head though she was never turned in. From free woman to fugitive, Tubman continued to free persons who were enslaved and spoke out against the “peculiar institution” and for women’s rights.

She even aided John Brown in his raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859, which hastened the Civil War. Ironically, during the Civil War, the American government asked her to organize a network of spies for the Union. Tubman added Union Army scout, nurse and whatever you call a woman who led an armed expedition to free more than 700 enslaved African Americans. Some called her General Tubman after this. She also assisted Col. James Montgomery in disrupting Southern supply lines, which resulted in the freedom of hundreds more.

Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison gave her the biblical nickname “Moses” because she led many to freedom.

After the war, Tubman worked to establish schools for freed persons. She also partnered with Susan B. Anthony in the cause for women’s rights.

Illiterate and unable to write, she worked on a book titled *Scenes from the Life of Harriet Tubman*. Tireless in her efforts, she went on to establish a home for indigent African Americans, where she died from pneumonia on March 10, 1913.

She was buried with full military honors, and I honor her abolitionist spirit through my work with the Raceless Gospel Initiative. She is my North Star, and I am certain I would not have made it this far apart from her witness.

We do not live far apart; she was born just an hour and a half from my home in Bowie, Md. Now cornfields and capitalist ventures grow from the same ground where she decided to make a break for it. Maryland is Harriet Tubman country. There are signs of her everywhere, reminders that she was here and there.

All summer I walked in her footsteps — from Dorchester County in Maryland, to Delaware, to Philadelphia, to New York. She also spent some time in Canada, and I will make my way there too.

Somehow, she has made her way to me. For me, Tubman represents resistance in its purest form.

Breaking away from a social norm, a social system constructed to break her soul, she embodied freedom. Tubman surmised that it was freedom or death:

“I reasoned out this in my mind: there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other, for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted, and when the time came for me to go, the Lord would let them take me.”

I am taking Harriet Tubman wherever I go. From here on, it is Moses and me. **NFJ**

—Starlette Thomas directs the *Raceless Gospel Initiative* for Good Faith Media.



# What if embracing the unknown leads to congregational thriving?

By Andy Hale

**B**efore the COVID-19 pandemic was in sight, the church was already facing remarkably challenging existential concerns.

We have all seen the symptoms unless we are in blissful denial: aging buildings, declining worship attendance, shrinking budgets, once-thriving but now floundering ministry programs, a dissonant connection between the church and its greater community, and/or the fraying familiarity among members.

Of course, the existential questions arising from these concerns were typically masked by theological disagreements over identity politics, debates over budgetary issues, tension between staff members and church bullies, or clashes over menial things.

At one church, I sat through multiple monthly business meetings where the church van's parking spot was the most contentious item on the agenda.

Some people have called our era "Post-Church" or "Post-Christian," while others have said we are in a new Reformation. Whatever you call it, the church is at a fascinating historical crossroads. After nearly 1,600 years of dominance within Western culture, the church is no longer at the center of society.

For most of us who grew up in the U.S., the church was at the center of our towns. As a result, many city planners affixed the primary church or churches around the city center, allowing the hustle and bustle of everyday life to take place around the church.

Yet, the dynamics of our towns and cities have changed. New areas have developed while once-thriving areas struggle. City planners talk in terms of urbanization, suburbanization, urban sprawl and blight, with many churches no longer in the middle of a town's hustle and bustle, metaphorically and literally.



There is no more compelling evidence of this moment than the rate of church closures in America. According to researchers, more churches are closing their doors than new ones opening them. In the decade 2010 to 2020, according to a Gallup report released last year, 75 to 150 congregations per week permanently closed.

In another Gallup study, for the first time since reporting began in the 1930s, fewer than half of Americans said they belong to a church, synagogue or mosque.

Seeing the church's future through the lens of dominance and certainty, we are not sure what to do with what appears to be a new era of uncertainty and unforeseeable outcomes.

Do we, the church, let the anxiety, panic and horror of it all set in and immobilize us? It would be entirely natural for the church, composed of a diversity of human beings, to lean into a carnal response to the unknown future with disappointment, frustration, egotism, grief, anxiety, doubt, depression or paralysis.

Acclaimed therapist, rabbi and leadership consultant Edwin Friedman noted: "Chronic anxiety might be compared to the volatile atmosphere of a room filled with gas fumes, where any sparking incident

could set off a conflagration, and where people would then blame the person who struck the match rather than trying to disperse the fumes."

Yet, what if we are just in a place of inbetweenness of where we have been, where we are and where we are going?

One word that can define these experiences is liminal, which comes from the Latin *limen*, meaning "threshold" or "space between." It was originally associated with the stone placed at the threshold of a door, crossing from one space into the other.

Often described as an inbetweenness, liminality is that space between where you are and where you are going, the present and the future, the old and the new, or the familiar and unknown.

When the church finds itself on the precipice of an uncertain future, we are reminded whose church this is and who will guide us through these uncertain times. That does not mean this will be an easy process.

This liminal journey will touch every facet of our existence — mentally, emotionally, physically, socially and spiritually. It will destabilize and disorient us, luring us back to old habits and comforts, tempting us not to venture into the unknown.

This journey will bring out the best and the worst of us, giving us all a reason not to trust, respect and work with each other.

And yet, what if thriving comes by boldly stepping forward in faith to follow God into the unknown and uncertain future? **NFJ**

*-Andy Hale is the associate executive coordinator of CBF of North Carolina, the creator and host of the CBF Podcast Conversation, and a doctoral candidate focusing on congregational thriving.*



# HELPING PASTORS THRIVE

A Ministry of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina

## Upcoming Workshops & Retreats

### **FALL REST & RENEWAL FOR PASTORS**

September 25-27

St. Francis Springs Prayer Center | Stoneville, NC

### **FINANCIAL WELLNESS FOR PASTORS—WEST**

(in partnership with CBF Church Benefits Board)

October 2-4

Lake Junaluska Retreat Center | Lake Junaluska, NC

### **FLOURISH:**

### **A TIME TO HONOR & INSPIRE YOUTH MINISTERS**

October 27

Emerywood Baptist Church | High Point

### **FINANCIAL WELLNESS FOR PASTORS—EAST**

(in partnership with CBF Church Benefits Board)

November 6-8

Trinity Retreat Center | Pine Knoll Shores, NC

### **PASTORS AS SPIRITUAL GUIDE**

January 22-24

St. Francis Prayer Center | Stoneville, NC

**FIND MORE DETAILS** on Helping Pastors Thrive retreats and workshops at [helpingpastorsthrive.org](http://helpingpastorsthrive.org).

# When trying to please everyone pleases no one

By Anonymous

**G**rowing up in a somewhat traditional Baptist church in the South, I committed to ministry in the mid-'80s, and a few years later believed God confirmed that calling to be a worship pastor. That calling never wavered for me — along with my passion to lead our church in corporate worship through choir and orchestra.

Like many others, our church has tried multiple styles of worship, on and off campus over the past 15 years. We truly believed God wanted us to take that path to best reach our community.

While seeing some positive impact, none of the off-campus sites sustained. After about 18 months, we have returned to one unified/blended style of worship service musically. Combining our services and personnel has been a huge challenge for me as a worship leader.

There is not much chemistry between the groups shaped by very different styles of music. Sadly, once you have had targeted worship styles for several years, coming back together is nearly impossible.

Leading my team and our “now divided over musical preferences” congregation is difficult. There has not been a Sunday in two years when someone didn't complain about something music-related.

This has been my toughest and least enjoyable time in ministry. In trying to please everyone, we have ended up pleasing no one.

Here are some thoughts on why we are in such a challenging place:

**Discontentment:** Covid changed much in church life, but signs of discontent emerged prior to March 2020. After reopening worship, many congregants got

*Note from Bill Wilson, director, Center for Healthy Churches: Occasionally I want others to hear a story that is too painful or localized to share openly. This one comes from an unidentified worship minister whose experiences mirror what others have shared about upheaval and disorientation being experienced today.*

over “just being thankful to be together again” quickly.

There is more irritability about nearly every aspect of life, and it has infected the church. Many people with the most to rejoice about have become disgruntled. It concerns and grieves me when such immaturity and selfishness are exposed.

**Personal preferences:** It is hard to overcome the result of catering to everyone's tastes and preferences for years. Tell 10 people the same thing and they'll formulate 12 different opinions about what they have heard. And to be correct, the others must be incorrect and need to be corrected.

**Overly-sensitive:** Coming out of Covid, we ministry leaders seem more sensitive to our critics now. What used to roll off our backs wounds us more. We are tired of being scapegoated for matters over which we have little control. This contributes to ministerial burnout and dropout.

**Many lead but few follow:** After creating multiple musical styles and services, we now have a lot of leaders who do the same jobs. There are jealousies and an abundance of opinions. For the most part, the intent is well and good. But music folks, especially leaders, tend to have strong opinions about the specific ways they prefer to do things. However, there can only be one leader — which inevitably leads to conflict.

Here are some ways my colleagues and I might respond:

**Slow down, breathe, chill out and detach more:** Yes, there is much to do for the Kingdom. But the idea that “I'd rather burn out than rust out” isn't impressing anyone — and it's foolish. No one can do it all. Learn to say “no” more often.

**Enjoy life and ministry:** God called us to ministry, and we get one shot at it. Our congregations notice when their leaders aren't happy. Our unpleasantness and discontentment can turn people away from the church. We need to find ways to live out the verse, “yet I will rejoice” (Hab. 3:18).

**Listen more selectively:** We need shorter lists of who gets our attention. Reading fewer authors more deeply, and eliminating some podcasts, blogs, articles and books that aren't constructive can be helpful.

**Increase spiritual practices:** Above all, we need to pray and study and memorize scripture. It is very helpful to find a trusted group to hold us up and help keep us accountable.

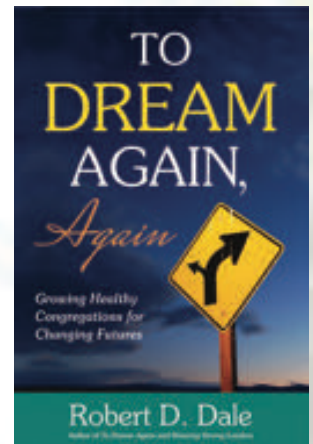
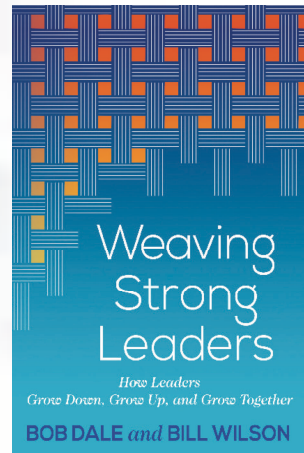
Issues related to music and musicians are not isolated problems but symptomatic of larger challenges facing many churches today. My hope is that these will be addressed seriously and soon — rather than keep asking, “Why don't we sing more hymns that I know?” **NFJ**





# HEALTHY CHURCH

RESOURCES



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

AVAILABLE AT [GOODFAITHMEDIA.org/bookstore](http://GOODFAITHMEDIA.org/bookstore)

615-627-7763

# Striving to be the light

By Mitch Randall

**W**e live in unprecedented and dark times. In recent years we have encountered a global health pandemic, a national call for racial justice, a contentious presidential election, an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, and a mass shooting at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas.

Reflecting on these events, I am reminded of the Apostle Paul's words, "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:11-12).

In his book, *Engaging the Powers*, theologian Walter Wink understands the cosmic powers as worldly systems attempting to control our lives. These "demonic" systems hold humanity enslaved to their powerful presence. From economic disparities to racial injustices, these systems keep humanity trapped.

Jesus came to demonstrate and profess another way, separate from these systems, teaching, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

"If the Son makes you free," he concluded, "you will be free indeed" (8:36).

Jesus broke free from the economic, political and religious systems enslaving people. He calls us to follow his example.

Jesus is the "light" of the world (John 18:18). Light accomplishes two objectives: it reveals and it highlights.

At the beginning of John's gospel, he wrote, "In [Jesus] was life, and the life was the Light of humanity. And the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not grasp it."

At Good Faith Media, we strive to follow Jesus' way to be a light unto the world.

We discover those engaged in remarkable ministries and striving for justice. We are committed to telling their stories and adding to the conversation where faith and culture intersect.

We seek to stay positive and offer hope within a world filled with division and strife.

GFM provides four distinct offerings to help analyze current and often confusing trends and issues, and to nurture the faith of all of us.

Our print media publishes *Nurturing Faith Journal and Bible Studies* and excellent books. The journal contains inspiring stories, insightful editorials and intriguing Bible studies. Book publishing provides a variety of volumes written by some incredible authors.

While the journal is subscription-based and books can be purchased on our website, the only way we can keep the cost minimal is due to the generosity of donors.

Good Faith Media is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that depends on the support of thoughtful and generous people like you.

Digital content at [goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org) offers three new articles five days a week from remarkable writers from around the world. Our staff and volunteer columnists cover numerous topics, providing thoughtful commentary on the most critical issues facing people of faith.

GFM's media production focuses on videos and podcasts. Our staff attends conferences and events, interviewing leaders and speakers. We've traveled to the U.S./Mexican border to talk with pastors



there about misconceptions regarding immigration and to witness their sacrificial ministries.

Our podcast line-up is impressive, with *Good Faith Weekly* and *The Raceless Gospel* leading the way. We work with partners to produce other fantastic podcasts, such as *Pilgrimages*

*of Striving and Thriving* with Lott Carey and *Journey Through the Desert* with Wanda Kidd. You can subscribe (for free) and listen wherever you get podcasts.

Good Faith Experiences are back with small groups having recently visited the Pacific Northwest, Israel/West Bank, Amish Country and a faith-science experience to Hawaii. Participants marvel at God's beautiful creation, engage in meaningful conversations and make new friends through these shared experiences. Please join us in the future.

Through our multiple ministries, Good Faith Media is spreading the light of Jesus far and wide. We invite you to "be the light" with us.

Through your charitable giving, you can invest in Good Faith Media's mission to provide reflection and resources through an inclusive Christian lens. While the world seems dark at times, we can be light unto the world.

Jesus told his followers to put their lights on lampstands instead of hiding them (Luke 11:33). So, as the children's song suggests, "Let your light shine!" **NFJ**

*-Mitch Randall is CEO of Good Faith Media. Charitable gifts may be made at [goodfaithmedia.org/donate](http://goodfaithmedia.org/donate); by mail at GFM, P.O. Box 721972, Norman, OK 73070; or by calling (615) 627-7763.*



# GOODFAITHMEDIA

Bringing you **podcasts** from your favorite authors and scholars.



## New to podcasts?

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

.....  
**Still having trouble?**

Reach out to us at [info@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:info@goodfaithmedia.org)



**GOOD FAITH WEEKLY** explores current events at the intersection of faith and culture, and offers interviews with compelling guests. Join Mitch Randall and Autumn Lockett along with new guests each week!

**PAUL BAXLEY**  
Executive Coordinator, CBF

**KATE CAMPBELL**  
Singer/Songwriter

**DAVID CASSADY**  
President, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky

**WENDELL GRIFFEN**  
Pastor, New Millennium Church

**KEVIN HEIFNER**  
Nephrologist, Baptist Health

**MARV KNOX**  
Retired CBF Field Coordinator, Fellowship Southwest

**RENÉE OWEN\***  
Chaplaincy & Pastoral Counseling Director/Endorser, CBF

**STEPHEN REEVES\***  
Executive Director, Fellowship Southwest

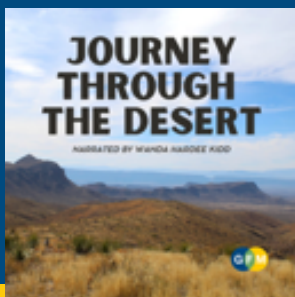


**AMANDA TYLER**  
Executive Director, Baptist Joint Committee

**DAVID TURNER**  
Pastor, Central Baptist Church Richmond, Va.

**MARK WINGFIELD**  
Executive Director/Publisher, Baptist News Global

\* GFM Board or Strategic Advisory Council Member



## NOW AVAILABLE: *JOURNEY THROUGH THE DESERT*

Wanda Hardee Kidd is a retired campus minister from North Carolina. In early 2020, burdened by grief, she left home – alone. A road trip. Just Wanda, her truck camper, and a broken spirit. She found healing in her desert wandering.





# Sleeping in church

By Brett Younger

I was so excited when I was called to be the pastor of my first church. I could not believe they would pay me to stand up each Sunday and say, “I’ve been listening carefully, and this is what I think God wants us to hear.” My preaching was going to stir things up. My sermons would lead people to a more serious faith. My church would become a force for social justice.

I was just beginning my first sermon when I heard confusing sounds from the third pew on the right — some kind of wheezing. I did not want to stare, so it took me a while to realize that Charles had fallen asleep.

During my second sermon, third sermon, and every sermon, Charles fell asleep. As soon as I started the introduction, his eyes closed and his head tilted back. No matter what lively delivery I tried, 10 sentences in he would be asleep. I suspected church members were taking bets on how long I could keep him awake.

I wondered why he bothered coming to church, so one Sunday after worship I asked, “Charles, when you’re really tired, do you ever think about sleeping at home on Sunday morning?”

“No, Brother Brett, I couldn’t miss church.”

Saints have a long history of catching up on their sleep in church. In Acts 20, Luke tells the embarrassing story of Eutychus falling asleep during one of Paul’s sermons. We know this story because Eutychus was sitting on a third-floor window ledge and plummeted to his death. Paul had decided

that the stroke of midnight was no reason to wrap up his sermon. His letters make it clear that Paul appreciates unnecessary details and could be guilty of homiletical Sominex. Maybe Eutychus was the kind of person who couldn’t miss church. His spirit was willing, but his body was sleepy.

The moral of the story is not that long sermons can kill you. Paul brings him back to life. Eutychus might wish that Luke had not been there taking notes, but it is also possible he enjoyed the shout-out.

The battle of eyelids has been going on for centuries. In the early days in the American colonies, churches hired a man to deal with misbehaving lethargists during worship. He would be armed with a long stick, one end equipped with a hard knob and the other fur. When men nodded off, they received a rap on the head. Women who dozed off got tickled with the fur. Some were accused of wearing enormous bonnets as a way of going undetected.

Sometimes it got ugly. Court records note: “In 1643, Roger Scott, for repeated sleeping in meeting on the Lord’s Day, and for striking the person who waked him, was, at Salem, Massachusetts, sentenced to be severely whipped.”

Increase Mather suggested that some came to church in order to sleep: “Some woeful creatures have been so wicked as to profess they have gone to hear sermons so they might sleep.”

In Brunswick, Maine, one irritated Puritan minister was known for calling out the names of sleeping parishioners, a practice generally served to shame the catnappers. On one occasion, however, a

grumpy parishioner retorted: “Mind your own business, and finish your sermon.”

Joseph Moody, a minister in York, Maine, was perturbed when he looked out over his flock and saw several asleep. He yelled, “Fire!” When the sleepers jumped to their feet and asked, “Where?” he shouted: “In hell, for sleeping sinners” (*The Perils for Puritans Sleeping in Church*, <https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com>).

What should we say to the parishioner who finds the pew too comfortable to stay awake?

One of the early church fathers, an Egyptian monk named Pambo, said, “Whenever I see a brother who has fallen asleep during the services, I put his head in my lap and let him rest there.”

The church needs to encourage sleeping in church. Sleeping is one of God’s best gifts. Sometimes when people sit down in the pew, it is the first time they have relaxed all week.

We should invite people to come to church to get some rest. The line between sleep and prayer is a fine line. The Bible is filled with God speaking to worshippers through their dreams.

Not every nap in worship will be a spiritual experience, but sometimes people just need some shuteye. Many of the best churches open their doors so homeless people can get a good night’s sleep.

I think about Charles sleeping peacefully in the pew all those years ago. I should have given him a pillow. *NFJ*

—Brett Younger is the senior minister of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, N.Y.



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

## ATTENTION TEACHERS: HERE'S YOUR PASSWORD!

Teaching resources to support these weekly lessons available at [teachers.nurturingfaith.net](http://teachers.nurturingfaith.net). Use the new password (peace) beginning November 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.

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

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

## IN THIS ISSUE

### *Darkness into Light*

Nov. 6, 2022

Job 18-19

### Trust for the Darkness

Nov. 13, 2022

Isaiah 65:17-25

### Hope for the Despairing

Nov. 20, 2022

Psalms 46

### Refuge for the Troubled

### *As We Wait*

Nov. 27, 2022

Romans 13:8-14

### Salvation is Near

Dec. 4, 2022

Romans 15:1-13

### Promises to Remember

Dec. 11, 2022

James 5:7-20

### Patience in Trials

Dec. 18, 2022

Romans 1:1-17

### Defining Identity

### Christmas

Dec. 25, 2022

Luke 2:1-20

### The Old New Story

## IN THE NEXT ISSUE

### New Year's Day

Jan. 1, 2023

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

### It's Always Time

### Season of Epiphany

### What Does God Expect?

Jan. 8, 2023

Isaiah 42:1-9

### Bringing Justice

Jan. 15, 2023

Isaiah 49:1-7

### Bearing Light

Jan. 22, 2023

Isaiah 9:1-7

### Multiplying Joy

Jan. 29, 2023

Micah 6:1-8

### Defining Expectations

Feb. 5, 2023

Matthew 5:13-20

### Demanding Action

Feb. 12, 2023

Matthew 5:21-37

### Getting Serious

Feb. 19, 2023

Matthew 17:1-19

### Keeping Secrets

### Season of Lent

### What Faith Produces

Feb. 26, 2023

Romans 5:12-19

### Unearned Righteousness

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 6, 2022

Job 18–19

## Trust for the Darkness

**W**e've all experienced days that felt like nights, hard times of pain and sorrow, gloomy days and a cloudy future. Still, none of us could match Job in the misery department. His story seeks to deal with questions other parts of the Bible leave unasked. The traditional narrative and wisdom literature promise blessed prosperity to the righteous and curses to the wicked, but anyone with eyes could see that it didn't always work out that way. 📌

Why? Why does God allow rotten people to prosper while righteous people struggle? The book of Job doesn't provide a clear answer, but it makes a long and valiant attempt. 📌

The familiar opening chapters present Job as “a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil” (1:8). The heavenly district attorney, called *ha-sātān* (pronounced ha-sahtahn), persuaded God to let him strike Job as a test, to see if he would remain true. 📌 A blitzkrieg of natural disasters destroyed Job's possessions and killed all his children, but Job faced the loss with equanimity (1:21-22). A second attack struck Job with a horrific disease that left him alone and in misery, yet still Job refused to charge God with wrongdoing (2:9-10).

*For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth. (Job 19:25)*

Three friends came and offered comfort as they sat together in silence for a week (2:13). When Job's composure broke, though, as he cursed the day he was born and questioned why God ever brought him from the womb (ch. 3), his friends defended the traditional theology by insisting that Job must have sinned greatly to deserve such sorrow.

Today's text is a brief excerpt that openly invites misinterpretation. We need to consider the broader context to avoid that mistake.

### Bildad's charge (18:1-21)

Today's text comes from the second speech in a second cycle of conversations between Job and his visitors, as he responds to a man named Bildad. 📌 Bildad's monologue is among the most pointed and least charitable of the conversations. He begins by accusing Job of beating around the bush and avoiding responsibility for his supposed sin (18:1-2).

He accuses Job of treating his friends like stupid cattle (18:3) and thinking himself to be the exception to the rock-hard rule that trouble only comes to those who deserve it: “You who tear yourself in your anger – shall the earth be forsaken because of you, or the rock be removed out of its place?” (18:4).

He then counts Job among the wicked who live in darkness (18:5-6), brought down by a multiplicity of snares they set for themselves (18:6-10) so that “Terrors frighten them on every side, and chase them at their heels” (18:11).

With a direct poke at Job's wasting skin condition, he says of the wicked that “Their strength is consumed by hunger ... By disease their skin is consumed, the firstborn of Death consumes their limbs ... In their tents nothing remains ...” (18:12-15). The result, he said, is that their roots dry up, their memory perishes from the earth, they leave no survivors, and people from both east and west look at them with horror (18:16-20).

Bildad wrapped up his accusations with the smug assertion: “Surely such are the dwellings of the ungodly, such is the place of those who do not know God” (18:21).

### Job's response (19:1-29)

Job responds by asking how long his accusers will continue to torment him “and break me into pieces with words” (19:2). He questions why they don't feel ashamed for wrongly denigrating him while magnifying themselves (19:3-5).

He then charges God with having “put me in the wrong” despite his innocence, insisting “there is no justice” (19:6-7). Job catalogues how God had walled him in, stripped him of honor, uprooted his hopes, and turned against him like an enemy (19:8-12). God had separated him from his family and estranged him from others,

Additional information at  
[goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org)





even from servants, making his breath repulsive and leaving him emaciated so that his life hung “by the skin of my teeth” (19:13-20).

Job pleads for a measure of compassion in his struggle to understand God’s ways. He speaks as if God is a lion who has attacked him and eaten what it wants, leaving his friends, like vultures, to pick at what remains on his carcass (19:21-22).

This brings us to the assigned text (19:23-27a), in which Job longs for his story to be known and the questions to be answered. “O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever!” (10:23-24). 📖

The depth of his complaint, surprisingly, is followed by a declaration of faith – or at least an intense kind of hope – that God would yet exonerate him: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!” (19:25-27).

We can understand why a short text such as this might be chosen for an inspiring liturgical reading, but within their context, Job’s words express more desperation than inspiration.

Who is Job’s “redeemer” (*gō’ēl*), and what does Job mean by the term? Is he anticipating vindication after death, or does he yearn for God to clear his name in his present life?

Christians naturally think “Christ” when we hear the word “redeemer,” and translators who spell it with an uppercase “R” (NRSV, NET2) mislead the reader. From the patristic period onward, Christian readers have seen in Job’s words a foreshadowing of Christ’s redemption of sin, but that was

not in the author’s mind. Job insisted that he had not sinned, and the narrator has affirmed that he was “blameless and upright” (1:8, 2:3), an innocent victim of a wager between God and *ha-sātān* the accuser.

In the Hebrew Bible, a *gō’ēl* was someone who helped out a relative who was deep in debt and in danger of losing their ancestral land. The *gō’ēl* would pay to “redeem” the land and any relatives who had been forced into slavery.

Job did not need redemption from either sin or from debt. He longed for relief from his suffering and loss, but even more, he sought the redemption of his good name: he wanted to be publicly absolved of the charges that his misery had been brought on by personal sin.

Thus, Job longed for an advocate or intercessor who would stand up for him and restore his relationship with God so that he could see God again on his side, and he seemed emphatically confident that a “redeemer” would ultimately come forward.

Many interpreters think Job was imagining a post-mortem vindication, reading “after my skin has been thus destroyed” as an indication of death. But he goes on to say “then in my flesh I shall see God.” It is unlikely that the author had a bodily resurrection in mind. Only late in the postexilic period did Hebrew theologians begin to consider the possibility of resurrection, which many did not accept even in Jesus’ day.

The reference to Job’s skin being destroyed could refer to his wasting disease that inflicted him with “loathsome sores . . . from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (2:7). Job’s skin might be completely ravaged, but he did not give up hope that someone would stand up for him and clear his name while he was still in the flesh. 📖

This view is in keeping with the remainder of the book, in which Job foresees no redemption after death, but only “thick darkness” (23:17) in Sheol/Abaddon, a desolate place that is “naked before God” (26:6). Job may wish for death to release him from pain, but he longs for vindication in his own lifetime.

In ch. 42, God does prove to be a “redeemer,” vindicating Job before the friends who have wronged him to the extent that they had to offer sacrifices and ask Job to pray for them to be forgiven of sin (42:7-9). A further account, written later, insists that God also restored Job’s fortune twice over and granted him 10 more children and a happy life (42:10-17).

A surface reading of the lection might inspire thoughts of Christ as redeemer, but in context it speaks to the reality of suffering and a deep longing for release. Job’s lengthy story does not explain why good people suffer. When he finally got an audience with God, the lengthy divine response could be summarized as “Who are you to question me? I’m God and you’re not: I don’t have to explain myself to you” (Job 38–41).

Suffering is real. If we’re the one experiencing dark days, we can join Job in trusting God while yearning for both release and some sense of redemption. More commonly, we find ourselves in the role of the friends, whose accusations offer a crash course in how not to comfort someone facing pain, disease, or loss. They did much better when they first arrived and simply sat with him in silence.

Bad things happen to good people. Job’s story indicts those who treat others’ pain lightly. His yearning hope challenges us to sit in solidarity with people who are suffering and in need of justice. Could we be their “redeemers”? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 13, 2022

Isaiah 65:17-25

## Hope for the Despairing

**S**ir Thomas More was an English lawyer and statesman of the Renaissance period. He was also a devout Catholic who sometimes wore hair shirts as penance and considered becoming a monk. He opposed the Protestant Reformation and wrote polemical rebuttals to the works of the Reformers. In 1535, when he refused to take an oath affirming King Henry VIII's supremacy as head of the Church of England, More was convicted of treason and executed.

With that kind of background, it might be surprising to learn that he coined the term "Utopia," the name of a novel he published in 1516. He cobbled the word together from the Greek words *oû* and *topos*: when combined, they mean "no place."

His novel depicted social, political, and religious customs of a fictional island nation with an idyllic society that some readers liken to life in a monastery.

"Utopia" came into common parlance as a descriptor for a perfect, if imaginary world, but one so unlikely that Wikipedia describes "utopian" as a synonym for "impossible," "far-fetched," or "deluded."

The word "dystopia" was coined three centuries later. Given humanity's history of conflict between nations and its fast-paced march toward ruining the planet, dystopian novels and movies

*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)*

are far more common than depictions of an ideal world.

### All things new (v. 17)

Thomas More was not the first person to imagine a utopian existence. In the eighth century BCE, both Isaiah of Jerusalem and Micah (Isa. 2:1-5, 11:1-10; Mic. 2:1-4) imagined halcyon worlds where both humans and animals lived in perfect peace.

The postexilic author behind Isaiah 56–66 lived in a time that might have felt dystopian, but he also caught a vision of a day to come when God would establish a new Jerusalem where sufferings would cease and all would live in peace.

The prophet's vision grew out of national disappointment, probably during Israel's early postexilic period. Periodic waves of former exiles, freed by Cyrus and fueled by Second Isaiah's hopeful prophecies, returned to Jerusalem with stars in their eyes, anticipating a glorious return to their ancestral home. ⚡

When they arrived, however, they found the city in ruins. The land was facing a drought. The land of "Yehud" allotted to them as a sub-province of Persia was small, consisting mainly of Jerusalem and the territory immediately around it. That meant other sub-provinces were close by. Leaders of neighboring territories were resentful of the Hebrews' return. There was

conflict between the former exiles and Jews who had remained in the land, some of whom had intermarried with other ethnic people. The returnees refused to accept the locals as sufficiently Jewish and would not allow them to participate in rebuilding the temple.

It was a difficult time, and many were discouraged when the prophet announced his utopian vision that the current miseries would fade. God would create a new heaven and a new earth with Jerusalem at its center, he declared in Yahweh's behalf: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth, the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (v. 17).

The temporal words "about to" (NRSV) or "am ready to" (NET2) are not in the text, nor is a future tense verb as translated by the NIV11 ("See, I will create..."). A more literal translation would be "Look at me, creating new heavens and a new earth." The verb is a participle. Since the transformation has not happened, translators tend to set the action in the future. ⚡

Isaiah saw a time when present despair would no longer be remembered: all recollections of it would be washed away by the glories of the new world.

### All things joyful (vv. 18-19)

The prophet called for people to rejoice even in anticipation of that coming day: "But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight" (v. 18). This marks three times in two verses that the prophet has used *bôre'*, the qal participle of *bārā'*, the word meaning "create." In

the Bible, it is used only with God as the subject, mainly in Genesis, Isaiah 40–66, and a few psalms.

The hallmark of God’s new creation would be joy, both for the people and for God: “I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress” (v. 19).

While the image of a perfect new world is inspiring, it would not be for everyone. The lectionary reading begins with the vision of a new Jerusalem at v. 17, but the previous 16 verses and the following chapter make it very clear that the new world’s glories would be limited to a righteous remnant. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more.)

### All things peaceful (vv. 20-25)

Isaiah’s paradisaical vision is defined as much by what it isn’t as by what it is. No longer would children die in infancy, or older people lack a full life: “for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed” (v. 20).

No longer would people build houses and plant vineyards only to have an invader take them away, “for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands” (vv. 21-22).

Like long-lived and fruitful trees, the people would also be productive, not laboring in vain or bearing children bound for disaster, “for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD – and their descendants as well” (v. 23). 🇺

Earlier, Isaiah said God had complained of the nation at large that “I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, ‘Here I am, here I

am,’ to a nation that did not call on my name” (v. 1).

In the new world, however, fellowship between God and the faithful remnant would be so close that “Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear” (v. 24).

The closeness of God and people would be mirrored by harmony even among animals. “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox,” the prophet said, in words reminiscent of Isa. 11:6-9. Then, strangely, he adds “but the serpent – its food shall be dust” (v. 25a).

Was the prophet suggesting that, even in the new world, the temptation to turn from God’s way would remain, or was he taking pleasure in suggesting that, though lions would learn to graze on grass, serpents would continue to eat dust, in keeping with the curse of Gen. 3:14?

It’s more likely that his intent was simply to say that snakes would no longer be a danger, reflecting Isa. 11:8: “The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.” Neither serpents nor other wild creatures would remain threats to human happiness: “They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD” (v. 25).

The happy new Jerusalem that Isaiah envisioned has yet to appear for a remnant of Israel, though hope remains. New Testament writers took up the theme of a new creation that the righteous would enjoy. In speaking of a coming “day of the Lord,” the author of 2 Peter wrote that, “in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Pet. 3:14).

The writer of Revelation, like Isaiah, claimed to have seen it in a vision: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had

passed away, and the sea was no more” (Rev. 21:1).

The world we inhabit is a place of wonder, but also one in which children can be born to terror. In America, mass shootings in schools or other public places have become all too common. In Ukraine, Russia’s relentless assault has resulted in countless civilian deaths, including children. In parts of Africa, children are kidnapped and forced to become wives or slaves of their captors.

Blistering summer heat waves and increasingly violent storms punctuate the reality of climate change, as humans continue to overheat the earth through excess carbon emissions from transportation, industry, and animal agriculture.

It would be surprising if we did not join the biblical writers in looking toward a new world, one in which children are safe, adults live in harmony, and all cooperate to care for the environment.

We should be careful, however, not to focus so much on future hopes that we don’t confront present realities. The children we birth and raise now *are* born into a world of dismay, and we have a responsibility to do our part to make it better through the hard work of promoting peace and the needed work of caring for the environment.

While Isaiah envisioned a new world, his primary focus was on the people around him and the choices they were making.

While Jesus spoke much about the kingdom of God, he challenged his followers to be at work in the world. While we may put joyful hopes in God’s future, the task at hand is to take care of the world we have and the people who are in it. **NFJ**



# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 20, 2022

## Psalm 46

### Refuge for the Troubled

Few psalms are more devoted to pure thanksgiving than Psalm 46. Reading it offers an appropriate reminder of how important it is to recognize how much we have to be thankful for, and how many blessings should inspire gratitude.

Some of us have far more wealth and material goods than others, but we may have observed that some of the poorest people are the richest in thanks. Perhaps it is because, when one has so little, every blessing is appreciated more. One who is not distracted by bank accounts, big houses, and expensive toys may find it easier to stay in touch with the daily blessings of food, health, and life itself.

When you stop to think about thanksgiving, what comes first to your mind?

#### A refuge (vv. 1-3)

The poet behind Psalm 46 thought first of security: those who are at home with God can face even cataclysmic events without fear. The psalm expresses profound confidence and inner security, something the wealthiest of people can lack. It's no wonder that Psalm 46 has become a favorite "go to" text for those who face troubling

*Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth. (Ps. 46:10)*

days when life experience seems to be preaching a contrary message. 📌

What is clear is that the psalmist trusted in God's care, no matter what may come, affirming that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (v. 1). The introduction is followed by a celebration of God as a refuge against natural disasters (vv. 2-3), a section that honors God's protection against other nations (vv. 4-7), and a closing meditation that brings the two together (vv. 8-11). The image of God as a refuge begins the first section and concludes the other two (vv. 1, 7, and 11).

Because God is trustworthy, the poet said, "We will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult" (vv. 2-3). 📌

The Jordan Rift Valley marks a fault line that runs from the Jordan River's origin north of the Hula Valley to Mozambique in southern Africa. The Dead Sea is the lowest point below sea level on earth (about 1,300 feet), and the fault remains seismically active. Strong earthquakes in 1837 and 1927 reportedly killed about 4,000 and 300 people, respectively.

The New Testament speaks of an earthquake powerful enough to split rocks and open tombs when Jesus was crucified (Matt. 27:50-53). Notably, the prophet Amos dated the beginning

of his ministry to "two years before the earthquake," a memorable temblor that probably occurred around 760 BCE.

The psalmist draws a picture of a major quake that changes the landscape and sends mountainous landslides tumbling into the sea, resulting in massive tidal waves that crash back against the shore and threaten to wash away coastal residents. We cannot know if the psalmist had experienced an earthquake, but he felt no trepidation at the possibility of natural disaster. 📌

The poet's words should not be read as confidence that God would never allow the faithful to be harmed by seismic shaking or ocean tsunamis, but as an assertion that God has control over the forces of chaos, typically symbolized by the churning sea, which no human can conquer.

The psalmist's confidence in God grew in part from Hebrew beliefs about creation. Genesis 1 imagines a universe consisting of nothing but dark chaos waters before God began the creative work of bringing order to the primordial world: light from dark, land from sea, and earth from sky. The psalmist believed that God had conquered chaos – which periodically reared its head in the form of earthquakes or tidal waves.

The Hebrews were not the only ancient people who had creation stories in which chaos waters played a role. The Babylonian creation myth claimed that Marduk, one of many gods spawned by the mother god Tiamat and her partner Apsu, entered the chaotic sea controlled by Tiamat and split her apart, using the two halves of her body to create the earth and sky.

Additional information at  
[goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org)



### A river (vv. 4-7)

The psalmist believed that God's power over the forces of nature extends to dominion over human nations, as well. Having spoken of waters and mountains in the previous verses, the poet skillfully transitions to the next section by shifting to another mountain, a river, and "the city of God."

The imagery of the verse is captivating: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High" (v. 4). The meaning of the verse, however, is not straightforward.

On the one hand, we might assume that the city is Jerusalem, where the Hebrews believed God's presence, in some fashion, dwelt above the cherubim in the Holy of Holies. There is, however, no river in Jerusalem, which sits atop a low mountain. It is possible that the psalmist is speaking metaphorically, for though Jerusalem is perched on a steep crest and has no river, at the base of the hill is the strong Gihon Spring, which gushes clear water from the earth and provides the city with fresh water. In Hezekiah's time, a deep tunnel was cut through bedrock, bringing the spring's water into the city, where it fed the pool of Siloam. The dependable stream surely brought gladness to the city. 📌

Concepts from both Canaanite mythology may also have influenced the picture. The Canaanites believed that the high god El sat enthroned at the head of two streams on lofty Mount Zaphon, a mythical mountain in the north, sometimes identified with Mount Hermon, whose snowy heights feed the Jordan River with meltwater.

The imagery of a stream emerging from God's throne also appears in Ezekiel's vision of heaven (Ezek. 47:1-12), later adapted by the author

of Revelation: "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. 22:1). Zechariah also prophesied of a day when "living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem" to both east and west, continuing in both the rainy winter and the dry summer season (Zech. 14:8).

We note that in v. 4, "the city of God" uses the title *Elohim* for God, while "holy habitation of the Most High" refers to God by the title *Elyon* (suggesting a "high" god). The story of Abraham and Melchizedek (Genesis 14) describes "King Melchizedek of Salem" as the "priest of God Most High." The term "Salem" almost certainly refers to Jerusalem, and "God Most High" translates *El Elyon*. The Hebrews came to believe that *El Elyon* of "Salem" and Yahweh of Hosts, the God of Jacob (v. 7), must be the same God.

As far as our text is concerned, the poet's point is that because God dwells in the city (probably Jerusalem), "it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns" (v. 5). 📌

The temple was in Jerusalem, and it is likely that the psalmist dwelt there, too. He did not fear attacks from other nations, because he did not believe God would allow the city to be conquered. The psalmist must have been confident that the people in his day were living up to their covenant obligations, because God's promises of victory were conditioned on Israel's obedience. 📌

The psalmist again flashes poetic skill by using some of the same words to describe the nations that he had previously used for the earthquake-stricken mountains and sea. The city of God does not "totter" (better "slip" or "slide"), as the tottering mountains slide into the sea, but "the kingdoms totter" and fall. As the seas "roared,"

so "the nations are in an uproar" (using a different form of the same verb). When God "utters his voice" – a reference to the sound of thunder – "the earth melts," as do God's enemies.

The section concludes with a confession that "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (v. 7). The same confession, which echoes v. 1, will be repeated at the end of the psalm, in v. 11.

### A reminder (vv. 8-11)

The psalmist closes by bringing together God's rule over both the earth and its people. God has brought desolations on the earth (v. 8) while bringing wars to an end, presumably in Israel's favor. In language reminiscent of the "swords into plowshares" prophecies of Micah and Isaiah (Mic. 4:1-4, Isa. 2:2-4), the poet speaks of Yahweh breaking and burning the weapons of war to bring peace to the earth (v. 9).

This brings us to v. 10, a much loved and often quoted, but generally misunderstood verse. "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted in the earth." We usually read the verse as an invitation to pause in our busy days and meditate on the goodness of God, but in context, whether addressed to Israel or the defeated nations, it calls for humans to cease their striving – "Stop it!" may be a better translation than "be still." All should recognize that God is king, and let God be about the work of ruling the earth and bringing peace.

This does not diminish the importance of being still and pondering our place in God's world, but its main purpose is to remind us of our place: God is king; we are not. NfJ

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 27, 2022

Romans 13:8-14

## Salvation is Near

**A**re you a rule-follower? Many people find comfort in having an external list of guidelines, knowing what the rules are, and then following them. Others prefer to work from an internal system of values from which they develop their own behavioral decisions. Some are more inclined to do whatever feels good at the moment, with little regard for either rule or law.

Teachers quickly size up students who follow the rules by behaving in class, doing their homework, and studying for tests. It's easy to love a cooperative student who causes no trouble. But teachers also learn to appreciate students who stretch the boundaries and color outside the lines.

Some of these students may seem beyond redemption when it comes to learning, but others find a way to master the material – or at least something more interesting to them – and still have a bright future.

The Apostle Paul had strong feelings about rules, and expressed some of his thoughts in today's text. Note that the lectionary text includes only vv. 11-14, but we will begin at v. 8.

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (Rom. 13:8)*

### Boiling it down (vv. 8-10)

In Paul's day, Rabbinic Judaism had sought to "build a hedge about the law" by expanding Old Testament teachings to develop a system of 613 specific commandments. According to the Babylonian Talmud: "There is full agreement that these 613 *mitzvot* can be broken down into 248 positive *mitzvot* [one for each bone and organ of the male body] and 365 negative *mitzvot*" (Makkot 23b-24a, accessible at [jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsources/Judaism/mitzvoh.html](http://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsources/Judaism/mitzvoh.html)).

Some devout persons, such as the Pharisees, sought to live in accordance with every religious prescription, no matter how onerous. Other Jews were less inclined toward a legalistic faith, but still familiar with the complex expectations of the rabbis, which were designed to establish a strong ethnic identity for a people who were no longer a political nation.

As Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, he knew that some were former Jews who had come – as he had – from a background of prescribed behaviors that promoted religious and ethnic conformity. In contrast, believers from a Gentile background may have been unfamiliar with guidelines as basic as the Ten Commandments.

In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul sought to help both Jewish and Gentile Christians understand what

kind of behaviors and attitudes are most pleasing to God, without getting them caught up in a list of legalistic rules. In ch. 12, he had encouraged readers to be transformed by the power of God's Spirit, becoming new people in Christ and loving one another with genuine love. Chapter 13 began with a reminder that believers, like all people, have obligations that include the payment of taxes and other debts.

Beginning with 13:8, Paul tackled the issue of rule-keeping by reducing the commandments to a single law, speaking of it as one obligation that persists: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (v. 8).

In doing so, Paul ran through a quick synopsis of four of the Ten Commandments (v. 9), all negatively worded directives that have to do with attitudes or actions toward other people. Believers should avoid adultery, theft, murder, and covetousness: all examples of self-centered actions that could bring harm to others. Paul told his readers that all the negative commands could be summed up in the single positive instruction found in Lev. 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Paul was not the first nor only New Testament thinker to summarize the law in terms of love. Paul rarely quoted Jesus, and the Gospel of John was written long after Paul's letter to the Romans, but he may have been familiar with the teaching attributed to Jesus in John 13:34: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Additional information at  
[goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org)





Paul was particularly interested in maintaining the Old Testament connection, however. In an earlier letter to the Galatians, he had used the same argument found in Romans 13: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14, citing Lev. 19:18).

Similarly, the author of James spoke of the same command as the law of the kingdom: “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Jas. 2:8).

In v. 10, Paul argued that a life of love fulfills the law because “love does no wrong to a neighbor.” On the surface, this suggests a rather anemic view of love, an approach that avoids harm but doesn’t necessarily help.

It is unlikely, however, that Paul would think of love in such shallow terms. In these verses he consistently used the word *agapē*, a rich term adopted by the early church to describe Christ-like, self-giving love. In other places (such as 1 Corinthians 13), Paul emphasized the active nature of such love.

Thus, we cannot mistake a life of non-involvement or indifference for love just because those attitudes do not cause direct harm to others.

Love may be many things, but it can never be indifferent. 🇺🇸

True love cares, acts, and gives – even when it hurts. This theme is not unique to religious thought: admiration of sacrificial love is a common theme in literature, such as Oscar Wilde’s tale of “The Happy Prince” or Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*.

### Living it out (13:11-14)

Paul followed his exhortation to love with a strong note of eschatological

urgency. Like other early Christian leaders from Jesus (Matt. 10:23, Mark 9:1, 14:62) to James (Jas. 5:8) and Peter (1 Pet. 4:17), Paul taught that the end of the age was near (see also 1 Thess. 4:17, 1 Cor. 15:51, Phil. 4:7). He and others seemed to take it for granted that Christ would soon return.

Paul offered no rationale for his expectation of imminent judgment, but wrote as if the belief was widespread: “Besides this, you know what time it is ... For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers ... the night is far gone, the day is near.” With judgment day approaching, Paul insisted, believers should “wake from sleep” and rise up to “lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (excerpts from 12:11-12).

Waking from sleep suggests shaking off one’s spiritual lethargy and devoting one’s energy to a life of renewed commitment to Christ. Similar uses of the metaphor can be found in Mark 13:35-36, 1 Thess. 5:6, and Rev. 3:1-3. Like other early believers, Paul expected Christ to return soon, and he wanted believers to be prepared.

Paul often employed the image of changing clothes as a metaphor of one’s new life in Christ and the importance of a change in both attitudes and behavior. In addition to this passage (vv. 12-14), he spoke of both “putting on” and “taking off” in Eph. 4:22, 25 and Col. 3:8, 12; and employed the metaphor of “putting on” alone in 1 Thess. 5:8 and Eph. 6:11-17.

The image of changing clothes suggests that believers are first to put aside their sinful “works of darkness,” just as they would remove worn or dirty clothes. In v. 13, Paul spelled out the sort of dark behaviors he had in mind: “reveling and drunkenness,” “debauchery and licentiousness,” “quarreling and jealousy” – all harmful actions that roughly parallel the earlier-mentioned

commandments not to commit adultery, covet, steal, or murder (v. 9). All are based on self-directed behavior that takes no thought of its effect on others.

Having removed their sinful/soiled garments, the newly awakened were then to adorn themselves with the “armor of light” (v. 12), an alternate way of saying “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 14), and akin to the “whole armor of God” he described in Eph. 6:10-17.

For Paul, putting on the “armor of light” enabled one to “live honorably during the day” – that is, to walk unashamed in the daylight, knowing that one’s behavior is worthy of respect rather than reproach.

Likewise, those who “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” would be so focused on following Jesus that they “make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” This does not suggest that Christ-followers do not have human needs – that they do not get hungry or cold or sleepy. Rather, Paul used terms such as “the flesh” and “its desires” to refer to the same kind of sinful and self-focused behaviors described above.

Paul’s point is not that believers should forgo all human comfort or ignore physical needs, quit their jobs and camp out on a hill while awaiting the Second Coming. Rather, he wanted Christians to live with a conscious and constant awareness that Christ could return at any moment. Those who keep Christ’s return in mind are less likely to lose themselves in selfish or harmful behaviors, and more likely to give themselves in loving service to others. Motivated by eschatological awareness and clothed with Christ, believers have no need for a list of commandments, but fulfill the law by living in love. NFI

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

Dec. 4, 2022

Romans 15: 1-13

## Promises to Remember

**O**n March 3, 1991, a Los Angeles man named Rodney King was stopped by police for speeding and driving while intoxicated. When King, a Black man, initially resisted arrest, he was beaten severely. The incident might have gone unreported if a person nearby had not filmed the encounter and sent the footage to a local news station. Public anger erupted and escalated to riots that resulted in 63 deaths; more than 2,000 injuries and 7,000 fires; and damage to 3,100 businesses.

Distraught by the aftermath, King sought to quell the riots by appearing on television to appeal for peace, saying “I just want to say – you know – can we get along? Can we, can we get along?” The words became a legacy to his efforts, usually paraphrased as “Can we all just get along?”

The Apostle Paul wasn’t facing a riot in Rome, but he also dealt with high emotions in a church that was struggling. As he came to the end of his letter to the Romans, he encouraged believers not only to get along, but also to fully accept each other, and to reach beyond themselves to welcome others.

Our Advent texts come from the New Testament epistles. Today’s

*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Rom. 15:7)*

lectionary text is Rom. 15:4-13, but the pericope begins with v. 1, as will we.

### The example of Jesus (vv. 1-6)

In ch. 15, Paul continues an appeal for unity that he had begun in the previous chapter, where the issue of concern was different eating habits. Some ate only vegetables, perhaps thinking that all available meat had been ritually offered in a pagan temple before being sold in the market. Perhaps they looked down on meat-eaters as idol worshipers, while omnivores may have considered the vegetarians to be too persnickety.

Paul charges them not to judge one another’s eating habits (14:1-4) or observation of particular days (14:5-6). We don’t live for ourselves alone, or even die to ourselves, he said, but to the Lord (14:7-9). Therefore, we should avoid judging and respect others’ scruples, even if we regard them as a sign of weakness. Otherwise, we might become a stumbling block to their faith (14:10-23).

Paul summarizes his argument in 15:1-2, saying that stronger members should put up with the preferences of the weak rather than pleasing themselves alone. This was for the benefit of one’s neighbors, he said, in order to build them up. The word translated “put up with” (*bastázō*) can mean “carry,” “endure,” or “tolerate.” The word for “build up” could refer

to physically building something, but in relationships, it suggests the idea of “edifying” others or helping them to grow in faith. The same term is found in 1 Cor. 10:23-24, where Paul argued that all things are lawful, but not all things are edifying, so Christian should seek what is best for their neighbors.

The idea of allowing the most restrictive member to set the menu for church suppers is not an appealing notion. Wouldn’t that mean we are reducing ourselves to the lowest common denominator? Paul knew the idea could be unpopular, so he appeals to the example of Christ, just as he had done in Phil. 2:4-11. He reminds his readers that “Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me’” (v. 3). The Lord of all took our human weakness upon himself – accepting the jeers of the most unholy rabble – and he did it for our sake.

Paul’s argument posits that if Christ could give up his divine prerogatives and suffer death for our sakes, can we not give up our choice of food at a community meal for the sake of a weaker member? The strong bear the burden for the weak (cf. Gal. 6:2). Love may lead us to limit our freedom voluntarily.

The Old Testament quotation in v. 3 comes from Ps. 69:9, and Paul uses it to call upon the authority of the scriptures along with the example of Christ, whom he saw reflected in the quotation. Such scriptures were written to instruct followers’ lives, he said (v. 4).

Utilizing a nice literary touch, Paul uses words he had applied to his Old

Additional information at  
[goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org)



Testament quotation as a lead-in to the example of Christ. Paul first reminds readers that those who are *steadfast* in trusting the scriptures would find in them *encouragement* and hope (v. 4), then he offers a benedictory wish that “the God of *steadfastness* and *encouragement*” would empower them to live in harmony with one another according to the example of Christ (v. 5).

The goal is unity, for which God gives us hope. So, Paul’s prayer concludes with a reminder that those who live in harmony “may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 6). We may be diverse in our cultural backgrounds, our theological interpretations, and our progress in Christian growth, but even so we may offer praise to God with one voice.

During the height of the Covid pandemic, when in-person church services were cancelled for a year or more, the biggest loss for many people was the sense of community that comes through singing together.

The Russian author Leo Tolstoy was not only one of the world’s greatest novelists, but also a fascinating moral thinker. After writing his two greatest novels, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karanina*, he committed his life to Christ – at least, to his own understanding of who Christ was and what he taught. The church of his day rejected Tolstoy, but he remained deeply committed to his views, refused to accept any further payment for his writings, and sought to live as simply as possible.

Tolstoy told a story about meeting a Russian beggar who was seeking money during a famine. He took the beggar by the hand and said, “Don’t be angry with me, Brother. I have nothing to give.” The beggar stood a little taller and replied, “But you *have* given me

something; you called me brother, and that is a greater gift than money” (James E. Hightower, *Illustrating Paul’s Letter to the Romans* [Baptist Sunday School Board, 1984], 110). To follow Christ’s example is to love one another by offering the gift of acceptance.

### The rewards of inclusivity (vv. 7-13)

Believers should be welcoming people, Paul believed, challenging the Romans to “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (v. 7). The word translated “welcome” (*proslambánō*) can mean to “take in” or “add to,” and in that sense to accept or welcome others, to take them into our lives.

Christ set the example of such welcome, Paul said. He came as “a servant of the circumcised” to “confirm the promises given to the patriarchs,” but also in order that the Gentiles “might glorify God for his mercy” (v. 8). The awkwardness of the phrasing in this verse may be Paul’s way of saying that Christ came first for the Jews, then for the Gentiles.

To support his position – to assure his readers that he isn’t just making things up as he goes along – Paul goes on to quote four additional Old Testament passages in vv. 9-12, all of which point to the praise of God for the influx of Gentiles into the church. It is inevitable that the addition of new people from different cultures or with differing beliefs about gender makes the challenge of unity more difficult – something that many of us have experienced in congregational life – but the blessing of God depends on it. 🇺

We all want to be loved, don’t we? But we also want to be accepted fully, as who we are, and the two don’t always meet. For two people to have a successful marriage, they must

learn to accept each other with all of their cultural shaping and childhood baggage, growing and supporting each other in positive ways. For a church to reflect the example of Christ, we should open our arms and hearts to each other regardless of skin color, economic status, or gender identity. In these days, some might think it even more impressive if Democrats and Republicans could embrace for the common good rather than being slavishly devoted to ideological agendas.

We need to accept each other for who we are, not for what we have achieved or where we have come from, or even where we hope to go.

Perhaps we should search for a stronger word than “acceptance.” It’s too easy to say we accept people without really meaning it. It’s not enough to say “I’m ok, you’re ok ... whatever.” We want more than that: we want to be wanted. We want others to care that we exist, to be glad that we are around. That’s what true welcome and acceptance means, that we want other people in our lives and in our churches – and that we accepted that we are wanted, too. That’s how we glorify God. 🇺

Paul had no doubt that the effort we put into achieving harmony would be worthwhile. Having counseled unity, he closes with a prayer for the church that returns to the theme of hope he had first broached in v. 4: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (v. 13). Through the Spirit, those who work together in harmony may experience not only saving belief but also joy, peace, and hope. Could there be a better wish for the season of Advent? **NFJ**



# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 11, 2022

James 5:7-20

## Patience in Trials

**A**re you a patient person? Are you always changing lanes while driving, or looking for the shortest checkout line, or growing antsy when someone is late? How we handle minor things may be indicative of how we handle larger issues, such as persevering through the years necessary to finish college, to advance in our occupation, or to see a desired relationship develop. Times of illness and disappointment can leave us feeling impatient. 🇺🇸

When James encouraged his readers to be patient, he was talking about their waiting for Christ's return. Many early believers held enthusiastic expectations that Christ would return within their generation. Those who were poor and suffering especially longed for the coming return of Christ as a day of vindication and restoration. In our text for today, James has words of encouragement for life in the meantime. 🇺🇸

Whether we think much about it or not, all of us are waiting for the end of our life, and we all have to decide what we will do with the life that remains to us between now and then. In our text, James offers advice for what to do while we are waiting. In short, he encourages believers to be patient in our attitudes (vv. 7-12), to be

*Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. (Jas. 5:7)*

faithful in prayer (vv. 13-18), and to be concerned about others (vv. 19-20).

### Enduring patience (vv. 7-12)

After an opening screed against those who pile up riches by oppressing the poor (vv. 1-6), James encouraged his audience – which must have included some of those downtrodden folk – to “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near” (vv. 7-9).

James wanted his readers to find hope in the Lord's coming, but he didn't want them to be so consumed with future hopes that they failed to deal with the present. So, he told them to be patient, using three examples.

Farmers know they can't expect immediate yields from their planting, but patiently await the harvest (vv. 8-9). Prophets suffered in God's behalf, but demonstrated patience and trust in God's ultimate justification (v. 10). Finally, righteous Job suffered more than anyone, but he endured with patience and experienced God's compassion (v. 11).

When we become impatient, we tend to take out our frustrations on

others. Perhaps that is why James warned his readers not to “grumble against one another,” since Christ's return would be a day of judgment (v. 9).

The patience James promoted is not just passively waiting for the inevitable, but an active confrontation with the struggles of daily life. His words challenge us to sow the seed of faithfulness, as farmers sow their crops; to proclaim the message of God in the face of adversity, as the prophets did; and to come to terms with suffering, as Job did. 🇺🇸

Since we often show our impatience in hurtful or thoughtless words, James warned against careless speech, thoughtless grumbling, or relying on oaths (v. 12).

### Faithful prayer (vv. 13-18)

Patient people are also called to be faithful through all the ups and downs of life, especially in prayer. James first addressed those who were facing difficulties: “Are any among you suffering? They should pray” (v. 13a).

The writer did not endorse a particular type of prayer. He did not say to pray that the suffering will be over, or to pray for acceptance in the face of suffering, or to pray for those who have caused the suffering.

The important thing is not *what* we pray, but *that* we pray. In hard times, the presence of God is especially needful, and we seek God's presence through prayer.

Prayer is also appropriate in times of joy. James asked, “Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise”

Additional information at  
[goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org)





(v. 13b). Sorrow may quickly drive us to our knees, but when things are going well, prayer may be the last thing that comes to mind.

Earlier, the author had reminded his readers that every good thing and every generous gift comes from God (1:17). Our “thank you” cards to God are expressed in prayers of praise.

But there are also times of sickness. James’ readers lived in a time when good medicine was virtually non-existent. While folk medicine was effective for some ills, people also sought relief by using magical charms or special oils. James urged his readers to put their trust in God rather than in superstition.

What follows can be difficult to interpret, for James appears to have promised blanket healing: “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven” (vv. 14-15).

We know, however, that prayer doesn’t always result in physical healing. Many people, even devout believers, suffer loss or die despite the most earnest of prayers being offered in their behalf.

Was James wrong, or do we miss his point? If James meant to say that the prayer of faith will always save the sick, and yet our prayers don’t bring healing, does that mean we have not prayed with sufficient faith? For persons who have already suffered a great loss, the last thing they need is for someone to shame them for a supposed failure of faith.

Let’s take a closer look at James’ terminology: he says the prayer of faith “will *save* the sick, and they will be *raised up*” (v. 15). This is the vocabu-

lary of eternal salvation and the promise of resurrection at the last day, which is the context of James’ larger discussion. It’s likely that James was not promising assurance of physical healing, as is often assumed: he was offering the assurance of eternal life for those who give themselves into God’s care. This is reinforced by his concluding promise that “anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.” Salvation is the most potent healing of all.

Thoughts of salvation raise another occasion that calls for prayer: when we have sinned. James’ assurance that prayer would lead to forgiveness assumes that the person being prayed for is praying, too. Indeed, he went on to say, “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (v. 16a). 🇺🇸

Whatever the occasion, James insisted that “the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (v. 16b). Some readers interpret this to mean prayer can get us anything, but we must not overlook the word “righteous.” Those who are righteous seek the will of God, not their own desires.

The true prayer of faith is always offered in the context of *God’s* will (cf. 4:15). James closed the section by calling on the prophet Elijah as an illustration and inspiration. Elijah once prayed that it would not rain, and there was no rain for three and a half years — until Elijah asked for the drought to be broken (vv. 17-18, cp. 1 Kings 17-18). We should remember, however, that Elijah was praying as God had instructed him to: it wasn’t his idea to pray for a drought or for rain (1 Kgs. 18:1).

James would not have had Christians presume that they could tell God what to do or whom to heal. If we cannot make assumptions about our own life (4:13-15), we can hardly presume to know God’s will for others.

Still, it is always appropriate to pray for one another, whether we are praying for personal concerns or international affairs. In doing so, we assist each other in our spiritual growth and sense of “connectedness” with God, so that we experience forgiveness. In the mutual confession of sins and in the shared prayers of the church, there is great power indeed.

### Loving concern (vv. 19-20))

James closed his letter by reminding believers not only to be patient and prayerful, but also to care about others. He showed particular concern for those who grew tired of waiting for Christ’s return and left the church. He urged believers to care enough about their wandering brothers and sisters to go after them, knowing that “whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sin” (vv. 19-20).

This does not mean that the one who reclaims a wandering brother or sister obtains a reward of bonus forgiveness points, like a bounty paid to cowboys who retrieve lost cattle. It is the errant one who finds renewed forgiveness upon their return and thus is saved from spiritual death. In a sense, this is what James was attempting to do with his entire letter. He saw churches wandering away from their faithfulness to God, and he sought by his advice to lead them toward repentance and restoration, to forgiveness and faith.

With this, James comes to the end of his plain-spoken letter to the churches, in which he has encouraged them to get serious about their faith, because following Jesus is serious business.

In this Advent season, that thought may lead us to wonder how serious we are about this faith we claim. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 18, 2022

Romans 1:1-17

## Defining Identity

**H**ow long has it been since you have written a letter, even in the form of an email? The Christmas season is one time of the year when many people still use the Post Office, mailing Christmas cards that may include brief notes or have lengthy family updates tucked inside.

Personal letters are rare, but usually welcome. Paul's letter to the Romans was both personal and serious – and his salutation was like a message in itself.

The lectionary text is limited to Paul's impressive prescript, but for the sake of a fuller treatment, we'll take a look at the entire opening chapter. 📖

### A lengthy salutation (vv. 1-7)

In this, the longest salutation of his letters, Paul emphasized the degree to which he was sold out to Christ. Many people lack purpose in life, but he was not among them: Paul couldn't get through the first sentence without launching into a synopsis of the gospel. Several phrases sound akin to early creedal statements.

Paul said he was called to be an apostle, "set apart for the gospel of God" (v. 1), a gospel "promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures" (v. 2). Like others in the early church, he interpreted many Old Testament texts as prophesies of Jesus, believing that they contained

*... and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord ... (Rom. 1:4)*

deeper meanings than the prophet's original intent.

Paul likewise affirmed a belief that Jesus "was descended from David according to the flesh" (v. 3). Writing long after Paul, both Matthew and Luke compiled elaborate genealogies for Jesus, though in different ways. 📖 Whatever tradition Paul knew, he was satisfied that Jesus was descended from David in a physical sense, and equally confident that Jesus had been "declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead" (v. 4).

In other words, Paul believed Christ's divine sonship had been revealed through Jesus' life and work as well as through his mind-bending resurrection from the dead. Many Jews had longed for a messiah who would be a "son of David," but they had not expected him to be the "Son of God."

Through Christ, Paul said, he had received grace that brought him to salvation and to his apostolic calling "to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name" (v. 5). Paul's goal of reaching "all the Gentiles" included his readers in Rome, who were not only "called to belong to Jesus Christ" (v. 6), but also "to be saints" (v. 7).

Being "saints" does not imply moral perfection. Like the Hebrew concept of holiness, it denotes a state of being set

apart. Paul considered all believers to be "set apart" from their old lives and called to live for Christ wherever they were.

Though Paul was writing to first-century Christians in Rome, his words continue speaking when we read them, for we have the same calling – to be "saints" who let Christ guide our lives in ways that reflect a "Jesus worldview" and to draw others to follow Christ.

Following his lengthy digression from the traditional salutation, Paul came back to it with the conclusion of v. 7: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

### A thankful prayer (vv. 8-15)

Paul introduced the remainder of his letter by explaining his desire to visit the Roman church and share with them so they might be mutually encouraged (vv. 8-15). He typically began his letters with a prayer for the recipients, and Romans (unlike Galatians) was no exception.

Paul's prayer served both to express gratitude to God for the Romans, and to encourage them in their faith. The apostle was moved by the courageous faith of the Christians in Rome, as they often suffered persecution or ridicule from without in addition to division from within, and he assured them of his constant prayers for them (vv. 8-9).

Though Paul had heard of the Romans and their struggles, he had not yet worked among them, so he prayed for an opportunity to visit and "share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you" (vv. 10-11). This was not a one-way enterprise, as if

Paul could bring a trunk filled with spiritual gifts and pass them out. He wanted to use his gifts in preaching the gospel and helping them to grow, but also hoped “that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (v. 12).

Paul may have been in Ephesus when writing these lines, or possibly Corinth, preparing for his final trip to Jerusalem. He had no idea that when he eventually arrived in Rome, it would be as a prisoner (Acts 19:21, 23:11, 28:11-16).

Paul’s stated desire to “reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles” (v. 13) may sound arrogant to modern ears, but it was a colorful way of saying how committed he was to preaching the gospel and seeing others come to know Christ.

Paul was not suggesting that the gospel enterprise depended on him, but he felt an obligation to spread the gospel to everyone. He expressed his sense of owing his best efforts as a debt “I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish – hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome” (vv. 14-15). A clearer translation would be “I am obligated ...,” as in NIV11.

### A firm declaration (vv. 16-17)

From there Paul pressed forward in declaring his eagerness to preach the gospel message: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’”

In saying he was “not ashamed” of the gospel, Paul used a negative expression to stress a positive reality.

Saying “I am not ashamed of the gospel” was an emphatic way of affirming that “I’m proud of the gospel.”

Many people in Roman society considered the gospel to be foolish. Facing public scorn, some early Christians may have kept their faith quiet, but not Paul. He was jeered for his faith, jailed for his faith, beaten for his faith, and run out of town for his faith, but through it all he continued to say, “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” 🇺

Modern believers may struggle with how open to be about our faith. If we pause to say grace in a restaurant, or if we keep a Bible on our desk, would it be seen as a positive witness, or would others think we are being “holier than thou”? We don’t want to be ashamed of our faith, but we may worry that others will think we are flaunting it. Authenticity should always be the key: whatever we do should be from conviction, not for show.

Paul’s impetus for sharing the gospel was clear: “it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (v. 16b). Paul was like a research scientist who has just discovered a cure for cancer and cannot keep the good news to herself. She will burst if she does not let everyone know about the life-saving potential of the discovery.

There is power in the gospel. The word Paul uses is *dunamis*, the root of our words “dynamic” and “dynamite.” The gospel has the power to shake us loose from sin-hardened ways, to change our lives, and to bring us into relationship with the Lord of the universe. We call that “salvation,” and it is available to everyone who believes, and that is good news. It is not something to be ashamed of, but excited about.

The salvation we experience is the result of the righteousness of God that is granted to us. In Hebrew thought, righteousness was not so much a moral quality as a legal standing. We know that none of us can attain moral perfection or righteous standing on the basis of our own merits. Paul’s great discovery was that God through Christ is willing to impute his own righteous standing to those who believe.

Some interpreters suggest that the phrase often translated as “from faith to faith” may mean something akin to “from the faith of the Old Testament to faith in Christ,” “from the preacher’s faith to the hearer’s faith,” “faith from first to last,” or other options. The meaning is not necessarily self-evident, because the referents of “faith” are not clear. Charles Talbert has suggested that Paul intended to say the gospel arises from/out of God’s or Jesus’ faithfulness, *for* the faith of humans (*Romans* [Smyth & Helwys, 2002], 41).

Paul’s quotation of Hab. 2:4b in v. 17 has also been translated and interpreted in different ways. The familiar KJV says “The just shall live by faith,” while NRSV has “The one who is righteous will live by faith” and NET translates “The righteous by faith will live.” The point is that whatever righteousness we possess comes through faith in Christ, which calls us to live out our calling.

Paul’s affirmation of Christ as both the Son of God and a descendant of David makes this text particularly appropriate for the Advent season. His prayer challenges us to ask in what ways our faith in Christ gives us hope and finds expression in our lives not only at Christmas, but also through every season of the year. **NFJ**



# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 25, 2022

Luke 2:1-20

## *The Old New Story*

**T**he Christmas story is so familiar that a routine commentary might put many people to sleep. We could talk about the problems of the date or the anomaly of Quirinius, but that wouldn't keep most people interested very long. We could discuss the theological implications of the Christmas story, but that is also familiar territory.

As a change of pace, consider this imaginative retelling of Luke 2:1-20 from the perspective of a stable hand at the Bethlehem inn. Perhaps the change in viewpoint can help us appreciate the story in new ways. Just imagine that the speaker has come to visit your church and to tell his story ...

### **Bethlehem, and a birth (vv. 1-7)**

Well, this place looks nothin' like Bethlehem – there's lots of room in *this* inn, not like the place where I worked. Of course, you wouldn't think it was much of an inn. An archway led into an open courtyard that was surrounded by mud brick stalls with thatch on top. It was a dry place to unroll your sleeping blankets, and that's all most folks expected.

On ordinary days, our customers were mostly traveling salesmen coming from the south on their way up to Jerusalem, stopping in to rest before gettin' an early start. We're just five miles from Jerusalem. A man named Lumas runs the place: he calls it "Caravan 6" – I don't

*... to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:11)*

know why. He keeps a torch burning by the gate at night so latecomers can find their way in.

My job was to look after all the camels and donkeys, along with a few sheep and goats we kept penned up out back. I'd bring hay up from the shed just down the hill so the animals could eat, and then I had to shovel up what the hay turned into. We mixed it with straw in a pile out back, and it turned into good fertilizer. That part of the job earned me the nickname "Domen," which is one of several Hebrew words we have for manure.

But you don't care about that. You want to know about the baby, don't you? Everybody does.

Well, the baby got here in the usual way, though not without more commotion than usual. It wouldn't have happened here at all if the mucky-mucks up in Rome hadn't decided that everybody should go back to their ever so many great-granddaddy's hometown so they could count noses and charge more taxes. ↓

That meant poor little Bethlehem was swamped, because everybody knows King David came from Bethlehem, and he had lots of wives and children, and his son Solomon had even more of 'em, and every one of their descendants can count back to David. They were all proud of their pedigree, but there was no way you could fit that crowd into a little town like Bethlehem.

Not that they didn't try: every room in town was double-booked, and everybody who was remotely related to somebody local just moved right in and imposed themselves on the kinfolks' hospitality.

You'd think you wouldn't notice one more couple coming in, but you couldn't miss the girl – she was so pregnant, and you could tell she was hurting. The man kept beggin' Lumas to give them a room, but he could see they'd have to throw out somebody else to make space. Finally, Lumas told me to take 'em down to the hay shed and clear out a corner where they could rest. It wasn't much, but the man seemed grateful to have any sort of roof over their heads.

Joseph was his name, he said, and he called his young wife "Mary." Good, honest names: I like that. Anyway, I took 'em down the hill and pitched enough hay out of a corner for them to have a cozy little place for the night.

They spread their blankets over a pile of hay, and I dragged in a small feed trough and cleaned it out for 'em – just in case. It didn't really take long for things to happen after that: the girl must've been in labor before they got here, because she had that baby birthed almost before I could get back with some clean water and soft rags. She'd brought her own swaddling for the baby, and before long the little fellow was nursing and I think his mama slept right through it.

### **Shepherds, and angels (vv. 8-20)**

Once things settled down, I walked back up around the inn and almost got run over by Cousin Joram and his boys comin' down the road. They all had this wild look, like a lion had been after



'em. I knew they were supposed to be up in the high meadows, but here they were, all flustered and out of breath. 📌

“What’s wrong, Joram?” I asked. “Did bandits steal your sheep?”

He looked at me and wheezed “*You mean you don’t know?*”

“Know what?” I responded.

“We’re lookin’ for the baby,” he said, “a baby that was born tonight!”

“Well,” I said, “There’s a baby boy that was born here, but his folks are from Nazareth and I don’t think you’d know them.”

“Oh,” Joram said, “If he was born at the inn, I guess he couldn’t be the one.”

“Well,” I told him, “He wasn’t exactly born in the inn. We ran out of room, so his folks are staying in the hay shed out back. The little fella’s sleeping in a manger I cleaned out for ’em.”

Oh, you would have thought I had handed Joram a million shekels. He nearly jumped out of his sandals, then he and his boys started slapping each other on the back and grinning and saying “*It’s true! It’s true!*”

And I said, “*What’s true?*”

And Joram said, “When the baby was born, did the angels sing?”

And I said, “What angels?”

And he said, “Did the heavens open wide?”

And I said, “You’ve been drinking, haven’t you?”

And he said, “Oh, no, cousin, but we’re drunk on joy! Let me tell you what happened!”

Then the other boys all gathered around so I wouldn’t think he was tellin’ a story.

“We were out watching the sheep,” Joram said, “like we always do, and everything was quiet, and then ‘Boom!’ – the night exploded and right there in front of me was an honest-to-God angel, all big and shining, and the air crackled and fizzed when he moved. . .”

I looked at the other boys, and they were all noddin’ their heads and grinnin’.

“And then the angel spoke to us,” Joram said, “and I swear his voice was like music walkin’ on a cloud. And he said, ‘Don’t be afraid, but listen: I’m bringing you great news for everybody; for *this very day* in David’s town a baby was born who will be the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.”

“*Domen!*” he said – “*the Messiah we’ve been hoping for! He said the Messiah was born today in David’s town, and we all know that means Bethlehem!*”

“So,” I said . . . “then why ain’t you lookin’ for him up where the grand old families live? You wouldn’t expect the Messiah to be born down here by the road!”

“That’s what I thought,” said Joram, “but the angel said ‘And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.’ And you said this baby was sleepin’ in Lumas’ hay manger! *It’s the sign! It’s what the angel said!* And when the first angel stopped talkin’, it was like the clouds rolled back and the sky lit up, and we could see *angels everywhere*. There were thousands of ’em, and they were all singing ‘Glory to God, and peace on earth!’”

“Domen,” he said, “we want to go down and see this baby.” And before I could tell them to leave the tired young family alone, they were already down the hill. They all crept up close, and every one of them knelt down around the manger, and Mary and Joseph didn’t seem to mind.

When the boys told the couple what they had seen and heard, Mary smiled and Joseph fell right back in the hay with a big grin. Seems like an angel had talked to them, too, and said their child came from the Holy Spirit

and would be the Son of God come to save people from their sins. They both had thought they might have been crazy, but the angel had spoken to the shepherds, too, so it must be true! And right then and there, they said “Then we really will give him the name Jesus, because the angel said he will deliver his people from their sins.” 📌

Then Joseph hugged Mary and the shepherds all pounded Joseph on the back the way men do, and it was a very pretty picture, but there was only one thing wrong with it.

### Domen, and a complaint

And what was wrong was that *I* didn’t see any angels. If that was the Son of God, born in the manger I cleaned up for them, why shouldn’t I get to see an angel, too?

How could I know what they said was real? How could I know Mary and Joseph and Joram’s boys weren’t all having the same delusion? Could I believe that this child was the Messiah of God if an angel didn’t tell me so?

Well, I never did see no angels, but I did keep an eye and an ear out for that boy while he grew up. He made quite a name for himself. Bethlehem ain’t far from Jerusalem, you know, and I heard all about what happened there.

Now, you . . . you didn’t get to see the angels or the baby either one. You may wonder if you can truly believe God would come to earth in such a way. You may not see angels. You may not see the baby, but look around and you can see the difference he has made: churches everywhere, millions and millions of people changed, people who are different because they trusted what the angels said.

Can *you* believe? I hope you will, but it’s up to you. **NFJ**

# Weekly Bible Study

## IS MORE

... with the scholarly yet applicable  
**NURTURING FAITH BIBLE STUDIES** by Tony Cartledge

### Weekly Bible study should be more than...

- ... reading a verse or two and asking, "What do you think?"
- ... diverting quickly to discussing sports or politics
- ... shallow treatments of a holy, yet complex text.

Here's what you can explore in 2023 — with the lessons right here in *Nurturing Faith Journal* along with Tony's video overviews and other teaching resources online.

Get started at [goodfaithmedia.org/journal/#subscribe](http://goodfaithmedia.org/journal/#subscribe) or email [orders@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:orders@goodfaithmedia.org) or call (615) 627-7763.

### New Year's Day

Jan. 1, 2023

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

**It's Always Time**

### Season of Epiphany

*What Does God Expect?*

Jan. 8, 2023

Isaiah 42:1-9

**Bringing Justice**

Jan. 15, 2023

Isaiah 49:1-7

**Bearing Light**

Jan. 22, 2023

Isaiah 9:1-7

**Multiplying Joy**

Jan. 29, 2023

Micah 6:1-8

**Defining Expectations**

Feb. 5, 2023

Matthew 5: 13-20

**Demanding Action**

Feb. 12, 2023

Matthew 5:21-37

**Getting Serious**

Feb. 19, 2023

Matthew 17:1-19

**Keeping Secrets**

### Season of Lent

*What Faith Produces*

Feb. 26, 2023

Romans 5:12-19

**Unearned Righteousness**

Mar. 5, 2023

Romans 4:1-17

**Lasting Trust**

Mar. 12, 2023

Romans 5:1-11

**Hopeful Peace**

Mar. 19, 2023  
Ephesians 5:8-14  
Shining Fruit

Mar. 26, 2023  
Romans 8:1-11  
Spiritual Guidance

Apr. 2, 2023  
Matthew 21:1-11  
Royal Humility

## Season of Easter

*A Church on the Move*

Apr. 9, 2023  
Jeremiah 31:1-6  
A New Heart and a New Start

Apr. 16, 2023  
Acts 2:14-36  
Making Sense of It All

Apr. 23, 2023  
Acts 2:14a, 36-41  
An Evangelistic Explosion

Apr. 30, 2023  
Acts 2:42-47  
A Common Cause – and  
Common Purse?

May 7, 2023  
Acts 6:1-7:60  
A Death-Defying Faith

May 14, 2023  
Acts 17:1-31  
Proclaiming an Unknown God

May 21, 2023  
Acts 1:1-14  
An Awesome Assignment

May 28, 2023  
John 7:37-39  
A Pentecostal River

## Season After Pentecost

*Lessons Old and New*

June 4, 2023  
Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Beginning to Begin

June 11, 2023  
Genesis 12:1-9  
A Man for All Peoples

June 18, 2023  
Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7  
Not Dead Yet

June 25, 2023  
Genesis 21:8-21  
Not Long Alone

July 2, 2023  
Genesis 22:1-19  
Saved by the Bell

July 9, 2023  
Genesis 24:34-67  
A Long Back Story

July 16, 2023  
Genesis 25:19-34  
Birth Rights and Wrongs

July 23, 2023  
Genesis 28:10-22  
Climbing Jacob's Ladder

July 30, 2023  
Genesis 29:1-30  
Jacob Meets His Match(es)

Aug. 6, 2023  
Matthew 14:13-21  
A Picnic to Remember

Aug. 13, 2023  
Matthew 14:22-33  
Skiing Without a Boat

Aug. 20, 2023  
Matthew 15:1-28  
When Crumbs Are Enough

Aug. 27, 2023  
Matthew 16:13-20  
Know, but Don't Tell

Sept. 3, 2023  
Matthew 16:21-28  
That Far? Really?

Sept. 10, 2023  
Matthew 18:15-20  
Confrontation and Community

Sept. 17, 2023  
Matthew 18:21-35  
The Power of Forgiveness

Sept. 24, 2023  
Matthew 20:1-16  
A Question of Fairness

Oct. 1, 2023  
Matthew 21:23-32  
Who Decides What Is Right?

Oct. 8, 2023  
Matthew 21:33-46  
Can Stony Hearts Break?

Oct. 15, 2023  
Matthew 22:1-14  
Hoping for Hyperbole

Oct. 22, 2023  
Matthew 22:15-22  
A Taxing Question

Oct. 29, 2023  
Deuteronomy 34:1-12  
A Good End to a Good Life

Nov. 5, 2023  
Micah 3:1-12  
Unfounded Assumptions

Nov. 12, 2023  
Amos 5:18-24  
One Thing After Another

Nov. 19, 2023  
Zephaniah 1:1-2:3  
People, Get Ready

Nov. 26, 2023  
Ezekiel 34:1-31  
Bad Shepherd – Good  
Shepherd

## Season of Advent

*A New Day Coming*

Dec. 3, 2023  
Isaiah 64:1-9  
The Cry of the Clay

Dec. 10, 2023  
Isaiah 40:1-11  
A Promise Like a Hug

Dec. 17, 2023  
Isaiah 61:1-11  
Uplifting News for  
Downhearted People

Dec. 24, 2023  
Psalm 89:1-52  
Promises to Keep

## Season of Christmas

Dec. 31, 2023  
Psalm 148  
Praise Squared

Part 2: 2009–2017

# BARACK OBAMA

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

The election of Barack Obama further revealed a stark division within American Christianity. Most of the mere 24% of white evangelicals who voted for Obama were progressives, believers in a loving and inclusive God.

**B**ut they were outliers: white conservative Christianity had long dominated America's trajectory, empowering the mass slaughter of Native Americans, the enslavement of Black Americans, the formation of the slaveocratic Confederate States of America, terrorism against Black citizens following the war, systemic racism, violent opposition to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the formation of the Christian Right in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Most recently, President George W. Bush had furthered Christian nationalism — the dominant political ideology among conservative white Christians that falsely proclaimed America a Christian nation — and insisted that America must remain so.

## LOSTNESS

Cast out of the White House and wandering in a political wilderness, white Christian nationalists felt a lostness they had not known since the presidency of Bill Clinton, the last Democratic president prior to Obama. A Black person occupying



Official portrait of President Barack Obama.

the nation's highest office heightened their racial anxieties.

"There is a substantial subset of white people in America who are boiling angry over this," noted Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center. In record numbers they flocked to extremist organizations within the Christian nationalist orbit, including the Ku Klux Klan and the Council of Conservative Citizens.

Extremist activity surged. Hundreds of hate crimes were reported, including burning crosses on the lawn of a New Jersey family who supported Obama.

Obama's election would "be a clear signal for millions of our people [white supremacists]," former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke had observed. "Obama is a visual aid for white Americans who just don't get it yet that we have lost control of our country, and unless we get it back, we are heading for complete annihilation as a people."

Thousands of far-right web forums and social media accounts had offered the same sentiments. Obama's win would "be a beautiful day when the masses look at the paper and truly realize they have lost their own country," another white supremacist had enthused.

Still another had thrilled that "To the average white man and woman, they could look at Obama and see plain as day that *whites are not in control.*" Yet another had observed that "if Obama were to win, it would be the best thing that ever happened to the Klan. They would have massive growth."

Indeed, Klan membership and that of other white supremacist organizations surged when Obama became president.

Long driven by racism, homophobia and xenophobia; resistant to America's democratic march toward human equality and inclusion of all persons; and opposed to government programs aiding minorities, many white Christian nationalists — virtually all aligned with the Republican Party — gritted their teeth, dug in their heels, and bought more guns as a defense against the perceived evils of a federal government controlled by liberal Democrats led by a Black president.

Obama-haters' initial "gut-level reactions" soon organized into grassroots opposition.

"Barack Obama's election as president increased anxieties about immigration and cultural change among older, often economically insecure members of the white middle-class, who then coalesced [in February 2009] into the [anti-liberal] Tea Party movement," Theda Skocpol, renowned Harvard sociologist and political scientist, observed.

Tea Party marches were anything but subtle. The marches often featured

---

This is the 45<sup>th</sup> article in a series by historian Bruce Gourley, managing editor for *Nurturing Faith Journal*, on the religious faith of U.S. presidents.



Confederate, Christian, xenophobic, and anti-Obama flags and banners.

Concurrently, white Christian nationalists maintained their decades-long pretense of being “pro-life,” a reference to their support for fertilized eggs, embryos and fetuses only. Living, breathing human beings were expendable.

The “pro-life” movement demanded that the government take control of women’s bodies and criminalize women who dared have an abortion. Most pro-lifers, however, condemned government help for poor minority families and children, fought against universal children’s daycare and health care, and opposed mandatory paid parental leave (after childbirth) for American families.

Nonetheless, the nation’s first Black president hoped to steer America toward an inclusive and just society.

## PLURALISM

Barack Obama set the tone in his inaugural presidential address on Jan. 20, 2009. He chose his words carefully, knowing that speaking truth about America’s history would further agitate racist sentiments held by many whites.

In calling for an end to the historical “petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics,” Obama left the specifics to the hearer’s imagination. Appealing to religious faith, he spoke of a new opportunity.

“We remain a young nation. But in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things ... to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.”

He turned to America’s religious pluralism to make his case: “[W]e know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers ... shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil

war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.”

Evoking an inclusive God, President Obama concluded with a hopeful challenge to a nation mired in a recession at home and wars abroad.

“In the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardship ... let it be said by our children’s children that when we were tested, we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God’s grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.”

But the president did more than talk about inclusive faith as a road to a better America: two weeks later by executive order he established the Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Diversity characterized the advisory council of the new White House entity, charged with helping the federal government strengthen communities for the common good: African Methodist Episcopal, Baha’i, Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Evangelical, Hindu, Jewish, Mainline Protestant, Mormon, Muslim, Native American, Orthodox Christian, Pentecostal, Sikh and secular communities were all represented during Obama’s presidency.

While explicitly maintaining America’s historical separation of religion and state — “because it protects our democracy, but also because it protects the plurality of America’s religious and civic life” — and equal religious liberty for all, the new entity, working with 12 federal agencies, was charged with (among other things) helping improve the lives of the underprivileged, reducing abortions, strengthening families, and fostering interfaith dialogue.

During Obama’s presidency millions of lives were positively impacted by the office’s faith-infused conviction of uplifting humanity.

President Obama’s faith-based policy successes reflected his personal Christian

faith. He read daily devotionals, met routinely with several evangelical leaders, attended prayer breakfasts, and attended church services far more times than had President Ronald Reagan.

Yet he practiced his faith quietly, albeit with some exceptions. At the 2012 Democratic National Convention Obama publicly confessed, “I’m far more mindful of my own failings, knowing exactly what [Abraham] Lincoln meant when he [allegedly] said, ‘I have been driven to my knees many times by the overwhelming conviction that I had no place else to go.’”

## VITRIOL

Not so fast! said many conservative white Christians, who dismissed Obama as a socialist, communist, extremist Muslim, racist, satanist and more.

But no falsehood gathered more public traction among conservative white Christians — and subsequently in the news media — than the claim that Obama was neither a Christian nor an American.

Becoming known as “birtherism,” the blatant lie claimed that America’s first Black president was a Muslim born in Africa. Gaining greater traction after it was embraced and furthered by dodgy businessman Donald J. Trump, “birtherism” continued animating extremists even after Obama publicly displayed a copy of his Hawaiian birth certificate.

Amid the vitriol many Black Americans, proud of Obama and of their nation for electing a Black president, nonetheless worried about the safety of the presidential family and the future of the nation. They had good reasons for concern.

Annual hate crimes during seven of the eight years of Obama’s presidency surpassed all years prior. Mass shootings skyrocketed to unprecedented levels, equaling in number all mass shootings under all presidents prior to Obama since Lyndon B. Johnson.

Death threats against the president remained a constant. Black America lived in a dual world of hope and fear.

For a man of persistent hope and centrist politics who hoped to bridge divides, hatred’s carnage — whether racially motivated or not — challenged Obama’s presidency. A few

among many atrocities came to stand out in history.

In 2012, unarmed Trayvon Martin of Sanford, Fla., was gunned down by George Zimmerman — a Hispanic American and neighborhood watch coordinator — while Martin, a 12-year-old African American, walked in his own neighborhood.

The same year a 20-year-old white shooter murdered 26 children and educators at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Ct. The following year Zimmerman was acquitted of murdering Martin, and the Black Lives Matter movement began, protesting police brutality against African Americans.

In 2014 the killing of two more Black men — Michael Brown in Missouri and Eric Garner in New York — led to massive BLM protests. One year later white supremacist Dylann Roof walked into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., on a Wednesday night and killed nine church members during a Bible study.

Long resisting the urge to deliver a pointed speech on race out of concern it would further elevate national tensions, on June 26, 2015 and in the wake of the Charleston murders, the president set aside his concerns and reached deep into his religious convictions.

## FACING RACISM

In Charleston at the funeral of the murdered pastor Clementa Pinckney, one of nine white supremacist victims, the president delivered a stirring eulogy addressing the evil of racism.

“The Bible calls us to hope, to persevere and have faith in things not seen. They [the victims] were still living by faith when they died, the scripture tells us,” Obama began.

As a pastor and a state elected official, Pinckney, dead at age 41, had lived a life of deep faith expressed in commitment to racial equity, conducting himself “quietly and kindly and diligently,” said Obama. The reverend had preached and striven for “our collective salvation, that to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and house the homeless is not just a call for isolated charity but the imperative of a just society.”

Punctuated with frequent and enthusiastic applause, President Obama continued. “The church has always been the center of African-American life.” During slavery discreet “hush arbors” and community “praise houses” were sanctuaries from white oppressors.

Many Black churches were part of the Underground Railroad, helping runaway slaves escape, and in the 1950s and 60s were “bunkers for the foot soldiers of the civil rights movement.”

Black churches “have been and continue to be community centers,” Obama continued, “where we organize for jobs and justice, places of scholarship and network, places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm’s way and told they are beautiful and smart and taught that they matter.”

The Black church, Obama observed, is “our beating heart, the place where our dignity as a people is inviolate.”

He called the Charleston murders “an act that drew on a long history of bombs and arson and shots fired at churches, not random but as a means of control, a way to terrorize and oppress,” an act that the murderer hoped “would deepen divisions that trace back to our nation’s original sin.”

Preaching, Obama spoke of the murderer as “blinded by hatred,” who could “not see the grace surrounding Reverend Pinckney and that Bible study group, the light of love that shown as they opened the church doors and invited a stranger to join in their prayer circle.”

Nor could the young man of hatred have “anticipated the way the families of the fallen would respond when they saw him in court in the midst of unspeakable grief, with words of forgiveness ... how the city of Charleston under the good and wise leadership of Mayor Riley, how the state of South Carolina, how the United States of America would respond not merely with revulsion at his evil acts, but with generosity” and “the power of God’s grace.”

God’s grace was leading to a racial reckoning, said Obama, who voiced to much applause what Black America

intimately knew but many white Americans did not want to hear: “[W]e all have to acknowledge, the [Confederate] flag has always represented more than just ancestral pride. For many, Black and white, that flag was a reminder of systemic oppression and racial subjugation.”

He called for the removal of the Confederate flag atop the South Carolina state capitol as “one step in an honest accounting of America’s history,” and “an expression that “people of good will, of all races” are “striving to form a more perfect union.”

Removing the flag would “express God’s grace” and could be the beginning of helping all Americans see “past injustices” that “continue to shape the present,” he affirmed.

Justice, he said, “grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other ...; my liberty depends on you being free, too ...; the path of grace involves an open mind. But more importantly, an open heart ...; If we can find that grace, anything is possible.”

Then the president closed his unprecedented sermonic speech by singing “Amazing Grace,” to which his audience quickly and resoundingly joined in.

Within two weeks Governor Nikki Haley, a Republican, signed into law a bill to remove the Confederate flag from the South Carolina state capitol.

## MODERATE PATH

Rhetorically, President Obama soared and inspired Americans hoping for social progress and racial equity. Politically, he strove to enact policies to advance American interests and further the common good.

Compounded by harsh resistance from conservative congresspersons growing all the more extremist, it was not an easy task.

“[T]he last thing we were interested in was giving President Obama legislative successes,” then-Congressman Mick Mulvaney of South Carolina later declared of Republican opposition to Obama’s presidency. Across the Capitol, Mitch McConnell, Republican leader of the

Senate, systematically opposed the Obama administration's priorities.

Far from the liberal politician his detractors claimed he was, Obama — working with a diverse cabinet collectively representing ideologies ranging from conservative to liberal — chose a moderate path in governing the nation.

Leaning to the right, Obama endorsed his predecessor George H.W. Bush's conservative Troubled Relief Asset Program (TARP) designed to boost the nation's economy amid the Great Recession that had begun in December 2007, the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression.

The program handed federal dollars to banks and auto makers teetering on bankruptcy, requiring later repayment from the corporations. Even so, critics accused Obama of bailing out corporate America.

Seeking accountability for the shoddy and risky lending practices of large banking firms that led to a meltdown on Wall Street, triggering the Great Recession, Obama led Congress in 2010 to pass the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act.

The Bill forced institutions “too big to fail” to maintain higher levels of capital reserve, scaled back the ability of investment firms to engage in risky investments and interest gouging, and created the Consumer Protection Financial Bureau to help protect consumers from financial industry abuses.

In addition to corporate aid and accountability, the Obama administration proposed — and a Democratic-controlled Congress passed — a modest \$800 billion economic stimulus package, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Only three congressional Republicans, all senators, voted for the Act.

Some one-third of the funding went to cash-strapped states for the purpose of preventing layoffs of public employees and reduction in unemployment compensation. Approximately one-third took the form of middle-class tax cuts, and the remaining one-third to the construction of public infrastructure: bridges, highways, sewage treatment facilities and other projects.

Critics on the left deemed the financial aid insufficient. They had a point. Although

the Great Recession formally drew to a close in 2009, the unemployment rate remained stubbornly high and wages stagnant until 2015. Not until Obama's last two years did the economy enter a full recovery.

By the time he left office in 2017, the president's policies since 2009 had helped create more than 11 million new jobs and generated the most rapid job growth among middle-class and lower-end workers since 1967. Even so, income inequality between the richest Americans and everyone else continued to widen.

## HEALTHCARE

Beginning with Theodore Roosevelt early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, conservative to liberal presidents had unsuccessfully advocated for healthcare for all Americans. Since Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s, Democratic presidents had made healthcare reform a major issue for the party.

Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s secured government-administered healthcare for senior citizens (Medicare) and the poorest of Americans (Medicaid). Republican Richard Nixon and Democrats Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton in the 1970s–90s tried but failed to convince Congress to enact universal healthcare for all Americans.

Since then the spiraling costs of health insurance and medical care had risen dramatically. Although some three-quarters of Americans (apart from Medicare and Medicaid recipients) had private health insurance, those insurance companies could cancel policies at will. And many insured Americans struggled to afford doctor visits or hospitalizations.

Congressional Democrats were ready to extend affordable healthcare coverage to all but were divided over how. Republicans opposed healthcare reform. Frustrated with congressional inertia, Obama, like Richard Nixon had done in 1972, turned his attention to the American people through an address to Congress.

“The plan I'm announcing tonight,” Obama declared in a prime-time address on Sept. 9, 2009, “would meet three

basic goals. It will provide more security and stability to those who have health insurance. It will provide insurance to those who don't. And it will slow the growth of healthcare costs for our families, our businesses, and our government.”

Specifically, “individuals will be required to carry basic health insurance — just as most states require you to carry auto insurance. Likewise, businesses will be required to either offer their workers' health care, or chip in to help cover the costs of their workers.”

Many Americans, numerous healthcare analysts and experts and Obama all hoped for a universal healthcare system administered by the federal government. Insurance companies pushed back, as they had during the Nixon presidency. Universal healthcare again went down to defeat.

Retooling, Obama and Democrats settled on a concept modeled on a healthcare proposal from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Espoused at that time by the conservative Heritage Foundation with the goal of widely expanding insurance coverage, the concept modified the private insurance market via consumer mandates, placing a ban on insurers denying coverage for pre-existing conditions, and subsidizing insurance for persons unable to afford coverage.

Since that time the Heritage Foundation's healthcare plan — which the organization backed away from by the mid-1990s — had essentially been implemented in Massachusetts by Governor Mitt Romney — a Republican currently serving as a U.S. Senator from Utah — thereafter achieving remarkable success in expanding coverage.

Democrats in Congress adopted the core components of the Heritage Foundation and Massachusetts plans, while also incorporating an expansion of Medicaid in order to provide coverage for the poorest of Americans. Committed to opposing Obama at all costs, every Republican in Congress voted against the conservative healthcare plan. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) passed Congress with only





Democratic support and was signed into law in March 2010.

Where many prior presidents had failed, Obama succeeded. With the stroke of a pen, millions of Americans previously unable to afford healthcare insurance received it for the first time. No longer could insurance companies deny coverage for pre-existing medical conditions, while a roster of preventive procedures was automatically covered in all policies.

Enraged, Republicans tried to kill “Obamacare.” Their appeals to the Supreme Court failed. But anti-abortion conservative Christians did succeed in forcing the government to allow conservative religious-owned businesses and non-profits to opt out of mandated contraceptive care for the sake of their “religious liberty.”

One of the most pro-life policies in a half-century, the ACA by 2016 reduced the number of non-elderly uninsured adults by 41 percent. The following year Republican Senator John McCain (AZ) — formerly an opponent of the ACA but then battling with brain cancer — cast the deciding vote in defense of the ACA during a final, failed legislative attempt by Republicans to kill the Act.

Passage of the Affordable Care Act proved to be the political high point of Obama’s presidency.

## SECOND TERM

In 2010 the dual winds of a slow economic recovery and a gale of white Christian nationalist anger swept more ultra-conservative Republicans into the U.S. House. Although Democrats retained the Senate until 2015, major legislative victories would be no more.

Stymied by rigid ideological opposition in Congress, Obama nonetheless easily won a second presidential term, his victory marked by high minority voter turnout.

In the face of rigid GOP opposition, Obama resorted to executive orders — lacking the long-term influence of legislation — that included measures to curtail the effects of climate change, gun violence, discrimination against LGBT persons, and abusive financial tactics by for-profit colleges preying upon students. He also signed into existence the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals Act (DACA), allowing many immigrants who had arrived as minors in the U.S. illegally to stay in the country.

Foreign affairs offered limited opportunities for Obama. Even the administration’s successful 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden — al Qaeda’s leader and the mastermind of the 9/11 terrorist attacks — by a team of Navy SEALs failed to quell anger on the far right. Other foreign policy

accomplishments included a reduction of troops in Afghanistan and an agreement with Iran that reduced that nation’s nuclear weapons capacity.

Even so, the Middle East remained the quagmire it had long been as the newly formed and extremist Islamic State (ISIS) made inroads despite counter actions on the part of the U.S. Russia, too, proved troublesome, invading and occupying a portion of Ukraine to expand the nation’s footprint westward.

America’s Christian nationalists, however, praised Russian President Vladimir Putin’s expansionist agenda undertaken in alliance with the Christian nationalist Russian Orthodox Church. They celebrated what one analyst summarized as the merger of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality.”

One leading American Christian nationalist praised Putin as the “lion of Christianity,” while another, Franklin Graham, applauded Putin for “protecting traditional Christianity.” Obama was their evil enemy, Russia’s Putin a saintly hero.

In the U.S., far-right extremists were stocking more guns than ever in growing anticipation of waging war on liberalism and democracy. Increasingly they demonized and threatened the federal government.



Nevada rancher and Christian nationalist Cliven Bundy became perhaps the most notorious. For decades refusing to pay lease fees on the federal lands upon which he grazed his cattle, Bundy threatened to start a “civil war” if the government tried to collect on his debts.

“[T]he Lord told me” to resist the federal government, he predictably claimed. Fellow white Christian nationalists rallied to his side, flying a banner declaring “Liberty Freedom For God We Stand.”

Federal agents confronted Bundy and his fellow extremists, the two sides facing off with guns pointed at one another. To avoid a shootout the feds backed down. Bundy declared victory, claiming God was on his side.

Several Bundys served time in prison but were released upon a mistrial, the family hailed as heroes by other God-and-gun wielding violent extremists. To the present day, remote regions of the Western U.S. harbor violent extremists planning for the destruction of the U.S. government.

## NATIONALISM

In Washington, D.C., Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and his allies kept their political aim on Obama. In an unexpected victory for the president, the Supreme Court in 2015 handed down a hallmark ruling protecting same-sex marriage, angering Christian nationalists bent on legislating their “religious liberty” to discriminate against others.

Just as quickly, political winds shifted again with the sudden death of conservative Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia in February 2016. Throwing down an unprecedented gauntlet, McConnell, whose leadership position included the typically perfunctory duty of approving presidential appointments to the Supreme Court, blatantly refused to allow Obama to replace Scalia.

The naked power grab roiled the political world but pleased Christian nationalists who hoped the next president would be a Republican who would replace Scalia with another far-right justice.

But some conservative white evangelicals began re-evaluating the

extremism in their midst. Ken Brown, a former “card-carrying member” of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority and pastor of Community Bible Church in Trenton, Mich., put his finger on the problem. His church, he said, had been peaceful under the presidency of Republican George W. Bush, who catered to conservative evangelicals, but “then came Obama.”

Tim Alberta of *The Atlantic* deemed Brown’s church reflective of a major shift. Brown witnessed his church members embracing conspiracy theories, lies, and hatred of Obama.

“Rush [Limbaugh] had them for three hours a day, five days a week, and Fox News had them every single night,” the pastor summarized, identifying the stokers of the flames of hatred and racism then raging in his church.

Their idealized white American nation was crumbling. Restoring their power was crucial. Truth did not matter. White Christian nationalists in their quest for power double-downed, in the words of historian Michelle Goldberg, on “the undermining of science and material, empirical reality.”

Brown’s church represented thousands of congregations. For many who had long claimed to follow Jesus, perceived threats to their white privilege chartered a new trajectory: a quest to re-enshrine the supremacy of their “religious liberty” for the preservation of their superiority in American culture. In their minds, Obama was the antichrist who stood in their way.

## HOPE

However, much of American Christianity found hope in Obama’s decidedly down-to-earth faith. The president considered himself both a Christian and a skeptic, “a part of the Christian tradition,” Harvard historian James T. Kloppenberg noted.

That tradition had “not received very much attention in the United States in recent decades” Kloppenberg observed, yet “is older than most forms of dogmatic Christianity.”

Political commentator David French, near the end of Obama’s presidency, observed that the president’s “public

professions of faith” had “been in near-perfect harmony” with the United Church of Christ, the denomination of Pastor Jeremiah Wright’s Chicago congregation where Obama had worshipped. The UCC, in its own words, “has no rigid formulation of doctrine or attachment to creeds or structures. Its overarching creed is love.”

In a 2004 interview prior to his presidency Obama said of his faith: “I’m rooted in the Christian tradition. I believe that there are many paths to the same place, and that is a belief that there is a higher power, a belief that we are connected as a people.”

In Obama’s estimation Jesus was a “wonderful teacher ... an historical figure ... a bridge between God and man, in the Christian faith.” Jesus is “powerful precisely because he serves as that means of us reaching something higher.” At the same time, Obama also affirmed the separation of church and state and opposed “religious certainty expressing itself in politics.”

America’s Black Church, itself theologically diverse, birthed Obama’s Christian faith and embraced his church-infused hope in a God of love who transforms and overcomes inequities in society and culture.

Believing “in the power of the African-American religious tradition to spur social change,” Obama said that “because of its past, the black church understands in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities ... as an active, palpable agent in the world. As a source of hope.”

Concluding his analysis of Obama’s personal faith, French said, “Barack Obama may believe in black-liberation theology, or he may not. He may have a close relationship with God, or he may not. We can’t know his heart. But when it comes to his civic religion, President Obama is his church’s — and liberal Christianity’s — great and mighty instrument.”

As Obama’s pathbreaking presidency drew to an end, American Christianity’s dueling concepts of God — one inclusive and equitable, the other authoritative and exclusive — were far apart. **NFJ**

# Good Faith Media internships bring fresh voices, learning experiences

BY ZACH DAWES JR.

**M**achaela Murrell and Christine Young are serving as Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Interns for the fall semester. Good Faith Media's internship program was launched in the fall of 2020, with two interns serving each term.

Machaela Murrell, from Durham, N.C., is a junior at Meredith College in Raleigh. She is an accounting major with a developing interest in the media industry and the diverse areas surrounding it.

"I am very grateful for this opportunity to work with Good Faith Media, and I am looking forward to gaining a deeper perspective of how media can help shed light on both the pillars of the Christian faith and the social aspects of today's world," said Machaela.

She added: "I also hope to improve my writing and communication skills so that I can be better equipped for wherever my future career path will take me."

Christine Young is based in Toronto and a recent graduate of York University. Her current work with a human rights

center strives to defend and protect equity at home and overseas.

"I'm absolutely thrilled to join the Good Faith Media community as an intern this fall," said Christine. "I'm very excited to learn from a team that is deeply passionate about advocacy and justice. I look forward to growing as a writer, exploring critical discourse, and supporting and building progressive social change through the lens of faith."

An initial naming gift from the foundation of First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga., where Ernest Hynds was a beloved member, helped establish the internship program. Hynds was a professor and department head in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia.

"Good Faith Media has been extremely blessed with our Ernest C. Hynds, Jr. Internship Program," said GFM CEO Mitch Randall. "We are very excited that



Christine Young (left) and Machaela Murrell

Christine Young and Machaela Murrell have joined this growing list of exceptional thinkers and writers."

Gifts to support this ongoing engagement with the next generation of communicators may be made by contacting CEO Mitch Randall by email ([mitch@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:mitch@goodfaithmedia.org)) or by phone at 615-627-7763.

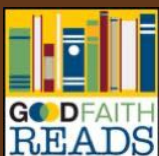
Prospective interns may learn more about the internship program by visiting [goodfaithmedia.org/internships](http://goodfaithmedia.org/internships). **NFJ**

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

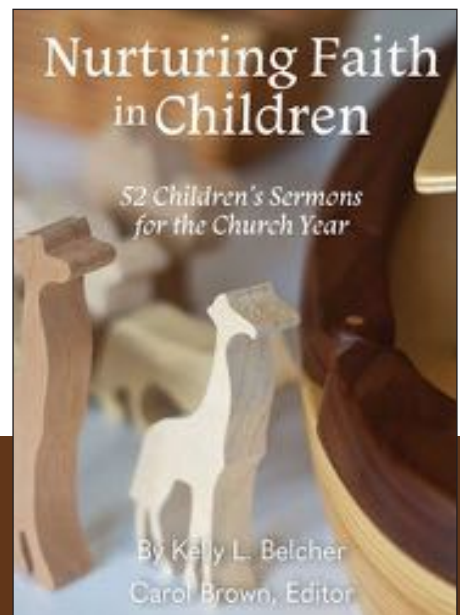
## From Nurturing Faith Books!

If you seek to engage children in weekly worship that welcomes and affirms their questions, furthers their Christian formation, and enables them to become worshippers themselves, then **Kelly L. Belcher's** *Nurturing Faith in Children* is the resource for you! Children learn religious practices through modeling and practice — your prayers can introduce young hearts to the language of prayer.

**Order today at**  
**[goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore](http://goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore).**



Listen to Good Faith Media's interview with Kelly L. Belcher about *Nurturing Faith in Children* at [goodfaithmedia.org/good-faith-reads/](http://goodfaithmedia.org/good-faith-reads/) or wherever you like to listen to podcasts!



# HEARTACHE & HOPE

Author advises churches to honor disabled children and their families

BY LIBBY CARROLL

Shortly after becoming parents, Kelly and Travis Speck watched with horror as their firstborn child, Bennett, was whisked from their arms and rushed to the NICU.

After a harrowing 70-day journey of watching their newborn son fight for his life, the Specks emerged from the NICU both overjoyed by the prospect of finally bringing Bennett home and reeling from news of their son's diagnosis of cerebral palsy.

Their story of navigating life as people of faith caring for the needs of their disabled child, told in Kelly Speck's book *Hope in Heartache: A Journey of Grace & Growth with a Special Needs Child* (Ballast Books, 2022), will be familiar to many readers.

The CDC reports that 61 million adults in the U.S. currently live with a disability. This is 26% of the population, or one in four people.

Disability is widespread, prevalent and an almost universal facet of the human experience, as most people will experience temporary or permanent disability throughout their life. Even so, disabled people continue to be marginalized. One entity often complicit in this marginalization is the American church.

A 2015 article in the *Journal of Disability & Religion* relayed the magnitude of the gap of attendance in faith communities between children without disabilities and those with disabilities. Drawing from parent reports, the writer notes "less than 50% of children and youth with disabilities participated in religious group activities at any point during the previous year."

Ideally, faith communities should be places of social support that decrease the marginalization of disabled children and their families. In reality, faith communities

are often inhospitable toward disabled individuals.

Churches that refuse to educate themselves on disability or make changes to become accessible are perceived as exclusive and unkind toward families for whom disability is a reality. Rather than welcoming all to their doors and acting as the hands and feet of Christ, these churches inadvertently marginalize children with disabilities and ostracize their families.

Thankfully, there are ways to welcome disabled individuals into the dwelling places of the body of Christ. The referenced article names physical accessibility of the church, teachings of faith leaders about disability, and congregational attitudes toward disability as factors that can either serve to welcome or distance disabled individuals.

Kelly Speck told *Nurturing Faith Journal* of her guiding principle for caring for children with disabilities and their families: "Look at each unique child with or without disabilities... What is most honoring to the child? What is most honoring to the family?"

By allowing honor for the individual children and their families to guide their approach, churches will become better equipped to minister to disabled people, she said. Because there is no "one size fits all" model when it comes to caring for children with disabilities, asking questions to assess the needs of families and individuals — and listening to their responses — can transform the experience people affected by disability have in faith communities.

When initially considering whether or not to write *Hope in the Heartache*, Speck dealt with conflicting emotions over sharing her family's story. On the one hand, she felt a sense of fear, her mind spinning with the possible outcomes of writing such a book.



The Speck family

On the other hand, she realized this book would be "our testimony of thanking God for what he's done and sharing it with the world." Once that became evident, she said, it "started to hit me more and more — how could we not tell our story?"

It is crucial that disabled people and families of disabled children become vocal about their stories. It is equally vital for churches to listen, learn and change.

"We thank God every single day that Bennett did live, and we simply ask God daily for more wisdom, more understanding, and more strength to care for Bennett with the dignity and love that he deserves," Kelly writes in the book's closing.

By listening to the stories of families of disabled children, churches can better walk beside parents of disabled children, strengthening them to bestow upon their children the dignity and love they deserve.

NFJ

-Libby Carroll, a student at Baylor University, served as a summer intern with Good Faith Media



# DO YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE IN THE HOCUS-POCUS TO BE A CHRISTIAN?

By Keith Herron

For 15 years I served a church in Kansas City with several multigenerational families. Most were three generations, but one was an exceedingly rare five-generation family.

**P**astor Kathy, my long-serving colleague, was the “middler” in that extended family system. Her father and stepmother were active members, as were her two daughters.

Her father’s mother, 95-year-old Julia, was rather active on her own. And Kathy’s two daughters each had their own children — making it a five-generation family.

The whole family was a delight, each with a very sharp sense of humor.

One day Julia, the family matriarch, asked her theologically educated granddaughter Kathy a longstanding question about faith: “Do you have to believe in the hocus-pocus to be a Christian?”

Julia had come to the point where she felt free to ask her minister granddaughter a question of true depth. Being nearly 100 years old is a vantage point of clarity as the far horizon looms now as the near horizon.

Why not ask your question while you’ve got time? There was no need to specify what the hocus-pocus was: the question seemed to presume it was in the eye of the beholder.

In many churches, the answer is very specified and, besides, such a question would be considered verboten where curious theological thinking is tightly controlled.

But I’d like to nibble around the edges of a topic I’ve thought about when discussing what happens to us and our



relationship with God when the unthinkable occurs — those events or occasions that take place when life happens.

The unthinkable can be tragic or it can be ecstatic. Most of us live meekly between the good and the bad, but mostly in the middle ground, hoping nothing too bad or maybe even anything too good happens. We make our peace with a manageable middle bandwidth of normality.

If you’re like me, you’ve been raised on a diet of explanations we tell ourselves when such things happen to us. There are multiple words for the explanations we give: God’s will, fate, providence, determinism, divine happenstance.

All those words imply God is behind the scenes pulling the strings of our lives,

orchestrating this or that, throwing down in our path some unimaginable event we have to deal with, maybe on occasion even pulling our bacon out of the fire when we get in trouble.

Think about all the prayers of desperation we’ve uttered to ask God to help us. Some of us have even prayed for a parking spot near the church doors. We have long held in our thinking that God stays busy by constantly attending to us and monitoring what goes on in our lives.

However, is that the only way we describe what’s going on? What do we do when those good terms don’t cut it?

What about luck? Most of you are smart enough or cynical enough to ask



the qualifier, “Do you mean good luck or bad luck?”

Let me illustrate: I read a fascinating story that was told at the Aspen Ideas Festival. Jacqueline Novogratz, CEO of The Acumen Fund, an international organization that raises funds for worldwide developmental causes, shared about how she sensed a deep life-changing call to this important work.

When Jacqueline was 12, her Uncle Ed gave her a ski sweater made “of soft blue wool, with stripes on the sleeves and a front-side African motif of two zebras walking in front of a snow-capped mountain.”

At the time, she had never even heard of Mount Kilimanjaro; she only knew the sweater made her dream of places far away.

That beautiful sweater made her feel so wonderful, she wore it often and everywhere. She even wrote her name on the tag to ensure it would be her sweater forever.

When turning 14, her young body was taking womanly form and the scene on the sweater took a different form too. One of the older high school boys made a lewd and cruel comment to her in a voice so loud everyone in the room heard him.

So embarrassed, she went home demanding to know from her mother why she would ever allow her to wear it. They took the sweater to a Goodwill Store and Novogratz buried a painful adolescent memory that was hard to forget.

A dozen years later, Novogratz was jogging one day in the hills of Kigali, a small village in Rwanda. About 20 feet in front of her was a little boy wearing her sweater, or at least a sweater identical to the one she had given away.

“This cannot be!” she thought to herself. She ran and grabbed the surprised child and, spinning him around, looked at the label inside the back collar. Sure enough, there was her name.

The world is small indeed when a teenage girl’s sweater can show up a dozen years later halfway around the globe in such an obscure African village.

## THE WORLD IS SMALL INDEED WHEN A TEENAGE GIRL’S SWEATER CAN SHOW UP A DOZEN YEARS LATER HALFWAY AROUND THE GLOBE IN SUCH AN OBSCURE AFRICAN VILLAGE.

How is it that life makes these kinds of bizarre connections as though life itself is beckoning us to get involved in a wider world?

In Christian circles, we are often raised on a steady, unexamined line of thinking some call determinism. In that view, God “orders our steps,” and we believe God makes things happen or not happen according to God’s unquestioned and unsearchable will.

Those events we see as good for us are not the problem. It’s those events that are against us that we question. This belief is fine as long as we don’t examine it too closely.

The Bible gives a version of this thinking, but even it is not as closely drawn as we assume with God in control of all things — orchestrating the divine paths we follow.

But what happens when this idea doesn’t hold up? Think about Job, perhaps the oldest story in the Hebrew Bible, when his house collapsed and killed all his children.

Then one tragedy after another hit him as if the dominoes of life were all falling according to some divine design.

Of course, we remember Job’s reversal from a life of blessing to a life of cursing was the result of a divine wager between God and the heavenly accuser. Read Job to see how all this took place.

Are we merely pawns to the mysterious whims of the divine? Or are we living a life in which all kinds of things are ours to experience? And when they do happen, is God there with us no matter what?

We are meaning-making people. Morris West, author of *The Clowns of God*, wrote: “We are creatures who walk in two worlds and trace upon the walls of our cave the wonders and the nightmare experiences of our spiritual pilgrimage.”

We take life as it comes — good and bad — and make meaning of it all.

As a college undergrad, I had a date with a beautiful, talented, young woman who was a member of the Baylor Religious Hour Choir. I asked her to go out on the same night the choir was having a party, so she invited me to go with her.

We were in the activities building of the First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas, and were all piled into a large room to watch a movie. I was sitting on the floor next to my date, when a sock-footed young woman behind me began tickling me with her feet.

I vaguely knew who she was because she was a widely known singer. She didn’t know me from Adam and didn’t care — except that I laughed at her tickles.

The next week I didn’t call my date from the week before. I called the sock-footed singer. She still did not know me but agreed to go on a date. Later I discovered she learned my name by overhearing others.

A year and a half later, I married that sock-footed woman and we’ve been together for 47 years. This is a story I vividly remember. And she smiles at the memory, having no idea at the time how the dominoes she tipped 50 years ago would fall.

Was it providence that brought us together? Absolutely.

Was it fate that we found one another? Surely.

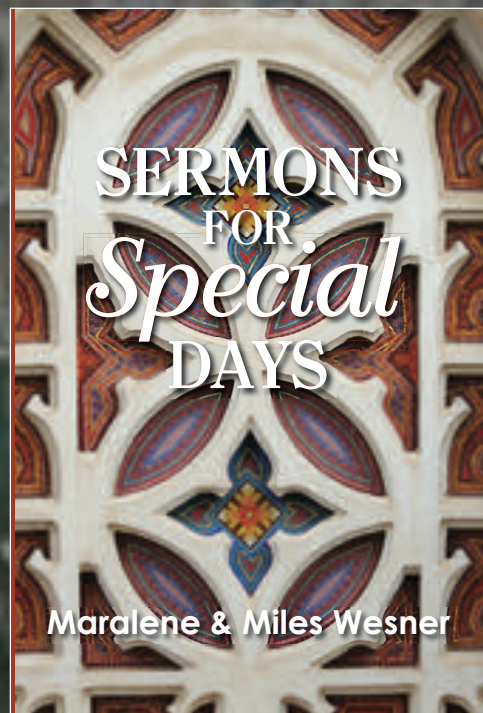
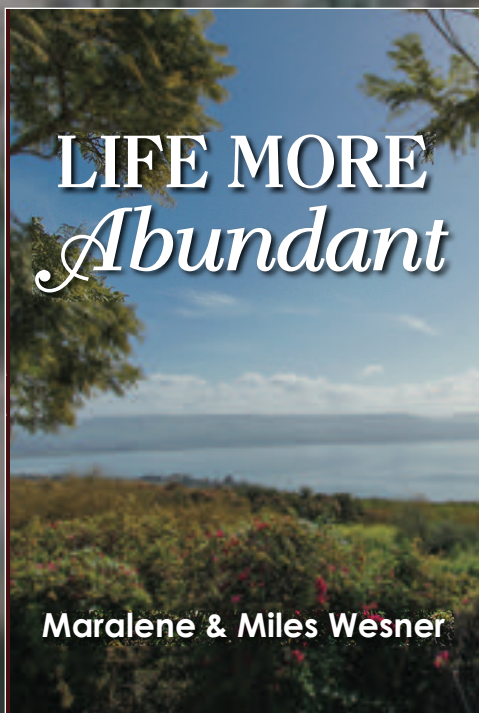
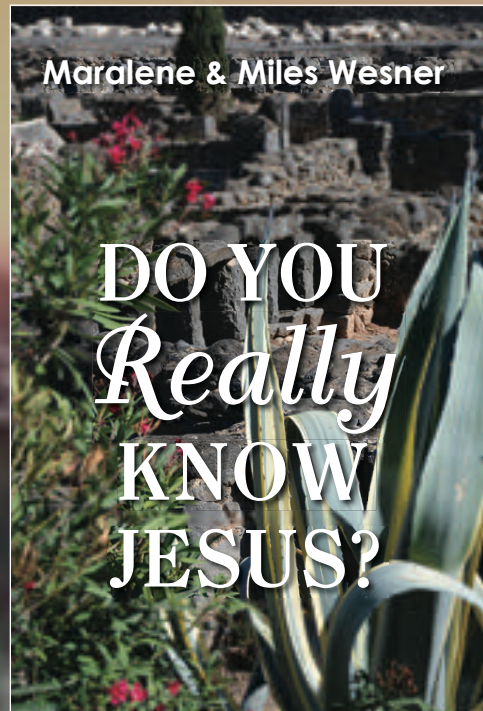
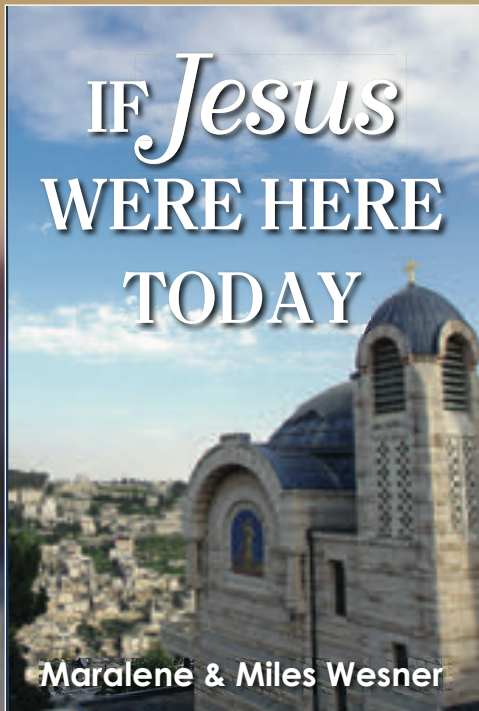
Was it God’s will? Oh, yes.

Was it luck? No question. **NFJ**

*-Keith Herron is intentional interim pastor at Countryside Community Church in Omaha, Neb.*

# From the Wesners...

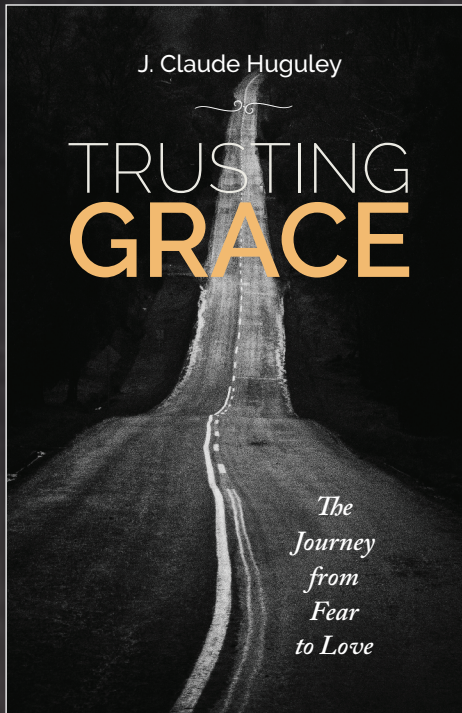
Authors Maralene and Miles Wesner write with insights and clarity that build bridges between the spiritual and the intellectual worlds in applicable ways.



Order online at [goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore](http://goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore)



# New from Nurturing Faith



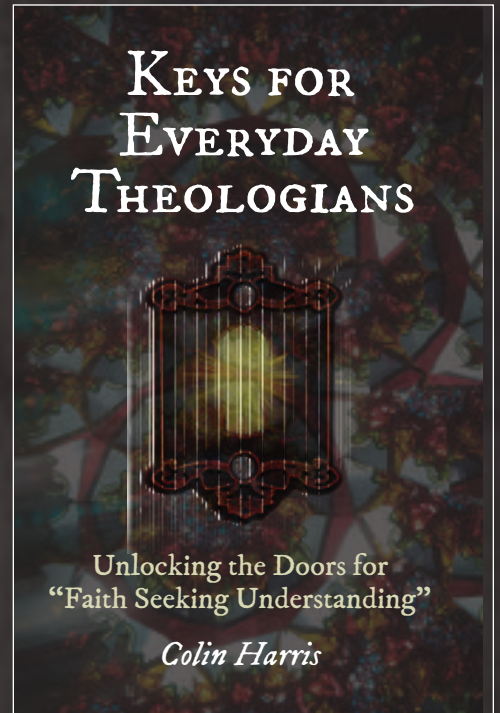
## ***Trusting Grace***

“Insights for confronting life’s traumas in ways that move through fear and insecurity to a spirituality shaped by love and grace...could not be more timely..”

—Bill J. Leonard, church historian

## ***Keys for Everyday Theologians***

Everyone thinks about God, and Colin Harris insightfully and helpfully offers keys to doing it with better understanding.



Unlocking the Doors for  
“Faith Seeking Understanding”

*Colin Harris*

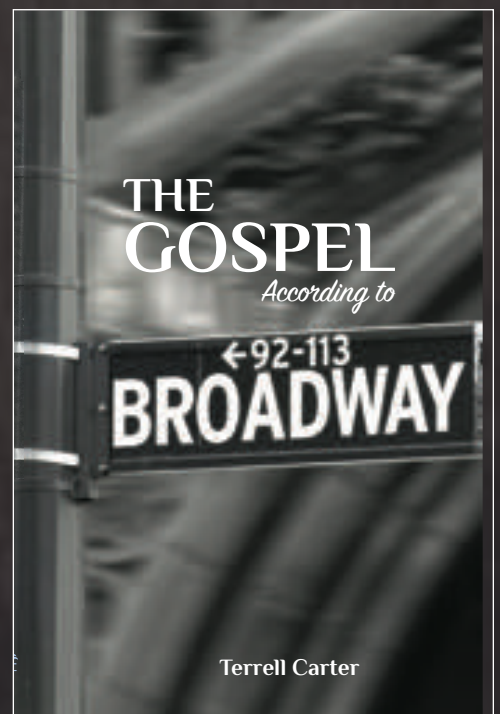


## ***Take Time for the Pain***

Harold Bryson explores his personal story of loss — moving from trying to hide his anguish to facing it more honestly and hopefully.

## ***The Gospel According to Broadway***

Terrell Carter raises the curtain on how God’s love impacts relationships, looking into ancient scripture and Broadway scripts.



THE  
GOSPEL  
*According to*

←92-113  
BROADWAY

Terrell Carter

**Or call us at (615) 627-7763 to place an order!**

# A LASTING LINE

Five powerful words in  
a lengthy, 50-year-old  
poem live on

BY KEN SEHESTED

**T**his is the unlikely story of a single, five-word sentence — a fragment of a much longer prose poem.

It was first uttered during what many would consider a parochial backwater event: the April 1971 annual meeting of the Florida Baptist Convention Woman's Missionary Union (WMU).

Several lines from that poem, including the pivotal sentence, were later quoted by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter during his March 26, 1979 speech at the historic Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty signing at the White House.

Years later that poem portion was produced as a large poster, seen hanging on walls on three continents. Long since, it entered the international vocabulary of advocates pursuing justice, peace and human rights.

The key sentence? "Peace, like war, is waged."

## ORIGINS

This December marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the initial publication of Walker Knight's phrase, embedded in the poem's text. Walker, then director of editorial services for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, had written the poem as part of a series of devotionals for the Baptist women's gathering, at the request of WMU leader Carolyn Weatherford.

Everett Hullum, Walker's associate editor of *Home Missions* magazine, read the



Walker L. Knight's entire 50-year-old poem appears in his memoirs, *From Zion to Atlanta*, available at [goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore](http://goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore).

manuscript and insisted the entire piece be printed. It debuted as an 18-page spread, accompanied by a series of striking photographs, in the December 1972 issue.

How some of that text ended up in Carter's historic 1979 speech is circuitous. John Nichol, then pastor of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., quoted several lines from the poem in a sermon as guest preacher at First Baptist Church of Vienna, Ga., where his friend Robert Maddox was pastor.

Maddox was already acquainted with Carter in South Georgia. The layman from Plains filled the Vienna pulpit twice while Maddox was on vacation in the 1960s.

Years later, Maddox became pastor of First Baptist Church of Calhoun, Ga., where one of the Carters' sons was a member. One Sunday Rosalynn Carter visited the church and had lunch with the Maddoxes.

It was September 1978, during the 12 days of strenuous diplomacy at the presidential retreat Camp David where the president was hosting Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Ms. Carter shared what little she knew of the high-stakes diplomatic initiative.

A few months earlier, one of Carter's aides whom Maddox had known in Vienna called to say the president would be speaking to the Southern Baptist Brotherhood

Commission. The president's speechwriters didn't know that context, so the aide asked Maddox to work up a draft.

He jumped at the chance and later offered his services as an ongoing speechwriter, which the president declined.

## AGREEMENT

The Camp David Accords represented an agreement in principle. Afterwards, Begin and Sadat returned to their respective countries to sell its details to their respective governments.

That's when things began to fall apart, necessitating Carter's diplomatic shuttling between the two countries. Finally, in March 1979, Carter announced a final agreement had been reached.

Hearing the news, Maddox, on his own initiative, wrote a speech for Carter for the treaty-signing ceremony at the White House. He remembered the phrase, "Peace, like war, is waged," from Walker Knight's poem, and inserted it along with several other lines.

Maddox sent the unrequested speech to Rosalynn Carter's press secretary. The president used what Maddox had written, including these lines:

It has been said, and I quote, "Peace has one thing in common with its enemy, with the fiend it battles,



with war; peace is active, not passive; peace is doing, not waiting; peace is aggressive — attacking; peace plans its strategy and encircles the enemy; peace marshals its forces and storms the gates; peace gathers its weapons and pierces the defense; peace, like war, is waged.

Walker was not identified as the author, although a White House aide asked Maddox for attribution. A few days later, a presidential aide urged Maddox to find a television; Carter was about to give the speech.

In May, Maddox was hired by the Carter Administration, first as a speechwriter, then as special religious liaison for the president.

## NO GUILF

Integrity was often used to describe Knight's character. One associate remarked to a new staff hire, "There is no guile in Walker Knight."

Such virtue was nurtured over time, making it hard to identify one particular occasion when this temperament crystallized. Possibly it was an experience recounted by his close friend John Nichol.

"You have to go back to the time when as a teenager [Walker] made his first major trip out of Henderson County, Ky., with a group of teenagers from his church, to attend Training Union Week at the Baptist assembly in Ridgecrest, N.C.," said Nichol at Walker's memorial service in December 2019.

"One evening the preacher for that week focused on one of the beatitudes: 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.' Dr. Johnson said that the verse could also be translated, 'Blessed are those who want to see things set right, for they will help accomplish it.'"

Wanting to see things set right served as a lifelong point of orientation, wrote Walker in his memoirs, *From Zion to Atlanta* (2013, Nurturing Faith). It's what would steel his resolve to speak out on matters of racial justice, on questions of economic inequal-

ity, on support of women in ministry, along with numerous other human rights matters.

By the time he assumed his role as editor of the HMB's *Home Missions* magazine (later renamed *Missions USA*), he joined his journalism skills to his theological vision and his editorial courage. He soon learned there would be a cost to such integrity.

Subsequent generations have a hard time imagining the red-hot emotions around Jim Crow culture and the revolt of the Civil Rights Movement.

For instance, in the fall of 1971, James Sullivan, director of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, halted distribution of a Training Union quarterly (study material for teens) — 140,000 copies, plus another 18,000 leaders' guides — because of a photo of a Black male teen talking with two white girls, along with a small portion of text. Those copies were destroyed, and new ones with substitute material were printed.

Sullivan said he wanted to avoid "misunderstandings ... construed as improper promotion ... of integration in churches, which is an individual church matter under Baptist polity."

Walker recalled times when the Home Mission Board executive called him in, holding up the latest issue of *Home Missions*, and asking "What does this have to do with home missions?"

Walker responded that mission stories could only be interpreted in their social context. He was already practicing what Congressman John Lewis would later urge: "Get in good trouble, necessary trouble."

By the early 1980s, a rising fundamentalist coalition had shown its bare-knuckled, publicly announced intent to take over the Southern Baptist Convention. Walker saw the writing on the wall.

At age 59, he and his beloved wife Nell agreed he would resign, take a 50% cut in pay, and, with support from a group of moderate-progressive pastors, start an independent Baptist publication. The first issue of *SBC Today* (later renamed *Baptists Today* and then again, *Nurturing Faith Journal*) was issued in April 1983.

## MORE THAN SENTIMENT

No single phrase has been more important to my own formation than Walker's lasting line: "Peace, like war, is waged."

Peace is not simply a sentiment, but an active practice. Peace is not like "peace and quiet" — because peacemakers sometimes stir trouble.

Peace, as Martin Luther King Jr. incisively noted, is not the absence of conflict but the presence of justice.

A broad consensus among New Testament scholars agrees that Jesus' call to love enemies is the radiant center of the gospel, the hub in which many spokes unite.

The capacity to love enemies — which is not the same as liking them — springs from God's unilaterally disarming initiative in Jesus.

Grace is the lubricant that loosens the grip of fear on our living, allowing us to live with extravagant love.

Our penitential posture, opening ourselves to God's love, is the very thing that makes us forgiving people — for "the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little" (Luke 7:47).

The disarming of the heart and the disarming of the nations are intertwined. Peace, like war, is waged. As Walker Knight put it, first to those WMU attendees:

Peace plans its strategy and encircles the enemy. Peace marshals its forces and storms the gates. Peace gathers its weapons and pierces the defense... But Christ has turned it all around: the weapons of peace are love, joy, goodness, longsuffering; the arms of peace are justice, truth, patience, prayer; the strategy of peace brings safety, welfare, happiness; the forces of peace are the sons and daughters of God. **NFJ**

—Ken Sehested writes at prayerand-politics.org. His most recent book is *In the Land of the Willing: Litanies, Poems, Prayers, and Benedictions*.

# Restorative Powers

Prioritizing the spiritual benefits of retreat

BY RUTH SPRAYBERRY  
DUCHARME

**A**t least once a year, we eagerly pack our bags, make a reservation, and set out on a much-deserved vacation. While vacations provide beneficial fun and exploration, they often fail to meet our needs for deeper physical, emotional and spiritual renewal.

Wendell Berry, the beloved American poet, writes about the restorative powers of retreat in his poem, “The Peace of Wild Things.”

This poem is a call to the sanctuary of nature as a place to go “when despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be.”

Despair for the world, fear of the future, the need for rest and the desire for peace are emotions with which we can all identify. When we carry these feelings and anxieties for too long without a space for release, we become lost to our true being — lost to our very souls.

When we find ourselves in this place, retreats can be a way to find renewal and give ourselves a spiritual check-up.

Most of us are good at taking our cars in for a scheduled inspection, getting our teeth cleaned and checked every few months, and making sure we get to the doctor for our yearly physicals. But how good are we at giving ourselves a spiritual check-up?

Retreats offer a unique way to unplug and concentrate on how we are cultivating and developing our true selves — the part



that is our soul and inner being. While a retreat’s physical and spiritual space is important, the good news is that we don’t have to travel far to experience the value of time away.

The primary model for a retreat is weekly worship. We leave the world to enter into sanctuary where we commune with God through worship, stillness, prayer and open hearts.

We depart from this place of sanctuary to go and serve after filling our spiritual reservoir. Retreats offer the same benefit on an even deeper level.

## RETREAT TYPES

Retreats come in all shapes and sizes. They can be for individuals or groups. They can last for a week, a weekend or a day. The benefit can be invaluable to spiritual growth, regardless of style or design.

Before embarking on a retreat, it is important to consider its basic elements and purpose. While learning can be fulfilling, it shouldn’t be the main focus of a retreat. Rather, a retreat should be for spiritual development with elements

designed to guide the participants to discern and deepen their relationships with God.

Retreats, while varying in style, setting and duration, can also be divided into two basic categories: personal retreats and group retreats.

When the world begins to press in on us and we feel unmoored by the things that ground us, a personal retreat may be just what we need. Time alone allows us to press the “pause” button and intentionally connect with the Divine.

The beauty of this style of retreat is the flexibility it affords to choose a location and a time frame. It offers the freedom to do what we want when we want to do it. We can sleep when tired and eat when hungry, without worrying about the needs of others.

When facing a big decision and needing time for discernment, a personal retreat can offer the space needed for that process. Such individual time can also be valuable for recuperating from a stressful event, healing from a particular hurt or adjusting to a major life change.

It is hard to hear God’s voice during our daily busyness because the noise level of the world is constant and loud. This is especially true of the noise that goes on in our heads.

Meditation — the process of stillness and “non-thinking” — can help to quiet the voices in our heads so we can hear and feel the promptings of God. This spiritual exercise is a good discipline to practice on a personal retreat.

Meditation and prayer can aid us in fulfilling the call of Christ to abide with

*When we step into retreat and enter into the divine flow, we abide with God.*

him and to stay connected to the vine — the source that produces good, sweet fruit in our lives.

A second basic type of spiritual retreat involves a group experience. Group retreats, popular among faith communities, tend to be theme-oriented and often are facilitated by a leader.

Retreating with a group offers many of the same benefits as a personal retreat such as times for reflection, rest and prayer, while meeting other needs. Group retreats can contain moments of solitude and silence, in addition to times for community and conversation.

Within the group setting, leaders should clearly communicate the style and purpose of the retreat. It is important to set a tone of openness, safety in sharing and confidentiality.

Creativity can play an important role in group gatherings. Providing space for artful creativity offers participants a means of taking what they are experiencing and using their hands to express it. Making prayer beads, painting with watercolors, weaving with fabrics, and mandala coloring are some easy and enjoyable ways to bring creativity into a retreat.

Fun activities and moments of authentic fellowship can be some of the most memorable moments for a group retreat. It's where people aren't afraid to laugh, dance and play a game together. These moments of connection with kindred spirits can be invaluable for faith communities, offering a time to see friends in a new and different light.

## RETREAT PLANNING

Exploring the options for retreats means considering some practical details and general features of the retreat.

A day retreat can be a convenient way to refresh one's soul and awaken one's inner being. Possible locations include a nearby church or monastery, or a park in which to enjoy nature, sit in solitude and find quiet rest.

A weekend retreat is a practical format for those who can manage this short time away from home and work. Finding a retreat center that can offer



lodging, meals and a relaxing setting is a good option. By leaving the necessary preparations to the center's management, retreat participants can concentrate on the spiritual details.

If someone is fortunate to have the time and means to retreat for a week or even a month, an extended time of withdrawal can offer valuable time for discernment.

To accomplish this goal, the retreat location should have a buffer between one's ordinary, busy life. The setting should have quiet space for reflection, comfortable and practical accommodations, and access to simple, healthy meals.

What will you experience while on retreat? While quiet reflection and rest may be all that one needs, engaging in some spiritual exercises and bringing along a few tools may enhance the time away.

Even if journaling isn't part of your normal rhythm, bring along a notebook and a pen. Expressing your feelings and having a space to record those thoughts are important.

Instead of writing, maybe the notebook will be used to doodle or draw. These expressions can be valuable too.

What is put on paper is between you and God. There is no need for perfection or editing; simply respond to the movement of God's spirit by letting whatever comes from your heart flow through your hand onto the paper.

Reading in peace and quiet can be a luxury in this day of constant noise and distractions. Take along a book or books, and soak in the writings of a favorite poet, author or theologian. Be inspired by scripture and other writings that speak to you.

Other spiritual exercises on a retreat may include prayer walks, yoga, breath prayers, centering prayers and labyrinth walking. Consider employing a spiritual director who can help you set an intention for your retreat and guide you to accomplish your desired goal.

When we step into retreat and enter into the divine flow, we abide with God. We become more in tune with the ways of God's spirit and more aware of God's presence.

Borrowing again from Wendell Berry, God invites us to "come into the peace of wild things ... to come into the presence of still water ... and to rest in the grace of the world."

The gift of a retreat is the time and space to trust God's love again and to experience God's creation as a balm for our weariness. Then, when we rise to step back into the world, we do so with a clearer understanding of the way we are to live in the world. **NFJ**

—*Ruth Sprayberry DuCharme*  
is a spiritual director, faith formation specialist and retreat leader living in Macon, Ga. For more information, visit [rducharmespiritualdirector.com](http://rducharmespiritualdirector.com).





# Revelry to Reflection

## Moving from Christmas Past to Christmas Present

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

As the winter solstice arrives and daylight hours lengthen ever so slightly, today's congregations will do something most Protestant congregations abstained from until more recent times. They will celebrate Christmas.

Eaton Hopewell Academy in Rhode Island, founded in 1756, was the first Baptist educational institution in America and forerunner of Brown University. Christmas break was not on the school calendar.

Student Samuel Jones wrote in his diary on Dec. 25, 1757: "Christmas Day! But our school goes on as usual. The only difference was that we had two big turkeys for dinner. Mr. E(aton) told us that he did not observe Christmas as he was certain that our Savior was not born on the 25<sup>th</sup> or any other day in December."

Of course no one knew when Jesus had been born, nor had the details ever mattered much.

Early Christians had often joined in raucous, pagan feasts and festivals during the winter solstice. Eventually the Catholic Church offered a time of solemn

fasting as an alternative for the more serious-minded.

Few changed their habits, but the Catholic Church's conversion of pagan revelry to a spiritual observance endured. In time Jesus' birth came to be celebrated on December 25, the Church's holy calendar expanding for Advent as a way of encouraging piety. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century "Christmas" — or "Christ's Mass" — was coined.

### RESISTANCE

Still, the popular winter solstice revelry continued. Resistant to Catholicism, Protestants (forming in the 1500s) steadfastly refused to observe the season with religious observances.

Many in both branches of Christianity preferred play over piety. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Puritan propagandist Philip Stubbes, in his book *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), pointed to Christmas as a time of evil abuses when "more mischief is committed than the entirety of the rest of the year.

"What masking and rumming ... robberies, whoredom, murder ... dicing and carding ... banqueting and feasting" during the Christmas season. Other 17<sup>th</sup>-century critics echoed Stubbes' criticisms, dismissing even religious observances as rooted in immorality, heathenism and satanism.

Critics of Christmas had a point: the early Catholic Church had appropriated and transformed formerly pagan festivals

into observances of Christ's birth, and decidedly unchristian revelry on the part of many Catholics and Protestants alike did continue marking the Christmas season.

Also, Puritan critics had a reputation as party-poopers. Resistance to Christmas as a holy day marked the broad world of Protestantism, many objecting even to the word "Christmas" for incorporating the word "mass."

Most people in a European world dominated by church-state alliances were forced to give at least lip service to being Christian. Yet many preferred theater seats to church pews during the Christmas season, the busiest time for theatrical productions. Drinks at the tavern often followed.

In 1645 one observer exclaimed, "O blessed Reformation! The church doors all shut, and the tavern doors all open!"

The debauchery drove Puritans nuts. Soon those strict guardians of morals private and public in the New World banned Christmas observances altogether, sacred and secular alike.

Generations passed. The Puritan influence remained, albeit to a lesser degree. Into the 19<sup>th</sup> century many of America's Protestant Christians observed Christmas largely as just another day.

Many businesses and bars remained open. Public entertainment was common. Politics carried on as usual. Increasingly some families observed the day with a special meal at home.

## GIFTS

Along the way a different Christmas tradition seeped into Protestant life through the remembrance of a kind 4<sup>th</sup>-century bishop from the Eastern Christian tradition. Nicholas, legendary for his generosity, especially to children, had never been entirely forgotten.

Over time some countries set aside a day of gift giving and generosity in honor of Nicholas. The specific days varied: December 6 in Western Christendom and December 19 in Eastern Christendom became known as St. Nicholas Day. Still later, some European immigrants brought to the New World their reverence for the ancient, gift-giving bishop.

The debauched nature of ancient pagan winter solstice feasts (with festivals having given way to more orderly revelry), the Roman Catholic Church's absorption and formal redemption of the pagan festivals into a series of holy days, and remembrance of Nicholas' generosity to children eventually converged.

In the early 1800s more Americans, especially families, increasingly celebrated an agreed-upon day near the winter solstice: December 25, long established by now in much of Catholic Europe as a time of lively recreation, special foods and gifts to children.

Quiet family celebrations of Christmas at home — even if after work hours — became common by 1860. Still, few Protestant churches observed the day.

Then came the War of the Rebellion, later known as America's "Civil War." Men went to war, many never to return. Empty chairs at Christmas dinners marked a solemn and sorrowful time. In the field, soldiers had memories of home utmost in mind.

Reflecting on the national mood, illustrator Thomas Nast imagined a Christmas season among a Union encampment in December 1863. Nast revised Santa Claus — a figure created by Dutch Americans early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to represent Saint Nicholas — as a funny, portly man. His first depiction appeared on the cover of the Jan. 3, 1863

edition of *Harper's Weekly*, one of the most popular periodicals in America.

Two days earlier President Abraham Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, initiating formal freedom for remaining slaves. In Nast's depiction of Christmas, Santa presents the Union encampment a special gift: a puppet of Confederate President Jefferson Davis being hung in effigy to the delight of the troops.

In the background soldiers are chasing a wild boar, presumably for Christmas dinner. Others relax and play games. An ambitious few climb a greased pole to reach a prize. In the foreground drummer boys startled by a jack-in-the-box portray children in the Army's Christmas Day gaiety.

## DECEMBER 25

Nast continued drawing Santa Claus, popularizing his mirthful, gift-giving figure with witty and joyful touches even in the midst of war. The illustrator's portrayal of Christmas as a secular holiday filled with joy and generosity transformed Christmas in the public imagination.

In 1870, five years after the Civil War, former Union general and then-U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant set aside "the 25<sup>th</sup> day of December, commonly called Christmas Day, as a day of public fast or thanksgiving." No religious significance was attached to the holiday.

The establishment of Christmas as a federal, secular holiday ironically paved the way for many Protestants to formally recognize Christmas as a Christian holiday. Liturgical churches, including Episcopalians, were early adopters in establishing Christmas services.

By the 1880s a number of evangelical churches across America — Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian and others — began observing the holiday with Christmas sermons and hymns. Some church women's groups, capitalizing on the giving theme, began collecting Christmas offerings for foreign missions.

Commercial businesses, some

since mid-century, made the Christmas season a central part of their marketing strategy.

A new congregational and commercial tradition emerged and endured. By the early-20<sup>th</sup> century most Christian denominations enthusiastically celebrated Christmas as a holy day, a commemoration of Jesus' birth. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many Protestant churches had set aside Roman Catholic prejudices and embraced the ancient church tradition of Advent.

The spiritual celebration of Christmas had become so well established in Protestant churches that many began taking offense when some businesses — aware that fewer and fewer Americans identified as Christians in a growing pluralistic nation — increasingly celebrated "Happy Holidays" rather than "Merry Christmas."

Those businesses had declared "a war on Christmas," challenging modern-day Puritans who demanded America be a Christian rather than a secular nation.

## PEACE & HOPE

Today, many Christian congregations celebrate Christmas in yet-evolving ways, including Chrismon trees in the sanctuary and collecting money, food or clothing for needy persons.

Some observe now-traditional practices such as Sunday School parties, Christmas Eve services, and caroling. Christmas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a time of unity and reflection. Christ has come — bringing peace and hope.

Yet too many persons live in poverty, helplessness, pain and despair. Too much violence and too little peace characterize the world.

Transformation is still needed to bring true joy to the world. Therefore, each Christmas season reminds Christians to offer hope to the world through embodying the inclusive and compassionate life and teachings of Jesus.

NFJ

# Christmas calls for our attention & intention

BY AUTUMN LOCKETT

Crisp winter nights sprinkled with twinkling lights... Finding the perfect gifts and wrapping them in shiny paper... Lisper children singing “Thilent Night” at the Christmas Eve service while hopping from foot to foot in anticipation of the next morning...

What fuels the electric whirl of kids at Christmas? Cynics say it is consumerism. But I grew up relishing very meager Christmases.

One year we received emptied plastic butter tubs filled with fruity Chapstick and new mittens, and I remember a warm amber glow washing over the day. I can still smell the crackling cedar logs in our pot-belly stove wafting together with the cherry cola gloss on my lips.

The day was glittering and sacred, with gifts totaling well under 10 dollars.

Religious folks will say it is all about Jesus. Some spurn the worldly Santa Claus, or at least require him to be kneeling at the manger.

Gifts are exchanged, but significant genuflecting must be folded into whatever “keep Christ in Christmas” celebrations they embrace.

Yet kids see straight through it all. Their simple focus on finding the fun, embracing the moment, and soaking in every beam of happiness is heightened each December.

As a new mom, 15 years ago, I fretted about how to make sure Christmas was special for our daughter, Ava. My husband, Josh, and I are both early celebrators.

Once Halloween is over, it is time to jingle all the way. Thanksgiving guests can enjoy our Christmas tree or eat elsewhere. We wanted Ava to feel the same holiday magic.

A hand-painted plate held Santa’s homemade cookies with gobs of buttercream icing. We added a new ornament representing something special from her first year of life, more toys and books



than she needed (especially with a January birthday approaching), five pairs of Christmas pajamas to be worn in rotation during the season, a fabric Nativity set so she could play while learning of Jesus’ birth, three Christmas church dresses (one from each grandma and great-grandma), and a perfect lullaby playlist as we finalized the ideal recipe for creating childhood Christmas magic.

For four years we layered onto the holiday traditions, adding hot cocoa Christmas light road trips, favorite holiday movie viewings, trips to see the actual Santa Claus at NorthPark in Dallas (he’s a child psychologist in the off-season), and visits to multiple relatives while enjoying all the festivities in each home. The Hallmark Channel could have featured our trio in a Christmas special.

One year when Josh was in law school, he had the chance to study international policy in Switzerland. So we headed to Lucerne for the fall semester.

We rode cogwheel trains, saw the first seasonal snowfall on the Alps, ate our weight in chocolate and cheese, and then one day realized it was December and we had not observed even one of our holiday traditions. We felt a void we weren’t sure how to fill.

Ava had the idea of taping together some of Josh’s used law school notes and drawing our own Christmas tree on the blank sides of the papers. The tree was taller than she, and we each added our own flourish.

We proudly put our make-shift tree on the wall of our Swiss flat and Ava drew some presents underneath. Not one of the specially curated, mom-approved Christmas traditions happened that year, but we all three still talk about our magical “Swissmas” spent together.

At the risk of sounding like the reformed Grinch, what if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more?

What makes a modest gift of Chapstick and mittens feel like love? What brings zealots and casual church-attenders together to light candles on Christmas Eve?

I believe it is intention. Christmas is a catalyst to seek out ways to show our love in more demonstrative ways.

Groups join together to serve those in need. We make sacrifices in order to spend more time, money and effort on the people we love.

This intentionality can be exorbitant (What child needs three Christmas dresses?) or humble (like a recycled-notes, crayon-drawn Christmas tree).

The holiday holds space to slow down, to love one another and really mean it. Isn’t that what God did?

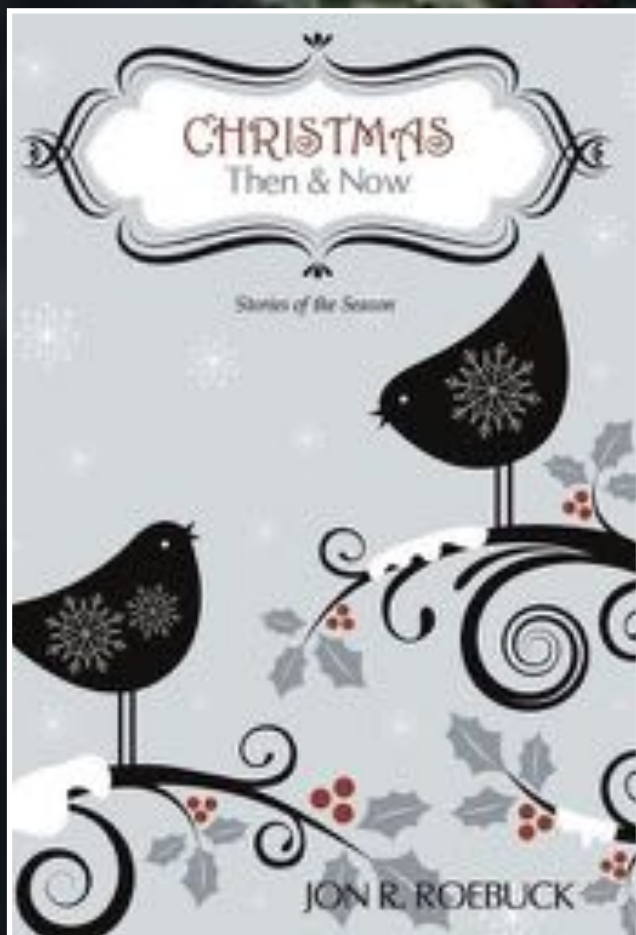
If we are to follow the example set for us, showing love intentionally is the ultimate Christmas tradition.

We’ve all survived three rather dark years. May we allow the intentional love of Christmas this year to overflow into a very hopeful new year. **NFJ**

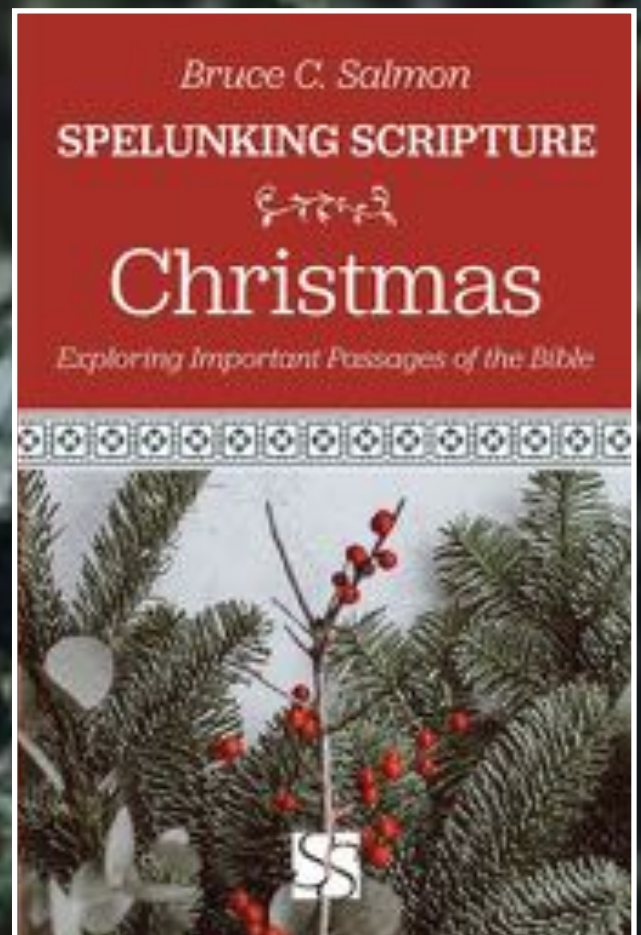
*-Autumn Lockett served as Good Faith Media’s first executive director of development and marketing, and currently directs the admissions office at the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine.*



# Celebrate Christmas with Nurturing Faith Books



*Christmas: Then and Now* is a collection of 25 Christmas stories that author Jon R. Roebuck has written over the past dozen or so years.



In *Spelunking Scripture: Christmas*, author Bruce Salmon digs into the story of Jesus' birth as told in the Gospel of Luke.

Order your copy at [goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore](http://goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore)

# Sermon preparation of the first order

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

When the new *Nurturing Faith Commentary: Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching* became available on August 1, the first order came from Nathan Byrd III, pastor of Milledge Avenue Baptist Church in Athens, Ga.

Covering the various biblical texts identified in the Revised Common Lectionary, this first of 12 volumes of the commentary set covers Advent, Christmas and Epiphany for Year A. The second volume — covering Lent, Easter and Passover for Year A — was released in September.

The insightful commentary set is written by Bible scholar Tony Cartledge, drawing upon decades of preaching, teaching and writing — including more than 11 years as the writer of the weekly *Nurturing Faith Bible Studies* with additional teaching resources.

Byrd's eagerness to get his hands on the first volume — and sign up to receive the remaining ones as they become available — was prompted by his familiarity with Cartledge's scholarly yet applicable approach. Also, he was drawn to the uniqueness of this resource.

"I am on email lists for several lectionary sermon helps, with each one choosing one of the given passages to expound upon," he said. "Cartledge's work is so much better as he expounds on all four texts — the Old Testament text, the Psalm, the Gospel lesson and the text from a New Testament letter."

A longtime campus minister serving in his first pastorate, Byrd said the new *Nurturing Faith* resource is a great aid to preaching.



"Instead of flipping back and forth in my Bible or between all of the various emails, I can just pick up *Nurturing Faith Commentary*, turn to the table of contents and find the chapter with all of the lectionary texts for a given Sunday," he noted. "It is so much more efficient."

Byrd described his sermon preparation as "a weeklong process" that grows out of an ongoing time of deliberation and discernment.

"It has been helpful to be able to look a few months ahead to know where I'm going," he said, "so I can assemble resources and begin thinking about the passages well before it's time to put pen to paper."

Even casually flipping through *Nurturing Faith Commentary*, he said, has prompted ideas for sermon planning for the future.

Planning the basic structure of future worship services and sermons is beneficial to

others also, he noted. "It allows our various teams and committees to get an early start on all of the details that will make the season memorable."

Like most preachers, Byrd draws from a variety of resources when doing sermon preparation and worship planning.

"I regularly go to various commentaries and other resources to pull together sufficient relevant material for my sermons," he said. "It's a long process of finding the core meaning of a passage that speaks to us today while noting the background material and finding a good example or two."

Now that process, he noted, is getting a jump-start.

"The new commentary provides a head start for me in the process," he explained. "Tony has already done the initial work of narrating the history of the lectionary texts, locating several key points, and providing some illustrative material that can be expanded and modified by a local pastor or teacher."

When the entire 12-volume set of *Nurturing Faith Commentary* is completed, a lesson on every possible lectionary text for any Sunday in any given year will be available.

Thanks to a generous gift from Bob and Pat Barker of Fuquay-Varina, N.C., the commentary set is very affordable. The first expansive volumes are being offered at just \$25 each including shipping.

Those choosing the option to purchase the full set as additional volumes become available over the next couple of years can lock in that low pricing between now and Jan. 1, 2023. To learn more or to place an order, visit the *Nurturing Faith* online bookstore at [goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore](http://goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore).

NFJ



**NEW!**

Tony W. Cartledge's

# *Nurturing Faith Commentary:*

*Lectionary Resources for  
Preaching and Teaching*

Scholarly yet applicable, this expansive and insightful resource provides pastors, teachers, and other Bible students with both academic and pastoral insights in approachable language.

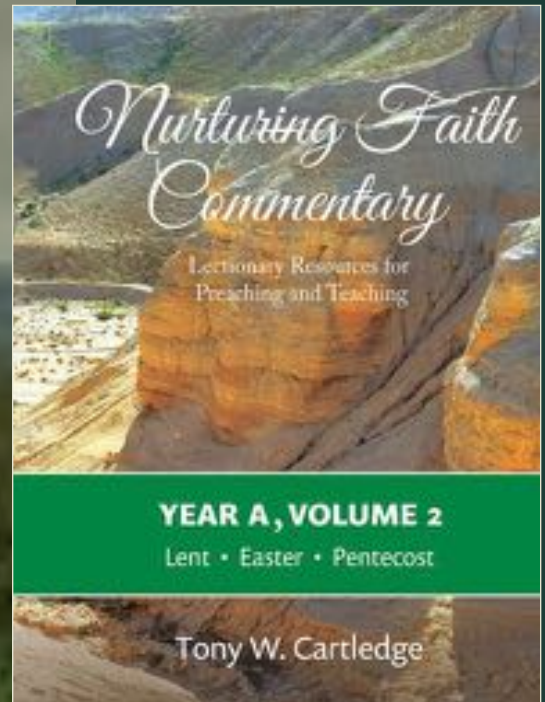
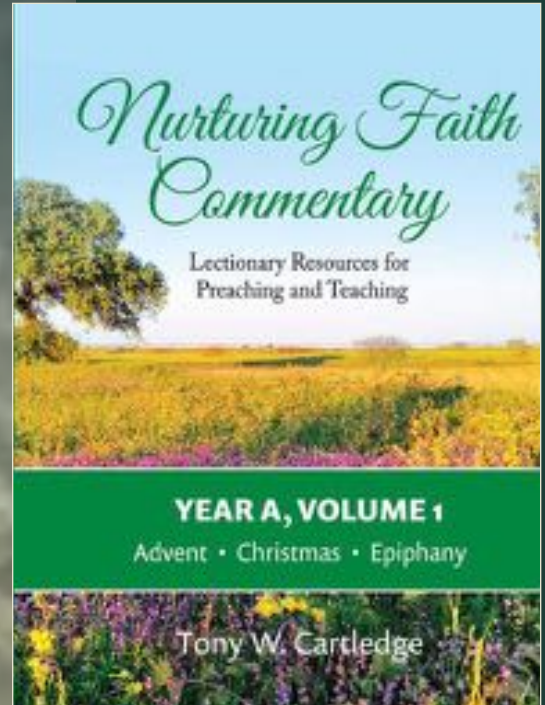


An experienced writer, editor, academician and teacher, **Tony W. Cartledge** is well known for his weekly Bible lessons and teaching/preaching resources that have impacted individuals, classes, and congregations in seeking to learn and apply biblical truths.

## **PROMOTIONAL OFFER**

**Subscribe now and save \$60 on the 12-volume set — a savings equivalent to receiving 2 volumes free!**

**The price for forthcoming volumes may increase depending on future printing costs, so sign up today to secure the entire set for \$25 per volume!**



Learn more at [goodfaithmedia.org/nurturing-faith-commentary](http://goodfaithmedia.org/nurturing-faith-commentary)



# Questions Christians ask scientists

Entering the pearly gates, you may ask God one scientific question: What do you ask?

BY PAUL WALLACE

The question I would put to the Creator, without hesitation, is: “Why quantum mechanics?”



Nearly a century has passed since Erwin Schrödinger proposed his famous equation that ushered in quantum mechanics, or the physics of very small things.

Well, Schrödinger’s equation is famous among physicists, anyway, and it heralded a new and strange understanding of the world.

So new and strange, in fact, was the theory and its implications that Schrödinger himself later remarked in a *New York Times* article (Dec. 26, 2005): “I don’t like it and I’m sorry I ever had anything to do with it.”

What was the great Austrian physicist so worked up about? To answer this question, imagine that you are standing at the end of a pool table with a single billiard ball in your hand.

You place the ball on the table and push it forward so that it bounces off the far cushion, returns to your side, bounces off the near cushion, and returns to the far side and bounces back again, back and forth.

Now make two simple assumptions: (1) The ball moves directly toward and away from you so that it never hits a side cushion. (2) This is a frictionless table, so that once the ball begins moving it won’t stop until you reach down and grab it.

These assumptions are unrealistic, yes, but they only serve to make things simple, so you will see how weird quantum mechanics is. (Ironically, physics deals in unreal, simple idealizations like the frictionless table, but these idealizations are precisely what make physics so useful in the real world.)

And there you stand, watching the ball bounce back and forth and back and forth along its path — toward you, away from you, toward you, away from you, all day long.

Yes, it’s a little boring, but please notice three things: (1) At any given time you can tell me where the ball is and how fast it’s going. (2) The ball can go any speed you like, including no speed at all, depending on how hard you push it. (3) It can have

only one speed: the speed you give it at the beginning.

Again, none of these are interesting points. This is just the way things work.

But what would happen if we made the whole thing smaller, and by smaller, I mean much smaller? What if we shrunk the pool table down to the size of an atom and the ball to the size of a proton?

In that case, quantum mechanics tells us that all three of the boring, unsurprising things listed above are no longer true.

You can no longer know simultaneously where the ball is and how fast it’s moving. If you want to locate the ball precisely, then you lose all information about its speed. And if you want to know its speed, then you lose all information about its location.

You can know the ball’s speed or location, but not both. Knowledge of one comes only at the expense of knowledge of the other.

This loss of information is not a matter of imperfect observations or measuring

**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](mailto:john@goodfaithmedia.org).



devices but is an absolute, in-principle limit built into the world. (For those keeping score at home, this limit is one consequence of something called the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle.)

Additionally, the tiny ball cannot go at any speed you like. Or, perhaps I should put it this way: You can push the ball at any speed you like, but it almost certainly won't have that speed when you measure it. In fact, if you measure it, you will only find certain speeds and no others.

As a simple example, suppose you push the ball at 7 mph, but when you measure it, you find it moving at 5 mph. So, you measure it again and find it again at 5 — and again.

But then you measure it a fourth time and find that now it's moving at 10 mph. To be clear, you never touched it; you just measured its speed, and now it's moving faster. So you check it again and it's back at 5.

Quantum mechanics tells us that only certain values of the speed are available to the ball; perhaps in this case the ball can only have speeds that are multiples of 5 mph. You will never find the speed to be any number other than 5, 10, 15, 20 or 25 mph and so on.

Other speeds are simply prohibited by the physics of the thing. You will never measure its speed to be 9 mph or 27 mph — even if you push it with a speed of 9 mph or 27 mph.

Notice I did not include zero in my list of possible speeds: according to quantum mechanics, it is impossible for the ball to be at rest.

It just can't happen! You can place it on the table at rest, but when you measure its speed, you will never get zero.

Moreover — and this is what got Schrödinger all hot and bothered — the ball can go both 5 mph and 10 mph at the same time, but when you measure it, it's got to pick one of these values.

You will never measure it going 5 mph *and* 10 mph, but you will always measure it going 5 *or* 10. But it really was going both speeds at once before you measured it, and the act of measuring forced it to pick one of its two options.

The ball and table are now behaving in ways that make no sense, and all we ever did was make them small.

To point out the ridiculous nature of this last situation, of the ball going both 5 mph and 10 mph simultaneously, Schrödinger invented a famous thought experiment involving a cat in a box with a vial of poisonous gas.

The vial is rigged to a switch that has a 50/50 chance of flipping over a 24-hour period. (Don't worry about what causes the switch to flip or not flip; just know that it has that 50/50 chance of flipping over a day's time.)

If the switch flips, then the vial opens and the cat dies; if the switch does not flip, the cat remains alive (but perhaps a bit cramped and cranky).

So we put the cat in the box with the vial. We close the lid and start our one-day countdown. The next day we wait and watch nervously as the clock ticks down.

At the instant it hits zero we open the box to discover the fate of the cat. Is it alive or dead? Both scenarios have a 50% chance of being realized.

With fear and trembling we open the box and behold: the cat is alive! (I love cats and I don't like to kill them.)

Return now to the tiny ball and table. Recall that the ball can go both 5 mph and 10 mph at the same time, but when you measure its speed, it snaps into one of these two distinct possibilities. The act of measuring it forces the ball's speed to attain one of its two available values.

Schrodinger said this situation is just as ridiculous as a cat who — with a 50/50 chance of being alive or dead — is in reality both alive and dead until we opened the box to “measure” the state of the cat and found it to be alive.

According to the logic of quantum mechanics, the cat is truly in a mixed state of being both alive and dead until we open the box to look, and when we do this the cat snaps into one of its two available states: alive!

The act of measuring Schrödinger's cat, and not what happened over those 24 hours, seals its fate.

This, of course, makes no sense, and neither Schrödinger nor anyone else believes that any cat has ever been simultaneously dead and alive, inside or outside any box.

But our tiny ball does simultaneously move at 5 mph and 10 mph, and something makes it decide on one value or the other when we measure its speed. Quantum mechanics is just that weird.

This short article barely touches on everything that could be said about the strangeness of quantum physics. But I hope it helps you to see why, if given the chance to ask God just one question about science, it would be: “Why quantum mechanics?”

NFJ

# Inspired Creativity

Faithlab understands the unique communications needs and challenges congregations and non-profits face.

Let us help you share your story in ways that are compelling and in sync with your mission.

**Learn more at [faithlab.com](http://faithlab.com)**

## WEB

Your website is the first place most people visit learn more about your ministries. Faithlab designs highly visual websites that express the quality and relevance of your ministries.

Our flexible page-builder system allows for creative layouts and features that can grow over time as your needs change.

All of our designs are mobile-optimized and are easy to update. Contact Faithlab today for a free consultation.

**Whether you need a website for your church, organization or yourself, Faithlab can help.**

## LOGO

Does your logo reveal your church or organization as current and relevant?

Is your logo recognizable in your community?

From colors to typefaces, your logo influences the appearance of all your communications, including web, newsletters, brochures and more.

Get a fresh, modern logo that expresses the identity of your church or nonprofit.

**Contact Faithlab today to request samples of our logo development work.**

**faithlab**

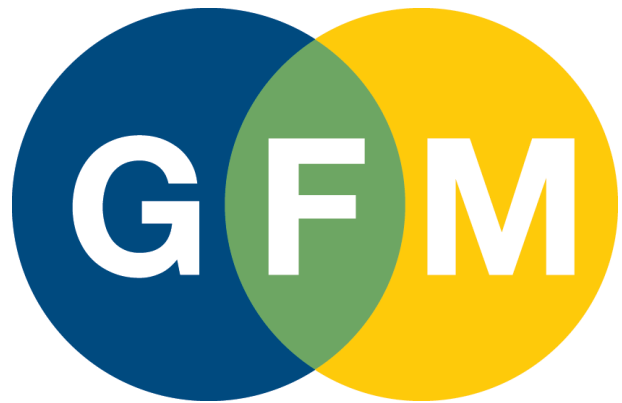
[faithlab.com](http://faithlab.com)



# Freedom is Fragile

At Nurturing Faith, we believe the voices of inclusive people of faith are underrepresented, leaving many feeling isolated. Through Good Faith Media we provide a space for voices to unite and impact the world for good.

We offer an alternative perspective of faith—engaging political, cultural, and societal trends and issues in a constructive manner.



*Will you help support our mission?*

Online: [goodfaithmedia.org/donate](https://goodfaithmedia.org/donate)

By phone: (615) 627-7763

By mail: P.O. Box 721972 Norman, OK 73070

---

Please note: If your gift is made in honor or memory of someone, let us know so we can include that notice in the journal. Reach out to us to discuss ways to support this ministry through monthly giving, estate planning, stocks, and charitable trusts.

Nov/Dec 2022

# Mark Your Calendars!

Two great Good Faith Experiences are being planned for 2023

## ICELAND ADVENTURES JULY 17-24, 2023



Natural wonders aplenty with waterfalls, geysers, hot springs, beaches, crater lake and a Northern Lights boat tour.

## COLORFUL COLORADO SEPTEMBER 16-23, 2023



Includes visits to Rocky Mountain National Park, Estes Park, Breckenridge, Aspen, Great Sand Dunes and more.

Itineraries, reservations and additional information will be posted soon at [goodfaithmedia.org/experiences-and-events/](https://goodfaithmedia.org/experiences-and-events/)