

MARCH-APRIL 2023

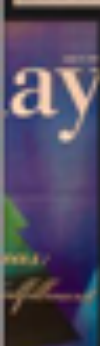
# NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

# 40<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY

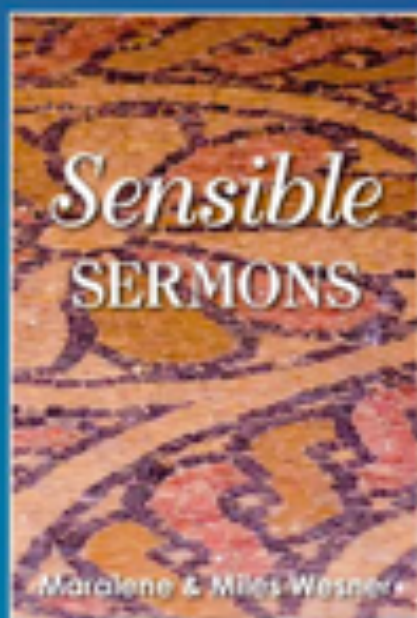
Issue

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# New from **Nurturing Faith** books:

From Miles and  
Maralene Wesner

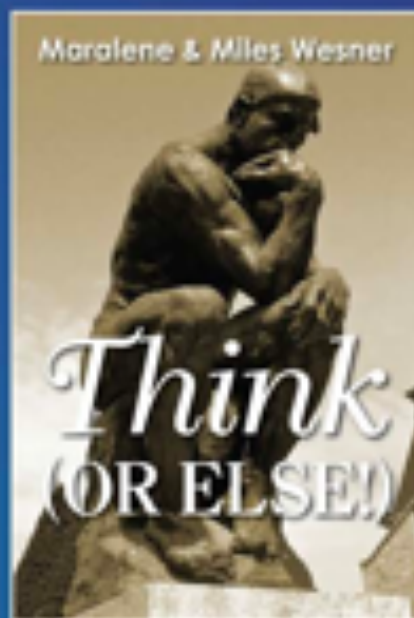


Reflect on the simple,  
commonsense teachings of  
Jesus that are still practical  
and relevant today.



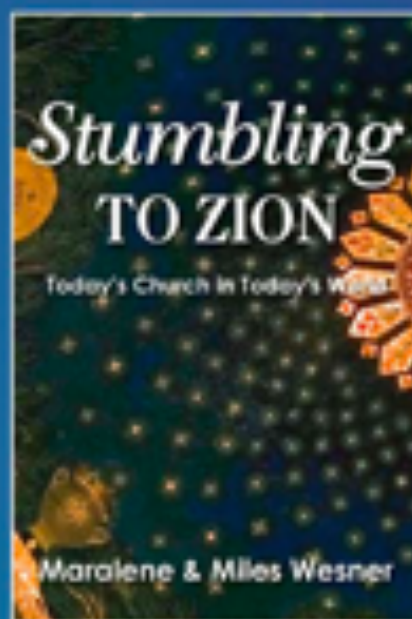
From Wallace W. Horton

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# Editor's Letter

Forty years brings much change. That certainly applies to this publication, which turns 40 with this issue.

The inaugural edition of the forerunning *SBC Today* rolled out in April 1983, through the vision and capable guidance of founding editor Walker Knight and his many helpers.

Both the publication and my relationship with it have changed significantly during those four decades. I was an eager reader for nearly the first half of its existence — and now for 23 years have been the editor.

Standing on the shoulders of Walker Knight, Jack Harwell and so many staff, directors and supporters has made my role possible. I am grateful.

Therefore, this issue will give some attention to its four-decade evolution

including a graphic timeline on page 4 by designer Cally Chisholm.

Bruce Gourley explores the journal's tracking of social issues (p. 8), and I look more closely at how the publication has covered and advocated for women in ministry (p. 10).

There is not space to address every aspect of change noted at this mile marker: from redesigns to book publishing to in-person experiences to the broadening mission of Good Faith Media.

So I want to emphasize two: First, the multitude of persons who've invested talents and resources in this venture are my heroes. Without you and those who preceded us, we simply would not be doing this needed work today.

Second, amid the many and often drastic changes in our world and with this publishing effort, the one consistency throughout the past 40 years has been an unwavering commitment to truth telling.



Having the editorial freedom to speak frankly, even when truth is uncomfortable, is a rare and cherished gift. May it continue to be embraced and appreciated. Read on!

Executive Editor  
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.*

*Nurturing Faith Journal & Bible Studies are a part of Good Faith Media*

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## 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.

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# 40 and counting

By John D. Pierce

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# A JOURNAL'S JOURNEY: 40-YEAR TIMELINE



## 1983

*SBC Today* (now *Nurturing Faith Journal*) premieres in April — thanks to founding Editor Walker L. Knight, Associate Editor Susan Taylor and the many volunteers at Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga.

## 1999

Ballance returns to pastoral ministry with Lex Horton serving as interim editor.

## 2000

John D. Pierce, managing editor of *The Christian Index*, becomes executive editor. Jackie Riley becomes managing editor and, later, senior book editor.

# Baptists Today

## 1991

The publication is re-named *Baptists Today* to reflect its broadened coverage and inclusion.



## 1980s

## 1990s

## 2000s

## 1988

Jack U. Harwell becomes second editor of the autonomous, national newspaper. Walker L. Knight is named publisher.

Pictured: Harwell and Knight



## 1997

Harwell retires and Knight returns as interim editor.

## 1998

Offices relocate to Macon, Ga., with a redesigned format, and a new website with daily news and discussion forum. Bob Ballance begins a one-year “transitional editorship” focused more on congregational resources than denominational strife.



## 2003

*Baptists Today* marks 20 years — expanding its web presence under Online Editor Bruce Gourley.



## 2000

- Brett Younger writes “Lighter Side” columns that become a long-running feature.
- *Baptists Today*'s new look is revealed in September with a focus on Baptists in Texas.
- The inaugural Judson-Rice Award is presented to Jimmy Allen (pictured).





## 2007

- Digital subscriptions are now provided.
- Tony W. Cartledge becomes contributing editor.



## 2016

- The renamed *Nurturing Faith Journal* appears as a redesigned 64-page, colorful magazine published six times per year.
- Paul Wallace begins his “Questions Christians Ask Scientists” column with selected columns now forming a book.



## 2020

- Good Faith Media is formed by combining the resources of Nurturing Faith and EthicsDaily.
- Christopher Adams and Rebekah Gordan serve as GFM's first Ernest C. Hynds Jr. Interns.

## 2008

A North Carolina edition is launched.

## 2013

A 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration is held at First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga.

## 2019

The 100<sup>th</sup> Nurturing Faith book title, Jon Roebuck's *Creating Space*, is published.

## 2023

The March-April issue marks the journal's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary.



## 2010s

### 2011

- Bruce Gourley begins “Baptists and the Civil War: 150 Years Ago” — his first history-based series.
- A redesigned, 44-page, full-color format — including the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony W. Cartledge — premieres in June.

### 2012

The first Nurturing Faith books are published in collaboration with Faithlab.

## 2020s

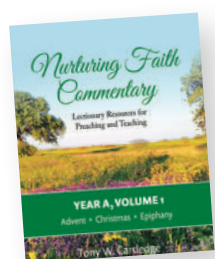


### 2017

An editorial titled “How about a Jesus worldview?” leads to formation of the Jesus Worldview Initiative and related retreats and resources.

### 2022

The first two of 12 volumes of the *Nurturing Faith Commentary: Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching*, by Tony Cartledge, are published.



## 2015

- Bruce Gourley's “Religion and the American Presidents” series begins.
- A tabletop style, commemorative church history of First Baptist Church of Griffin, Ga., is published with others to follow.

## 2021

David and Colleen Burroughs, founders of Passport Camps, receive the 20<sup>th</sup> (and final) Judson-Rice Award.



# WORTH REPEATING

**“Yesterday’s mistakes do not prevent us from embracing today’s opportunities.”**

— Pastor Barry Howard of Atlanta’s Church at Wieuca

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Isa. 41:10, the most searched-for Bible verse online by Ukrainians following their nation’s attack by Russia (RNS)

“What I’ve learned in recent years is to change my default setting from divine absence to divine presence — to assume that every experience I have is a spiritual one.”

Episcopal minister Debie Thomas (*Christian Century*)

“The world is not driven by greed; it’s driven by envy.”

98-year-old investor Charlie Munger (*Daily Journal*)

“Absolutism lacks the grace and genius of Jesus.”

Wesleyan pastor Benjamin Cremer (Twitter)

“You can’t fact-check a person out of hope and purpose [found in all the wrong places].

They’ll resent you even if you’re right.”

Attorney David French, whose warnings to fellow church members about a con man’s costly scheme were rejected (*The Atlantic*)

“You can’t gaslight me; I grew up with everyone telling me the earth was 6,000 years old.”

Scott Barber of Vancouver, B.C. (Twitter)

“Sometimes in the church I fear we duck hard topics and preaching gospel issues because we’re afraid people don’t want to reckon with them.”

Greg Garrett of Baylor University (BNG)

“(I was wrong) about the God I warped into a weapon, a garrison.”

From Eugenia Leigh’s poem “I Was Wrong About So Much” (*The Atlantic*)

“The more I engage with churches across the wide spectrum of the American church landscape, the more convinced I am we need to pay as much attention to our unlearning as to our learning.”

Bill Wilson of the Center for Healthy Congregations (BNG)

“Both the desire to exaggerate crime and the impulse to downplay it undermine constructive attention to a horrific problem.”

Nicholas Dawidoff in his article “Poverty is violent” (*The Atlantic*)

“Christian nationalism often overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation.”

Amanda Tyler of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, testifying before a U.S. House subcommittee (BJC)

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**Austin Conners** of Greenville, S.C., in honor of the Everett Miller Friendship Class of First Baptist Church of Raleigh, N.C.

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

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# Countering “cultural narcissism” in Americanized Christianity

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

The letter “I” appears thrice in the word Christianity. Too often it appears more frequently and is capitalized in the ways many Americanized Christians regard their faith.

Self-victimization defines much of the highly defensive, fear-of-loss, public expressions of Christianity today. Of course, self-focus has long been at the core (no pun intended, Adam and Eve) of that which is at odds with God.

Nashville psychologist Dave Verhaagen, author of *How White Evangelicals Think: The Psychology of White Conservative Christians* (2022, Cascades Books), points to a way of understanding the dynamics at play within such a large portion of white Americanized Christians. It is the psychological concept of “collective narcissism.”

Verhaagen professed his Christian faith as a 7-year-old attending Vacation Bible School. In an interview with *The Tennessean* newspaper, he recalled: “With kindness and compassion at its core, authentic Christian faith rejected worldly power grabs and earthly kingdom-building.”

He added: “I had signed up for a faith that loved others when they were unlovable, showed undeserved mercy, and required dying to self and living for others. I thought that’s what it was about.”

Likewise, many of us were taught to reflect the life and teachings of Jesus only to find those who taught such truths were quick to embrace a starkly contrasting political ideology that they now deem “Christian.”

Verhaagen described the sad reality: “Instead, I found myself as part of a sub-culture that appeared self-centered, angry and unattractive, not only to those outside of it, but to plenty of those with it, including me.”

He believes more voices are needed to counter this tragic and selfish redefinition of Christianity.

“Historians and sociologists have had the best things to say so far,” Verhaagen told the Nashville newspaper. “But there haven’t been strong voices in psychology speaking to what we’re seeing in evangelicalism.”

Verhaagen’s book aims to help fill that gap. He offers a psychology-based framework for understanding the current religious and political phenomena, anchoring it in a diagnosis of “collective narcissism.”

He began by considering questions such as: Why do evangelicals seem to be so susceptible to conspiracy theories? Why do evangelicals rate themselves highly on warmth toward racial minorities, but score high on measures of racist attitudes?

His reflection and research led to the idea of “collective narcissism,” which, he said, has three components:

One, someone who is part of a group perceives that group as being special. Two, they see those outside the group as not recognizing that specialness, and they feel disrespected by that. And, three, they feel justified in being hostile toward those outside the group.

Those of us paying attention to the devolution of Americanized Christianity in recent years have seen these attributes of collective narcissism on full display.

It is not unusual for Christian groups to convey and feel a sense of being privileged insiders — favored by God, right in doctrine and among those destined for heavenly rewards while others are damned. Often there is an esoteric feeling of unlocking the scriptures regarding end times and other matters with only their group in on the secret.

The second characteristic is central to the larger right-wing political ideology that so many Americanized Christians have embraced: not being treated as special, and therefore being offended.

The whole idea of the false notion of a “Christian nation” is to stake claim on a privilege that should not be extended to

all others. When others don’t honor such a claim, there is a resulting sense of disrespect.

A recent copy-and-paste Facebook post shared among many Christians declared: “It’s my turn to be offended.”

White Americanized Christianity is largely focused on the fearful idea that someone is trying to take something away from them. Migration and other aspects of social change (including expanding equality and justice) have those who claim to trust God trying everything possible (regardless of morality) to ensure their political and cultural dominance.

Therefore, the third characteristic is self-granted permission to be hostile toward those who are perceived to be disrespectful and dismissive of white evangelicalism’s sense of specialness. This permits an “end justifies the means” embrace of unethical powerbrokers who promise them favors in exchange for political allegiance.

It allows for turning a blind eye, if not a helping hand, to those who demean vulnerable people and seek to eliminate even through violence anyone or any group considered an outsider and therefore a threat to one’s specialness.

Such a time calls for countering this perception and perversion of Christianity with clear and contrasting words and faithful deeds. It requires being publicly truthful, not just privately concerned.

Until fear, defensiveness, misinformation, hostility and self-absorption are extracted from such expressions of the faith and replaced by inclusion, truthfulness, compassion and sacrifice, we can expect a continuous rejection of what Jesus said and did by those claiming nothing of him but his name and promise of heaven.

Extracting the emphasis on “I” from Christianity removes more than vowels. It right-focuses our faith in the way Jesus called us to live. **NFJ**

# A PROPHETIC VOICE

Guidance through 40 years of cultural/religious wilderness

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Restlessness was thick in the air. A forward march of human rights in the U.S. during the 1950s through the 1970s had not set well with many white Americans outside of large cities.

President Jimmy Carter, while a Southern Baptist and as rural a white southerner as one could be, cast his political lot with the currents of equality and inclusiveness. Yet an inherited recessionary economy sapped much of his forward-looking agenda and sunk his presidency.

Racial, sexual and economic anxieties — fully interwoven by the end of the 1970s — gave rise to the wedding of far-right politics and fundamentalist religion. The birthing of this New Right, a political and cultural movement, reset the nation's course.

## SBC TODAY

Against this backdrop a new publication emerged. Inherently religious in nature, *SBC Today* — founded in 1983 as an independent news journal grounded within a moderate to progressive Baptist framework — documented the fundamentalist takeover of the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

Southern Baptist fundamentalist leaders claimed to be fighting for “biblical inerrancy.” In reality, their make-believe theology — since the ancient biblical text claimed neither to be, nor was, perfect — was but a front for their power-seeking, cultural war ideology.

Throughout the 1980s, white Baptists of the South were — in the words of Baptist historian Walter B. Shurden — engaged in a “struggle for the soul of the Southern



Baptist Convention” between fundamentalists and moderates.

*SBC Today* spoke to conscientious conservatives, moderates and progressives alike — individuals and congregations within the SBC that resisted the culture war within and without the expansive Southern Baptist Convention.

Women's rights, racial justice and peace issues were among the many controversial subjects bisecting religion and culture that the journal covered. In the larger world — as inclusive currents lifted women — *SBC Today* covered the correlative birth and formative years of Baptist Women in Ministry. (See related story on p. 10.)

Embedded within the far-right political ideology that grew throughout the 1980s, fundamentalist Southern Baptists soon won the struggle for control of the SBC, leaving many of its longtime and most supportive participants deeply disappointed and disillusioned.

## THE '90S, BAPTIST SYTLE

These non-fundamentalists, by the turn of the 1990s, channeled their energies and

resources into a rapidly growing network of new organizations and institutions. These included seminaries and denominational-like structures — all grounded in historic Baptist principles of equal religious liberty and freedom of conscience for all.

In response, *SBC Today* rebranded itself as *Baptists Today* and became chronicler and advocate both of a dynamic and rapidly-changing Baptist landscape in the South — including the formation of the denomination-like Cooperative Baptist Fellowship — as well as evolving moderate-progressive Baptist life in the North.

Women stood foremost amid the cultural crosswinds. In households, higher education and the workplace, women made dramatic gains, their power rising higher than ever.

Reported by *Time*, gaps between men and women in education “essentially disappeared for the younger generation,” as noted in 1995 by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Yet “the more women assumed power” in the 1990s, argued journalist and author Allison Yarrow, “the more power was taken from them through a noxious popular culture that celebrated outright hostility toward women and commercialized their sexuality and insecurity.”

In similar fashion, *Baptists Today* in the 1990s focused much attention on the record numbers of seminary-educated Baptist women ascending to positions of leadership in moderate to liberal Baptist congregations.

The publication also reported on the patriarchal Southern Baptist Convention's increasingly hostile edicts attacking women ministers as ungodly. But there was more: a growing number of sexual abuse allegations dogged fundamentalist Southern Baptist leaders and ministers, the allegations decades later numbering in the many hundreds and leading to a denomination-

wide scandal and the downfall of many perpetrators.

## WIDENING CHASM

Far-right, fake-news-fed Christian nationalists of the 1990s — led by Republican-aligned fundamentalist Southern Baptist leaders — sought to make America a Christian nation. Increasingly they embraced the dark, vitriolic language of cultural warfare.

The far right's resistance to gender equality, LGBTQ rights and an inclusive democracy formed the general backdrop of *Baptists Today's* reporting and editorials — chronicling and interpreting the shaping of an alternative, inclusive Baptist ecosystem.

A new millennium — and the publication's third decade — witnessed the further hardening of America's cultural chasm.

Following the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, angry far-right voices across an expanding media landscape took on violent tones: 9/11 led to Islamophobia; Barack Obama's election as the nation's first Black president brought a dramatic rise in racist rhetoric and hate crimes; public momentum for equal treatment of LGBTQ persons generated still more hate; and the extremist anti-abortion movement remained committed to an agenda of placing women's bodies under government control.

In the quest for a so-called Christian nation, far-right religion and politics alike opposed human rights, inclusive democracy and church-state separation.

*Baptists Today* covered the culture war as manifested within Baptist life, reporting on developments, analyzing critical issues, and advocating for Baptists' historical principles of freedom.

---

Limited copies of Gourley's *Baptists Today at 30* remain. To order a copy for \$15, mail a check or money order to:

Good Faith Media  
Attn: Jackie Riley  
151 Broadleaf Dr.  
Macon, GA 31210

## MORE CHANGE

The culture wars waged hotter still into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By now, American Christianity was paying a steep price for its publicly-perceived opposition to truth and inclusivism.

One could no longer deny that Southern Baptists and other conservative white evangelical denominations were in rapid decline due to radicalization and politicization. Yet moderate to progressive denominations and groups also struggled as Americans' interest in religion of any kind waned.

Seeking to reach a larger audience, *Baptists Today* rebranded itself as *Nurturing Faith Journal*, the new name conspicuously lacking denominational distinction on the one hand, and reflective of a need for healthy faith on the other.

Signifying the growing presence of lectionary preaching in moderate to progressive Christian congregations, and acknowledging a dearth of scholarly-informed, honest Sunday School curriculum, the journal (even before its name change) introduced the weekly *Nurturing Faith Bible Studies* written by biblical scholar Tony Cartledge.

With timely, hard news moving online in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century world, the journal shifted from news reporting to its focus on less-dated but highly relevant and unique content.

These writings — including editorials, analysis, feature stories, interviews, special

series, and media reviews — sought (and still seek) to nurture and deepen readers' faith amid a religious, cultural and political environment of division and hurt.

Journal readers were/are increasingly encouraged to accept all persons as created in the image of God and to live faithfully to the life and teachings of Jesus who called his followers to do likewise.

## THE NEED

Voices such as *Nurturing Faith Journal* are needed to clarify, confront and counter unfaithful ideologies arising from America's culture wars that are now reaching an explosive level.

Unprecedented in history, millions of white Christian nationalists have forsaken any remaining vestiges of credibility by loyally following political messiahs who war against truth, Jesus-centric Christianity and inclusive democracy.

Reflecting the heretical theology of Dominionism — the violent conquest of the world in the name of God — many Christian nationalists now covet the authoritarian power to control all others.

Increasingly the pages of *Nurturing Faith Journal* over the past decade have implored Christians to view the world through the compassionate, justice-oriented, inclusive life and teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in the Gospels.

In this the fourth decade of America's now-existential culture war, the damage to American Christianity and democracy is extreme, and both are imperiled. In such challenging times, the need is great for an independent publication and its expanded resources that are responsive, relevant and visionary.

Therefore, on its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, *Nurturing Faith Journal* remains a prophetic voice in the wanderings through a cultural and religious wilderness. *NFJ*

—Bruce Gourley is a public historian and *Nurturing Faith Journal's* managing editor.



# CHANGING TIMES

Journal has traced, advocated for women's equality

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Support of gender equality has been a defining distinction among Baptist groups that reject the hierarchal claim that the Bible limits women to secondary, even submissive, roles in church and society. Seeing evidence of that commitment play out fully within congregational life, however, has often been slow or in some cases still unrealized.

Readers of this newspaper-turned-journal for the past four decades have had a front-row seat to the evolving roles of women ministers in Baptist life. Woven through its pages are numerous accounts of and advocacy for advancements in gender equality.

## IN BETWEEN

A headline on page 2 of the inaugural issue (Vol 1, No. 1, April 1983) proclaimed: “33 take first steps toward group for Baptist women ministers.”

Associate Editor Susan K. Taylor reported on the March 21, 1983 gathering at Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky.

Printed just below that report was a story on Southern Baptist association leaders in Oklahoma City voting overwhelmingly in opposition to churches that ordain women as deacons or ministers.

Two months later, *SBC Today* (as this publication was first known) reported in its June 1983 issue: “Southern Baptist women in ministry took another step toward becoming a permanent organization when they met prior to the 1983 Southern Baptist Convention in Pittsburgh.”

During a Sunday morning worship service at the Pittsburg gathering, Nancy Hastings Sehested, then associate minister at Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., said Baptist women ministers are “living in an in-between time.”



Nancy Hastings Sehested has been both participant in and witness to the struggles for acceptance and equality among Baptist women ministers. She and her husband Ken live in Asheville, N.C., where she served in both chaplaincy and pastoral roles. Photo by John D. Pierce.

The ongoing work of a steering committee that year would lead to the formal creation of what today is known as Baptist Women in Ministry.

## REFLECTIONS

Sehested, who now lives in Asheville, N.C., and has retired from prison chaplaincy and some pastoral roles, reflected on the past 40 years of change in which she was deeply involved — often delivering sermons at the various gatherings.

“I was one of the fortunate women who always found a place to serve in the church,” she said with gratitude.

Sehested was ordained by Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., where she was associate pastor. That congregation is also where this news journal was founded and first housed.

The publication “started during the thick of Southern Baptist conflicts,” Sehested noted.

“The beginning of Southern Baptist Women in Ministry (now BWIM) in 1983 coincided with the beginning year of *SBC Today*,” she said.

“As the editor and founder, Walker Knight listened to us and reported on us. Our voice mattered to him. His voice mattered to us.”

Knight, who worked in the early years with gifted associate editors Susan Taylor and Amy Greene, “offered news and opinion pieces that clearly stated his support for women ministers.”

The October 1983 issue focused heavily on women's roles, including the article, “Women break through SBC pastor barriers,” written by Taylor.

Paula Clayton of North Carolina was quoted as saying: “The problems are not

local. Once people know it's possible, more will hire women. But men are in authority."

Writing editorially, Knight called the rise of women ministers among Baptists a pleasant surprise that might reveal a new "openness to an all-inclusive gospel."

### PASTORAL PIONEER

Sehested set a well-noted example when Prescott Memorial Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., called her as pastor in 1987.

In the October issue that year, Knight editorially commended the calling as "a breakthrough into another level of responsibility for women pastors" — deeming her "a representative of all women as pastors."

The November issue reported that the church was expelled from the Baptist association of churches in Memphis, prompting Sehested to later say she moved to "Mr. Rogers' neighborhood," but wasn't loved "just the way I am."

She was referencing Adrian Rogers, a highly influential fundamentalist pastor in Memphis who would serve as president of the SBC.

After an eight-year, groundbreaking pastorate in Memphis, Sehested moved to western North Carolina where she was one of the founding pastors of Circle of Mercy Congregation in Asheville. Sehested also served as a state prison chaplain for 13 years.

And she has been the pastor of Shekinah Gathering, a house church in Boone, N.C., for 25 years.

Of the earlier years, said Sehested, many of the issues that were swirling around those days were centered on the question of women in leadership in the church.

"We joined other denominational bodies in women's quest for full equality in the church," she said. "For Southern Baptists, the controversy sparked conversations on Baptist issues like the autonomy of the local church, the priesthood of the believer and the interpretation of the Bible."

She added: "*SBC Today* could be counted on to lift up the centrality of these Baptist beliefs."

### AT ISSUE

"I remember a few times when I began a talk with the words, 'Here I am. Here is what an issue looks like,'" said Sehested.

She noted that women have always functioned as leaders in church but often without title or recognition. She recalled Anne Thomas Neil, a retired Southern Baptist missionary, suggesting a boycott of women's ongoing work in the church.

"She thought that if we had a sit-down strike of our work, then people would see that women already held the church together through our work in missions, teaching and leading."

The cover story of the July 1984 issue blared in its headline: "Women blamed for world's sin."

Taylor reported on the SBC resolution that claimed women are to be submissive to men because Eve brought sin into the world.

"The reasoning of the resolution follows very closely to that used to justify slavery, and that used to blame all Jews as Christ killers," wrote Knight in editorial response. "It is difficult to see anything other than prejudice in such reasoning. Southern Baptist women deserve a better fate."

In the November 1984 issue, church historian Bill Leonard wrote: "If there's not grace enough for Eve and her daughters, freeing them for what God calls them to be, there's no grace for any of us."

Looking back, Sehested said there was a belief that if women told the stories of their callings to ministry repeatedly and clearly, then they would be welcomed into all positions within churches.

"Instead we were often maligned and dismissed," she said. "One faction of Southern Baptists used the Bible to restrict us to a role of submission to men in home and church."

"There are plenty of biblical verses to support that belief," she added. "Many of us knew the sting of being called a heretic, or Jezebel, or destroyer of families, or unbiblical."

### CULTURE

For many women, the barrier was more cultural than biblical, said Sehested.

"Churches were slow to hire us partly because of a fear of losing members," she said. "But over the decades there have always been daring churches who have called us to serve in pastoral leadership. It is cause for rejoicing."

This publication in 1985 reported what was then big news, that Janet Fuller, an SBC Home Missions Board-supported campus minister in Connecticut, was ordained to ministry. Yet the November 1986 issue reported that HMB directors voted to not give future financial support to any women pastors.

In the January 1987 cover story on "Women's status in the SBC," then associate editor Michael Tutterow wrote: "Nationally, only about a dozen women serve as senior pastor of a church. The lack of women in the pastorate suggests the pulpit is the last bastion against women."

He quoted Sehested, saying of the resistance or opposition to women ministers: "It's an unusual twist to Baptist policy which says all believers are equal in bearing witness to our faith. It would seem that Baptists would be in the forefront of opening doors to lay and clergy, men and women, to bear witness to their faith from the pulpit."

In April 1987, this publication reported that the upstart Southern Baptist Alliance (now Alliance of Baptists) would fund women pastors serving in mission settings.

The issue also carried a piece by retired seminary professor Dale Moody on "How the Bible views women" — in which he concluded, "Institutionalism and authoritarianism quell the Spirit today."

It was that year, 1987, that Sehested began her Memphis pastorate.

### VISIBILITY

Baptist women ministers and their supporters found their issue raised to new heights when an episode of the popular TV show *Designing Women* took up the cause.

In the June 1988 issue, Carol Younger, then of Paoli, Ind., wrote about the show's script in which a character challenges a Baptist pastor's claims that women can't be ministers.

The minister is portrayed as a caring person with a simple blind spot rather than a raging fundamentalist.

Charlene (played by Jean Smart) says, “I guess the thing that gets me most, Rev. Nunn, is how so many ministers and especially Baptist ministers can be against women being preachers when all our missionary models are women.”

Revealing show creator Linda Bloodworth-Thomason’s insider Southern Baptist knowledge, Charlene asks: “What about Annie Armstrong and Lottie Moon?”

The pastor encourages Charlene to not let their disagreement “undermine your faith in God,” to which she replies: “It’s not my faith in God I’m worried about. It’s my faith in you.”

According to Younger’s article, Bloodworth-Thomason, who wrote and co-produced the episode, did so after reading news accounts of Prescott Memorial being expelled by the Baptist association in Memphis for calling Sehested as pastor.

## UPHILL STRUGGLES

No one tracked the progress of Baptist women ministers more than Sarah Frances Anders, a sociology professor at Louisiana College and an *SBC Today* director. Through letters to the editors of Baptist newspapers, she sought reports on each ordination and ministry calling.

In the May 1989 issue, Anders wrote a column on the “uphill struggles” of women ministers. She traced the history of women’s ordination among Southern Baptists, noting data “suggests an average of 45 to 50 new ordinations each year during the trend toward ultra-conservative controls in the SBC.”

That same issue carried an editorial by Jack U. Harwell, the second editor, affirming: “Here at *SBC Today*, we plan to do all we can to articulate the issue [of women’s equality] in such a way as to uphold the lordship of Jesus and the priesthood of every believer — male and female.”

Two months later, the July 1989 issue reported that four groups — Center for Women in Ministry, Southern Baptist Alliance, SBC Women in Ministry and SBC’s Woman’s Missionary Union —

“have recommended a major strategy to develop long-range plans to strengthen and enlarge the role of women in Southern Baptist Convention life.”

The next year CWIM and SBCWIM would merge to form what is now the independent Baptist Women in Ministry.

## GAINS & LOSSES

“Many of us have been given a place and opportunity to know the grace-filled times of preaching, teaching, dedicating babies, blessing marriages, visiting the sick, feeding the hungry and honoring the dead,” said Sehested recently.

This publication — evolving from *SBC Today* to *Baptists Today* to *Nurturing Faith* — and others, she said, have consistently offered stories of our contributions to the world-wide church.

“It has made our lives of service more normative and not such an anomaly,” she said. “This is cause for celebration.”

Others, however, have had to take their callings elsewhere, she noted.

“We are keenly aware that many women did not have Baptist churches or institutions open to their leadership. Some left to serve in other denominations. Some left the church entirely. Some found positions in colleges and universities. Some found positions as chaplains or in other kinds of ministry.”

“The story of the women who left the church has not been told adequately,” she added. “It is still cause for lament.”

In a July 26, 1991 opinion piece, hospital chaplain Kathy Manis Findley wrote: “My divine call from God hasn’t changed, and neither has my denomination’s attitude about women in ministry. I suppose many people think we’ve made monumental progress. After all, we now have the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship who actually had women preachers at the convocation in Atlanta. But for me, not much has changed.”

Psychotherapist Jo Anna Price of Newport News, Va., wrote in the Feb. 4, 1993 issue: “The changing role of women has opened doors not only for us, but also for our daughters and our granddaughters.

We can model a new way of seeing and doing for our entire society.”

The next month, in a March 4, 1993 article marking 10 years of Baptist Women in Ministry, Betty Winstead McGary reported: “While there were just over 100 ordained Southern Baptist women in ministry in 1983, now there are over 900.”

But some found that ordination — or just being effective in ministry — wasn’t enough.

Church staff minister Rita Ponder of Lyons, Ga., in a June 16, 1994 letter to the editor, lamented that due the SBC opposition to women in ministry, “I am no longer a popular entity, although I have the same calling from God. My job opportunities have diminished greatly in the last few years.”

## POWER

Recalling those years, Sehested deemed it “a time of reckoning.”

“We wondered if our communities who raised us and baptized us would claim us,” she said. “We learned quickly that the whole shebang was about power.”

“Who has power? How is power used and abused? By what authority do we preach and lead? If Baptists believe that all of us are ‘priests’ to each other, what is the role of the ordination of women or men?”

Sehested recalled a denominational leader saying to her dismissively: “Nancy, why don’t you just admit that you women just want power?” She asked if that was the same question he asked of men in ministry.

“Then I confirmed his suspicion and our quest,” she said. “Yes, we certainly did want power, the power to exercise our call within our communities of faith no less than men. We wanted to bear witness to gospel good news with our own unique voice.”

When Sehested asked the pastor whether he affirmed women in pastoral leadership, he responded that it was entirely a local church matter.

“It was not entirely a local church matter,” she said. “The denigration of women in pastoral leadership has its roots in the denigration of all women.”

**33 take first steps toward group for Baptist women ministers**

The newly formed organization, the Southern Baptist Women's Ministry, is set to launch in the fall. The group will be a national organization, with regional and local chapters. The group will be a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization. The group will be a national organization, with regional and local chapters. The group will be a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization.

**SBC TODAY**

**Oklahoma City Baptists oppose women's ordination**

The great Baptist denomination in Oklahoma City has expressed its opposition to the ordination of women as pastors. The denomination has a long history of opposing the ordination of women as pastors. The denomination has a long history of opposing the ordination of women as pastors.

**We are not looking to kick anyone out, but we feel the association must speak**

—Lumsford

The denomination has a long history of opposing the ordination of women as pastors. The denomination has a long history of opposing the ordination of women as pastors. The denomination has a long history of opposing the ordination of women as pastors.

My own cover story in the June 2003 issue of *Baptists Today* — titled “When God called ‘Miss Ruby’” — recapped the pioneering pastoral ministry of Ruby Welsh Wilkins in rural Wadley, Ala.

“I was female, but God knew that before he called me,” she said. “So evidently, that was no determining factor.”

That same issue reported on BWIM celebrating its 20 years of “providing support for the woman whose call from God defines her vocation as that of minister.”

Through the following years, many opinion pieces and feature stories focused on the role of women in ministry and society — with strong advocacy for gender equality.

In an interview in the September 2008 issue, Anne Thomas Neil, the retired missionary and mentor to women ministers, said: “I believe the message of Jesus Christ is that we’re all equal — equally whole, equally responsible, equally valued. I think the church needs all the gifts of all of us to carry out the mission Jesus gave to us.”

In the February 2009 issue, Susan Shaw, author of the book, *God Speaks to Us Too: Southern Baptist Women on Church, Home and Society*, said of interviewing Southern Baptist women:

“They will say they are submissive and that somebody else is the leader. But if they think God has told them to do something, it does not matter what anybody else says. I think this has given them this huge space where they negotiate agency even within the restrictions of the Southern Baptist Convention.”

**MORE TO DO**

As women being called to pastoral roles continues to grow, Meredith Stone, current BWIM leader, consistently calls for a balance of celebration and persistence.

Contributing Editor Tony Cartledge in a December 2010 commentary charged:

“It’s time for moderate Baptists who claim they support women pastors to quit paying lip service to the notion and actually call a woman.”

Pastor Susan Joyce of Antioch Baptist Church in Enfield, N.C., is quoted in an April 2011 feature story saying:

“[Churches] have told us it was OK to knock on their doors, that God has gifted and called women. Now it is time to open the door all the way and let us in.”

In an April 2014 guest commentary, Naomi King Walker, then music and worship pastor at Immanuel Baptist Church in Frankfort, Ky., wrote:

“Qualified, called women ministers permeate every area of Baptist life, yet many still enjoy far fewer opportunities than their male counterparts... Women ministers are building on their past and looking toward a promising future.”

Weaponizing the Bible against women and minorities has a long history within Christian groups, including conservative Baptists. Wrestling with biblical texts has long accompanied the authentic testimonies and obvious gifts of women ministers.

Yet the Bible has more to say than those who seek to isolate a few verses in support of their oppression.

“The quest for a definitive word from the Bible in affirming women in leadership is still persistent in some circles,” said Sehested, who for decades had the poison darts of selective biblical literalism thrown her way.

“Many of us have been inspired to remember women of faith in the Bible like Shiphrah and Puah, Deborah, Esther, Mary, Mary Magdalene and others,” she said.

Yet a double standard is often in place.

“Unlike men in ministry, we needed to point to biblical affirmations for our calling,” she said. “Women were the first proclaimers of Jesus’ resurrection. We have known that we were part of their lineage of proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.”

The Bible, she said, can be used as either a weapon of oppression or an invitation to liberation.

“The most affirming verse truly essential for women in ministry comes from Jesus’ own words: ‘The winds of the Spirit blow where they will’” (John 3:8).

She added: “There is still more life to be known in justice and mercy from those divine winds blowing through the church.”

NFJ

# On death, resurrection and local congregations

By Larry Hovis

Christian faith is founded upon the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In order for Jesus to be raised from the dead, Jesus first had to die.

All human beings die — no exceptions. Christian faith offers the promise that if we are in Christ, when we die, we are raised with him.

As Rom. 6:4 states, “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

But what about churches?

We rarely think about it, but churches are like people. It is a natural part of a congregation’s life cycle to, at some point, cease to exist. To my knowledge, none of the local churches mentioned in the New Testament is operational today.

Though churches die, they can experience resurrection — by being transformed and living “in newness of life.” To take such a path requires courage and faith.

It appears that the next 10 years will be a time of death for some, perhaps many, churches. This is due to the age of the congregation as a body, the age of its members, or the environment in which it operates.

For a congregation to admit this reality is not to concede defeat. Rather it is an act of profound faithfulness.

For many churches, the need to face this prospect will be most evident during a pastoral transition. How can a church know when or how it is time to cease existing in its current form and be transformed to a new expression of ministry?

## FOUR DIMENSIONS

To make this courageous determination, a church must go through a thorough



discernment process, based on four dimensions of church health:

*Mission and Ministry* — Does the church have a strong sense of mission and vision beyond its own survival? Does it have meaningful ministries that

impact not only the congregation but also the community?

*Leadership* — Does the church have strong lay and clergy leadership? If undergoing a pastoral transition, does the church have clear and reasonable expectations for the new pastor?

*Finances* — Is the church financially viable? How many giving units are supporting the church’s ministries? What are their ages?

*Property* — Do the church facilities help or hinder the church’s mission and ministries? What percentage of church resources (financial and personal) are devoted to facility maintenance?

While it’s easy to focus on the second two dimensions — finances and property — the first two are the most important. A healthy bank account and well-maintained physical plant are useless without vision and leadership, including lay leadership.

## PATHWAYS

Once a church has gone through a healthy discernment process, there are at least three general pathways for resurrection:

*Transformation* — The church must develop a new vision for ministry, adapted to the new realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This may require new approaches to staffing, new uses for facilities (possibly removal or renovation of some existing facilities), or new governance and leadership structures. Such radical change is extremely difficult but necessary to ensure a faithful and fruitful future.

*Partnership* — This pathway involves working with one or more churches to craft a more viable and sustainable future. It could involve sharing a pastor with another congregation, merging with another congregation, or seeking the support of an anchor church.

*New Birth* — This pathway is the most radical. It requires that the congregation allow its current institutional form to die in order to be re-born with a completely new form of ministry.

This might involve closing and re-starting with a redefined mission and vision, new leadership, and possibly a new name.

Another possibility would be to remain a non-profit entity but liquidate congregational assets (property, money) and focus on supporting a missional endeavor in keeping with the congregation’s mission.

Another involves a “holy closure” in which the congregation closes, liquidates its assets and donates them to its denomination, a partner ministry or another non-profit.

Any of these “new birth” pathways, to be done in a healthy manner, requires a “hospice pastor” to continue to minister to the congregation during this process and help the members process their grief spiritually and emotionally.

Christian faith teaches that death is not the end. In fact, without death, there can be no resurrection.

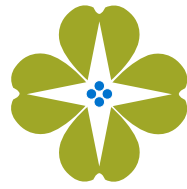
The time has come for churches to face the reality that they will not live forever in their current form, but out of death comes resurrection. Such a posture requires bold faithfulness and courageous leadership.

May God “grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days.” **NFJ**

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



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# Churches and parachurch organizations can work together for God and good

By Scott Harris  
and Amy Sherman

Sally is a church member who tutors kids at a faith-based nonprofit in town. These four — Sally, the kids, the church and the nonprofit organization — represent God’s design for community transformation.

Both the church and the nonprofit play roles in equipping Sally to use her gifts to serve the kids as part of this four-fold partnership story.

John, another church member, serves overseas as a church planter. Again, there are four characters in this story. The church sends John; the mission agency is a vehicle for him to serve; and a far-off people have his gospel witness. All four are enriched by this multi-dimensional partnership.

Partnerships can be wonderful, mutually beneficial, draining, frustrating, catalytic, fuzzy, painful and fruitful. Since God’s people are called to relationships, such healthy ministry partnerships are models of unity, synergy and gospel advance.

Churches often partner with multiple nonprofit ministries. These church/parachurch relationships can be tricky, even dysfunctional. Tensions and mutual disrespect can easily infect such partnerships. Churches may view faith-based nonprofits more as parasites than partners, while those ministries can view churches as “country clubs with crosses.”

In a 1983 paper commissioned by the Lausanne Movement, John Stott lamented that a “spirit of prejudice and mistrust” had developed between church and parachurch organizations. He identified “well over 100 areas of conflict or friction.” Yikes.

Yet healthy partnerships can be a great blessing. A common thread of healthy partnerships is the recognition that con-

gregations and para-church ministries are incomplete without each other.

This is starting ground for healthy, win-win alliances. Church members such as Sally and John need churches and nonprofits to work together to equip them to reach local kids and to plant churches abroad.

If God’s people are to be a people on mission, then we must maximize our God-given partnerships to work effectively together. Positive missional partnerships ...

- recognize the lavish generosity of God and allow that reality to forge joyful confidence rather than a fearful scarcity mindset;
- embody other-centeredness by focusing primarily on the needs and interests of the ultimate beneficiaries of the kingdom activity rather than those of either partner;
- deeply appreciate one another’s giftedness, and respect one another as joint stewards of God’s assets for advancing God’s mission;
- adopt an open-handed posture, letting go of egos and turf;
- embrace a holistic, dynamic, interconnected understanding of missional discipleship.

Here are three common practices in highly effective partnerships:

*Eschew the scarcity mindset:* Missionary Hudson Taylor famously said, “God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s supply.” As pastors equip the saints for ministry, God will call some to serve inside the local congregation and others outside it. Churches must model generosity for their members. Likewise, nonprofit ministry leaders can rejoice not only in their own successes but also in the flourishing of all — seeking to build up and bless their church partners.

*Partner in synergistic disciple-making:* Church and nonprofit leaders share a joint assignment for multi-generational, multiplicative disciple-making. Within church systems, we tend to bifurcate discipleship and mission rather than seeing them as two sides of one coin. Too often “discipleship” unfolds inside the church’s four walls through information-laden classes while “mission” unfolds outside, through serving opportunities in local or global communities — but with little or no reflection on or integration of those experiences. Jesus apprenticed his disciples through teaching *and* missional engagement. Likewise, modern-day disciples need to spend time hearing, reading and discussing — and spend time going and doing.

*Commit to investing in mutual support:* We must put internecine conflicts behind us and demonstrate mutual support and submission. Many are familiar with Ralph Winter’s use of modality and sodality. Neither the modal (the church gathered) nor the sodal (the church sent) is a complete expression of Christ’s body. Each has complementary callings and functions that should be respected and celebrated.

We must forge a new future of strong, hardwearing partnerships between congregations and nonprofit ministries that are sufficient to the enormous challenges we confront in today’s missiological context. Sally and John — and the kids and the wider community — are counting on us to get this right. **NFJ**

—Scott Harris, vice president of church and global engagement at Mission Increase ([mif.org](http://mif.org)), is former missions minister at Brentwood Baptist Church in Tennessee. Amy L. Sherman leads the Sagamore Institute’s Center on Faith in Communities ([sagamoreinstitute.org](http://sagamoreinstitute.org)).

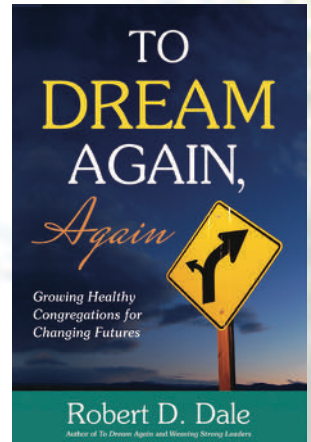
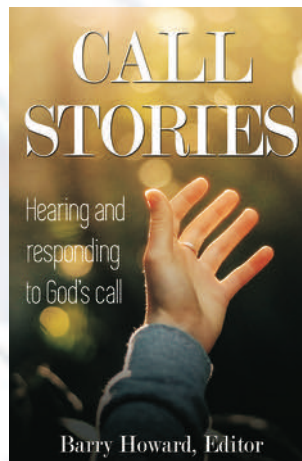
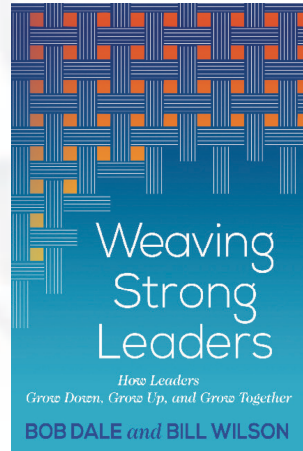
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# Called to paths of liberation

By John R. Franke

**P**salm 23, the psalm of the good shepherd, is one of the most familiar and beloved passages in the Bible. It has provided comfort and strength to Jews and Christians for thousands of years.

The representation of Yahweh as a shepherd has a special resonance in ancient Hebrew culture; Yahweh offers sustenance, guidance and protection.

In much Latin American interpretation, in spite of the prominence of the shepherd motif, the pastoral scene serves only as a background for the main thrust of the passage — namely that Yahweh leads the author (and all those who faithfully follow) in “right paths” or “paths of righteousness.”

In the affirmation that Yahweh leads in “paths of righteousness,” the shepherd image is merely a backdrop to the saving activity of God in Israel’s history, particularly the exodus from Egypt. It is this “saving” event of deliverance from bondage that Israel remembers and celebrates.

Hence, many Latin American interpreters suggest that “paths of liberation” would be a better translation: Yahweh leads us in paths of liberation, releasing us from the bondage of fear and oppression, for the sake of the divine name.

Therefore we do not need to fear even when walking in the darkest valley or in the midst of our enemies, those who oppose the paths of this divine liberation. In this way God is pictured as a generous host and trusted guide who offers security, blessedness and rest in the midst of the challenges of seeking justice on the earth,

These Latin American interpreters read Psalm 23 not simply in an individual way, but also in a collective, communal manner. They would generally prefer the speaker to be a “we” rather than an “I” because the needs, dangers and persecutions to which the psalmist refers are ultimately communal in nature rather than individualistic.

As J. Severino Croatto, a professor of Old Testament in Buenos Aires, affirms: “In our context, the social dimension always lies above the individual. In our context, therefore, the psalm stirs up feelings of solidarity with other people.”

He also notes the necessity of heeding a warning: “Projecting onto Yahweh the security and satisfaction of needs does not eliminate the pressing need for human mediation and means.”

The proclamation of Yahweh as a “good” shepherd also strikes a contrast with Israel’s corrupt shepherds. In Ezek. 34:1-16, the prophet announces God’s judgment of the shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves, but not the people they are called to guide.

They have not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bound up the injured, brought back the strayed, and sought the lost. God is against such so-called shepherds.

Through Ezekiel, Yahweh is judging the shepherds of Israel and calling on them to be conformed to the pattern of Yahweh’s liberating and hospitable shepherding.

This emphasis on liberation in Psalm 23 is in concert with the life and mission of Jesus.

In the inauguration of his public ministry in Luke 4:18-19, Jesus connects his work with the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim



freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

The calling of the church, in keeping with the witness of scripture, is to join with God and Jesus in the struggle for the liberation of humanity from the

forces of oppression and enslavement.

The concrete specificity of these texts, in addition to many others, points beyond common interpretations that imagine the activity of liberation in primarily, or only, a spiritual sense. Embedded in the Hebrew tradition, the call to liberation is to be enacted in the present in such a way that the existing social order is actually changed.

Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutierrez speaks of liberation in three senses — political, cultural and spiritual — all of which are part of the mission of the church.

He asserts that while these are interrelated, they are not the same and none is present without the others. Together they are part of a single, all-encompassing salvific and liberative process that takes root in temporal history.

Gutierrez writes, “We can say that the historical, political liberating event *is* the growth of the kingdom and *is* a salvific event; but it is not *the* coming of the kingdom, not *all* of salvation.”

As the Body of Christ in the world, the church follows the God who leads in “paths of liberation.” The church is called to follow Jesus by participating in the historical and political process of salvation and liberation as an instrument and demonstration of God’s love for the world. **NFJ**

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



# My need for a feminine church

By Starlette Thomas

Since I was 17, I've been facilitating conversations about Christian scriptures. The difference in the weekly Bible study I now lead is that it's all women.

In 2020, I joined a church in Washington, D.C., planning to lay low. Fresh out of an abusive ministry, I needed to assess what had been done, to rest and catch my breath.

I also needed to catch up with myself and on a few conversations with God. There were questions I had meant to ask and hurts I needed to revisit.

My tendency is to just work more rather than work through the issues.

After serving as an associate and interim pastor, while working as a denominational leader too, my faith in Christians was gone. "Let me pray with you" and "God bless you" were triggers now.

I would have never attended seminary if I'd known this is how things would turn out. I should have paid more attention in the class that warned us of "clergy killers."

So, it took some convincing when I was asked to read scripture during a Sunday morning worship service. I figured it was quick and not much could come of it.

Sitting up front meant more eyes were on me, more unwanted attention. I shifted in my seat.

Of course, I could do it. But when I got up, a male minister jumped in front of me. He grabbed the microphone and read the scripture.

My head was spinning. What is going on? Why is this happening to me?

Apparently, in my new member orientation, the leaders had failed to tell me that the church had a misogyny problem. Still, it wasn't my problem, and I had no problem leaving.

After more revealing details of the sad state of things and the benediction,



I bolted to the parking lot and haven't returned for a worship service since.

Later, it was explained as a miscommunication and then a misunderstanding. There were multiple phone calls before one of the men admitted to what was really happening.

The associate ministers were competing for the pulpit, to replace the pastor as soon as he retired. They were treating their weekly program participation as an audition.

Though I was completely unaware and wanted no part of it, I had been added to the list of potential candidates/competitors without my knowledge or consent.

To my dismay, it was all being livestreamed, and a female member saw it. She reached out via social media and asked if I'd be interested in teaching a Bible study.

In protective mode but sure that the male minister would never get the opportunity to treat me like that again, I agreed. Still nursing my wounds and ready to walk away from my calling, I went against what I was feeling.

What began as a four-week study on baptism and the raceless gospel has turned into months of teaching on the early church and the work and witness of the Holy Spirit.

When we started meeting on Monday nights, I was barely speaking to God, and I couldn't pray without crying.

Now, I am convinced that I am not keeping the faith, but the faith is keeping me. There is an unseen hand holding mine even as I have tried to pry my fingers loose.

"I want a feminine church. I want a hen who gathers her chicks under her wings church. I want a woman searching for a lost coin church. I want a persistent widow church, an early rising, resurrection witnessing church, a serving and caring church. I want a feminine church," said Robyn D (@SuprBRDee) on Twitter.

It is one of two tweets in her short thread. But it was exactly what I needed to hear, and I immediately felt seen.

I needed compassion, nurture, and the reassurance that everything would be alright. I needed fellow believers who protected me, who noticed that I was missing and who held me tightly once found.

I needed them to be able to tell when I wasn't feeling like myself. I needed a church that allowed me to hide under a pew until I felt safe enough to come out. I needed a mama bear church that would defend me when I was most vulnerable. I needed a feminine church.

"I want a church that is fierce. I want a church that will fight for the marginalized. I want a church that will wade through a mob to protect the poor. I want a church that will welcome the prodigal. Based on the women I have known, that too would be a feminine church," Robyn concluded.

The women who gather each week remind me that this kind of church is possible. While we are meeting, it would be a good time for some men to learn how to share this call to Christian ministry and the microphone. **NFJ**

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

# Mellow Mushrooms

By Brett Younger

**T**he mushrooms in my yard make me think. The oldest mushroom is 10 inches across and once had yellow, orange, red, and purple concentric circles. The brightly colored photo was taken in the summer, but it looks like spring and fall at the same time. I am glad I have the picture that proves what it once was, because that same mushroom now looks weather-beaten, not nearly so robust — a mousy-looking spore.

Carol thinks the mushrooms should go to make room for green things, and, as always, she has a point. Van Gogh is not famous for his paintings of mushrooms. Mushroom clouds are the worst. Most mushrooms have no morels. Shiitake happens. But I like my mushrooms. Thank you very mush.

Once in a while someone stops and looks at our mushroom patch. I imagine they are trying to decide if they would leave the mushrooms, but maybe they are imagining a mother mushroom singing a lullaby to her baby, “Mush little baby, don’t say a word,” reprimanding the mushroom “You’re in big truffle young lady!” or having a mid-life crisis and buying a spores car.

I have thought about leaving the photo next to the mushrooms with a note that says: “Look at how beautiful it used to be. Isn’t it amazing? We’re giving the little ones time to see what they’ll do,” but I do not, for fear they would think I have sampled the mushrooms.

We could leave a QR code that leads to information on mushrooms. Who wouldn’t be fascinated to learn that 14,000 species of mushrooms have been identified? Mushrooms have been around for millions of years and are essential to the environment for reasons that are not clear on Wikipedia. A few biologists argue that without mushrooms humans

would not exist, but most think we would be fine.

Most of the mushrooms that do not kill you are good for you. Eating mushrooms is like falling in love. You never know if it is the real thing until it is too late.

Mushrooms have a long history of being used for medicine. Minute amounts have been reported to stop migraine headaches. Get well shroom. Some scientists think mushrooms talk to one another, but others think the scientists are tripping.

Many people appreciate mushrooms for their hallucinogenic powers. Oregon and Colorado have decriminalized psychedelic/magic mushrooms. There is research you are unlikely to hear about in Sunday School. R.R. Griffiths published “Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance” in *Psychopharmacology* 187. A double-blind study showed psychedelic mushrooms provide an experience with substantial personal meaning and spiritual significance. One third of the subjects reported ingestion of psychedelic mushrooms was the single most spiritually significant event of their lives.

You may be surprised to learn that mushrooms are not mentioned in scripture. This did not stop Rick Warren from preaching, “When God wants to make a mushroom, he does it overnight; but when God wants to make a giant oak, he takes a hundred years. Great souls are grown through struggles and storms and seasons of suffering.” This sounds like a metaphor Rick thought of on Saturday night.

Robert Farrar Capon may have heard Rick Warren before he preached against using mushrooms as a metaphor: “The world exists, not for what it means but for what it is. The purpose of mushrooms is to be mushrooms. Things are precious



before they are contributory. It is a false piety that walks through creation looking only for lessons which can be applied somewhere else.”

People have strong feelings about mushrooms. Tom Colicchio’s last name sounds like a mushroom, but he’s not a fan: “Mushrooms can be very fancy. It’s the closest you can get to eating dirt.”

John Cage writes: “A meal without mushrooms is like a day without rain.” This sounds like he doesn’t like mushrooms, but it’s possible he really loves rain.

Mushrooms are considered vegetables, but technically they are a member of the fungi kingdom, so despite being sold in the produce section, they are actually not plants at all. Mushrooms are essential to mushroom soup and are a terrible topping for pizza. Mushrooms are low in calories, fat, cholesterol, and sodium, and high in protein, riboflavin and niacin. Mushrooms require little energy and water to grow. More than a million mushrooms can be produced annually in a one-acre space.

John Ford said it for all of us: “I am a mushroom on whom the dew of heaven drops now and then.”

I believe my admiration of mushrooms makes me a fungi. They remind me that there is so much room in my heart. **NFJ**

—Brett Younger is the senior minister of Plymouth Church in 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.

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



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



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# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 5, 2023

Romans 4:1-17

## Lasting Trust

Grace comes hard for many people, unless we are on the receiving end. We may find it hard to forgive people who have offended us, even if the hurt was unintentional. Some people begrudge recipients of social welfare programs for receiving benefits for which they didn't work, even if those persons lack the ability or opportunity to be gainfully employed.

American values tend to respect people who earn their wealth more than those who inherit it or gain it by cheating the system. Perhaps that is one reason why it is so hard for many persons to accept God's offer of *grace*. We want to have a good relationship with God and the hope of eternal life, but we want to earn it by our own works. To think it could be freely given seems like cheating, or too good to be true.

**We earn it!**  
(vv. 1-4)

The mindset that tells us we must merit any reward has an ancient history, as evidenced in Paul's writings. Many of Paul's contemporaries took pride in attempting to earn a righteous standing with God through observing the laws and rituals of Judaism, and some

*For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. (Rom. 4:13)*

early Christians sought a similar path. Paul, however, had come to believe that God's operating premise was one of grace.

In Romans 3, Paul declared that Jesus had revealed the depths of God's free grace toward humankind: "...since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (vv. 23-24). Jesus himself had suggested that nothing brought more joy to God than the opportunity to grant grace to a repentant sinner (Luke 15:7).

Paul was concerned because some believers were convinced that faith was not enough, but that they must continue observing Jewish law. To counteract the inherent legalism in that approach, Paul challenged them to look to the past and consider the foundation of their heritage, not with Moses, but with Abraham.

Even Abraham, the illustrious ancestor of the Hebrews, had been saved by faith and not works, Paul said. Adopting a favorite style of rhetoric, Paul posed a question that his hearers might ask, and then answered it. "What about Abraham?" he asked (v. 1). Shouldn't "Father Abraham" be a prime example of one who was saved through works? After all, Gen. 26:5 claims that God had praised the patriarch, saying: "Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my

laws" – even though the Mosaic law had yet to be given.

Paul insisted that Abraham's faithfulness was not motivated by a desire to earn God's love, but a belief that God had already shown grace to him. Paul recalled Gen. 15:6, where God renewed a promise to make of Abraham a great nation who would become a blessing to all peoples. In response, the narrator said, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Thus, Paul argued, not even Abraham could boast of having earned his relationship with God (v. 2). 🇺

In Paul's mind, Abraham's faithfulness in keeping the law, his good works toward others, and his unquestioning obedience to God's commands were all a reflection of his faith in God – not an attempt to earn God's favor. If Abraham had worked for his reward, he would have earned it (v. 4), but instead he put his trust in God's promise, receiving God's blessing through the medium of God's grace.

**He saves us**  
(vv. 5-8)

Abraham experienced God's grace, but the scriptures portray him as being faithful from the beginning. What about those who are not so righteous as the iconic Abraham? Paul called upon another ancient example of faith and trust – one whose reputation was less sterling.

David was remembered as Israel's greatest king and a man after God's own heart, but David also possessed a dark side. In his most glaring lapse, David not only committed adultery with Bathsheba, but also tried to cover his crime by ordering that her faithful

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husband Uriah be sent to a certain death in battle (2 Samuel 11). Can God's grace also justify sinners (v. 5)?

Paul answered in the affirmative. David repented of his sin, cried out to God in repentance, and experienced God's cleansing grace (v. 6). To illustrate, Paul could have described David's penitent prayer of 2 Samuel 12, but quoted instead from the opening verse of Psalm 32.

Like many others, Psalm 32 was traditionally attributed to David. The psalm expresses the joyful relief of one "whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered," the overwhelming release of "one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin" (vv. 7-8). The remainder of Psalm 32, like the more familiar Psalm 51, suggests that the psalmist experienced God's grace for one simple reason: he acknowledged his guilt and asked for forgiveness. 📖

### **Us means all (vv. 9-17)**

Some of Paul's readers may have brought up the issue that both Abraham and David were Jews: perhaps God's grace is more evident toward them than toward Gentiles. Shouldn't non-Jews have to do something to earn their right to relationship with God (v. 9)? Can the uncircumcised expect the same rights and privileges as those who bear the mark of God's covenant people?

Paul answered the question with another, reprising his initial appeal to Abraham: "Was God's grace shown to Abraham before or after he was circumcised?" The answer can only be *before* – that is, while he was still technically a Gentile (v. 10). Abraham had been born in Mesopotamia and lived much of his life in Haran. According to the stories in Genesis, Abraham was 75 when God called him, but was not circumcised until he had been in Canaan for 24 years. 📖

Paul argued that God's grace toward Abraham clearly predated his circumcision, which was given to Abraham as a "seal" of the righteousness he had had already experienced *by faith* – an outward mark of an inner relationship. Thus, Paul presented Abraham as the father of all believers, circumcised or uncircumcised, who put their trust in God (v. 11). He is the hope of the Gentiles as well as the Jews, the ancestor of all believers – Gentile or Jewish – who follow his example (v. 12). 📖

Paul's argument was not complete. He knew that someone might ask "But what about the law?" If circumcision was irrelevant to receiving grace, Paul argued, then the law was even more so. By Paul's reckoning, Abraham was "regarded as righteous" several years before his own circumcision and hundreds of years before Moses. Paul saw the giving of the law as a guideline for living as people that God has already redeemed, not as the means of entering a relationship with God.

If the law had set up a new means of relating to God by elevating obedience over faith, Paul argued, then the Abrahamic covenant of faith would become void and God's promises to Abraham's descendants would no longer apply (vv. 13-14). But, he claimed, the blessings of keeping the law were overshadowed by the curse of *not* keeping the law (the "wrath" of v. 15) – and it is quite evident that no one can keep the law perfectly.

Thus, Paul contended that a right relationship with God is not based on the conditional covenant of the Mosaic law, but the prior Abrahamic relationship of faith and promise (v. 16a). Otherwise, he argued, we would be hopeless. But, because God still relates to humankind through grace, all people still have the option of finding forgiveness: God's grace is "not only

to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham" (v. 16b). The promise to Abraham was not for the Jews only, Paul insisted, for God had said "I have made you the father of many nations" (v. 17a, citing Gen. 17:5).

Abraham's faith was such that he believed in a God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (v. 17b). God had promised to make Abraham the father of many nations, but he remained childless, even when he was very old and his wife Sarah was long past menopause. Yet, Abraham believed that God could bring life from their aged bodies, which were "as good as dead" (cf. vv. 18-19). When Abraham weighed all the reasons why he could not have children against the promise of God that he could, he chose to believe in God.

As the result of Abraham's faith, he became not only the physical ancestor of the Jewish people, but also the spiritual ancestor of many peoples – of all who follow his example of trusting faith in God.

Today, believers who read this Romans text may find Paul's theological argument to be less than exciting, for Christianity has long accepted the principle of salvation by faith, and Christians don't need analogies based on Abraham to convince us. Even so, we can find in this text a powerful reminder of the influence one person can have. Nearly two millennia after Abraham's era, Paul remembered his example and pointed to him as a model of faith.

What kind of legacy are we leaving for our descendants? Will they remember us as one who trusted in wealth and achievements apart from God, or as one who trusted a promise that goes as far back as Abraham and as far forward as our future hope? **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 12, 2023

Romans 5:1-11

## Hopeful Peace

**D**o you feel proud of yourself? In general terms, I've observed that people who grew up 50–60 years ago were taught to be to be seen and not heard: to take pride in their work, but not to brag or think too highly of themselves. In recent years, more parents have focused on boosting their children's self-esteem, encouraging them to be proud of who they are.

Pride can be important: coaches of organized sports often preach team pride so players will try harder and support the other members of the team. Minority persons rightfully emphasize pride in their heritage or their identity as a way of claiming their place within the larger society.

There are positive aspects to the issue of pride. But there is also a flip side. I remember childhood Sunday School lessons in which we were taught that “pride goeth before a fall” (Prov. 16:18, KJV), and that “the boastful pride of life” is a wicked, worldly thing (1 John 2:16).

Pride, like other human attitudes, can be a mixed blessing. We need a healthy amount of self-esteem regarding who we are and what we do, but we must be careful not to let hubris

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:1)*

overshadow our concern for others and our humility before God.

In today's text, Paul talks about three aspects of Christian faith that are proper causes for pride. Paul speaks of how believers can “boast” of the eternal *hope* they obtain through faith in Christ (vv. 1-2), in the *sufferings* they endure for the sake of Christ (vv. 3-5), and in the Lord who has made possible their *reconciliation* (vv. 6-11).

### Boasting in hope (vv. 1-2)

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith” (v. 1) connects chapter 5 with the previous two chapters, in which Paul had argued that salvation comes through faith, not works. 🇺🇸 Now he moves on to explain how salvation brings peace with God through Christ (v. 1). Anyone could claim faith in God, but Paul believed that salvation came only by faith expressed through Christ, “through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand” (v. 2a).

God's ever-present grace was often featured in the Old Testament narratives. The work of Christ, however, makes God's grace more accessible to all persons. Paul taught that Jesus came into the world for our sakes, that he died for our sins, that he was raised as our example. As we trust in Christ, we can experience forgiveness of our sins, an ongoing relationship with God, and hope for eternity.

Paul reminds us that our free access to God is not because of our good works or high standing, but because of God's grace. God has chosen to save us, and this alone is the key to our standing. Being chosen is a special thing. We take delight in being chosen for a sports team, for an honorary society, for a scholarship, for a job, for membership in an invitation-only club. We have access to God because God *chose* to redeem us through Jesus Christ, and because we have chosen to accept God's gracious invitation.

Because of our new standing with God, we can joyfully “boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (v. 2b). Paul believed that our present life of fellowship with God through the Spirit is just a foretaste of the life that lies ahead, when we will share the glory of God in his fullness.

In *Surprised by God*, James W. Cox related a story about an African-American preacher from Chicago, D.E. King. Someone asked Rev. King why black Christians were always joyful in their worship, even when they faced many difficulties and things were not going well. The pastor explained, “We rejoice in what we are going to have.”

Those of us who mourn for the loss of loved ones can rejoice in the hope of “what we are going to have” as we contemplate a joyful reunion. Those who are oppressed and downtrodden in this world may yet have hope and rejoice “in what we are going to have” in the eternal inheritance prepared for God's children. This hope brings both peace and joy. 🇺🇸

In his commentary on Romans, F.F. Bruce notes that “peace and joy are

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twin blessings of the gospel: as an old preacher put it, ‘Peace is joy resting. Joy is peace dancing.’” We would do well to consider the many ways in which peace and joy are intertwined, and how they both grow from hope.

### Boasting in suffering (vv. 1-4)

Lest his readers be carried away and think of Christian living as a piece of cake, Paul reminds them that suffering may continue. Believers will experience hardship just as other people do, and have no reason to expect anything different. Paul uses the word *thlipsis*, which can refer to tribulation, trouble, hardships, and suffering. The world brings suffering enough for us all, and being Christian does not make us immune. Indeed, there are times when following Christ may even add to our suffering, especially in times of organized persecution or prejudice against people of faith.

Even so, there is a difference in the way Christians approach the issue of suffering. Paul argued that believers could take pride even in suffering, because we know that “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (vv. 3-5). 📖

We can boast in our sufferings because we can see past the present difficulty to the future blessing. Like an athlete who endures the pain and discomfort of training for the hope of improved skills and conditioning, we can accept suffering as an essential step in the development of faithful patience and Christian character.

Through patient endurance, Paul says, we can develop character that has been proved by testing. As a struc-

tural engineer may test potential bridge components by putting them under stress, so our own character is proved and even strengthened through testing.

For Christians, the ultimate outcome of suffering is hope in the future God has prepared for us. Hope will never disappoint us, because it is ever-present. When all else is taken away, we still have hope. Persons who have lost loved ones to death know what it is like to be tested. In times of trauma or loss, it may be hard to have faith, but that is when we discover the incredible power of hope.

Even when we may find it hard to *believe* some things as firmly as we once did, we can *hope* them more than ever. We learn that faith, in a sense, is nothing more than hope with feet on it – hope to the point of commitment. Hope has a power all its own, a power that does not disappoint.

Can you think of a personal experience in which hope has helped you through a period of suffering or trial? Have you been able to share that hope with others?

### Boasting in reconciliation (vv. 6-11)

Paul has argued that hope enables us to deal with suffering and find peace. In vv. 6-11, he focuses on Christ as the source of hope by using four descriptive adjectives to portray our former state of lostness, which has been transformed by the power of Christ: we were *weak*, we were *ungodly*, we were *sinners*, we were *enemies of God*. 📖

“While we were still weak,” Paul says – while we were still living under the world’s pervasive sway, “at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (v. 6). The word *asthenēs* often means “sick,” but can also mean “weak,” or “without influence.” We were weak and unable to save ourselves, Paul

said. Who would want to save us – especially if saving others required one’s own death, and if the people to be saved are not only weak, but also living in opposition to God?

“Christ died for the ungodly,” Paul says. The enormity of that simple statement becomes evident with vv. 7-8. On some rare occasions, we might hear of someone who was willing to die for another person – usually someone who was innocent and worthy of sacrifice on the part of others. The amazing thing about Jesus is that he died for us “while we were still sinners” (v. 8).

Our past experience gives rise to present hope. If Christ has truly justified us through his death on the cross, then we have confidence of a sure salvation (v. 9). According to his custom, Paul speaks of salvation in the future tense (compare Rom. 5:10; 9:27; 10:9, 13; 11:14, 26). When we trust in Christ, we are granted a right standing with God, but the time of ultimate salvation lies in the future. If God loved us enough to reconcile us through Christ’s death “while we were enemies,” then surely God will continue that saving work through Christ’s resurrection life (v. 10). 📖

This gives us abundant cause to boast in our God who reconciles us through Jesus Christ. The word translated as “reconcile” comes from a root word that means “to exchange.” Here, it means “to exchange enmity for friendship.” Wherever “reconcile” or “reconciliation” is used in the New Testament, it is always God who does the reconciling, and humans who are reconciled by virtue of God’s work in Christ. We didn’t (and don’t) deserve the reconciling love of God, but we can certainly take pride in knowing that God has chosen to extend such love to us. NfJ

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 19, 2023

Ephesians 5:8-14

## Shining Fruit

It's mid-March, and those of us who made New Year's resolutions may have given up on them long ago – if we even remember what they were. Was it to lose weight or eat a healthier diet? To be more kind to others? To follow Jesus more closely?

Change is hard. That's one reason the season of Lent can be valuable: it offers a focused opportunity to work on overcoming detrimental behaviors we'd like to get past, and to replace them with positive behaviors that bring goodness into the world.

What a struggle this is! Try as we might, favorite sins keep popping up. Familiar ways of thinking are chemically hard-wired into our brain, and making lifestyle changes is a lifelong task.

The young Christians in Ephesus faced a similar problem, for they came from a largely pagan background, and continued to exhibit many troublesome behaviors.

The impressive city of Ephesus was known for many things, including a thriving industry in producing and marketing images of a goddess known to the Greeks as Artemis (Acts 19:23-41) and to the Romans as Diana. In Greek mythology, Artemis was the sister of Apollo and the daughter of

*For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light ... (Eph. 5:8)*

Zeus. She was known as the goddess of wild nature and of huntsmen, often depicted in the company of mountain and forest nymphs.

Ancient gods were typically ascribed varying characteristics in different regions. The syncretistic version of Artemis worshiped in Ephesus also bore some of the characteristics of Semitic fertility goddesses such as Astarte and Ishtar, or the Phrygian goddess Cybele. While Greek and Roman art depicted Artemis as a beautiful and shapely young woman, Artemis of Ephesus was typically sculpted with her entire torso covered with breasts or breast-shaped appendages. Her cult was so influential that the Ephesians celebrated a month-long festival, called the "Artemesion," in her honor. 📌

It is no wonder that Paul worked so hard to draw his Ephesian readers away from their former religions and toward a new life directed by Christ. Artemis was only one of many gods worshiped in Ephesus, and none of them were associated with morality or ethics in the manner of Christianity.

Today we would be hard-pressed to find modern Christians bowing before a goddess named Artemis, but aren't many of us also devoted to sensuality? The image of Artemis with her many breasts could be an appropriate metaphor for our sex-obsessed society. Paul's message to the Ephesians applies to modern believers, too.

## From darkness to light (v. 8)

Today's text is one of several occasions in which Paul urged the Ephesians to leave their former way of life behind and to behave as Christians. In 4:17-24, Paul had focused on the image of the old and the new: "You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:22-24).

Paul then challenged the believers to speak truth to one another (4:25), to control their anger (4:26-27), to do honest work instead of stealing (4:28-29), to speak positively instead of negatively (4:30), and to overcome bitter wrath with kindness and forgiveness (4:30-32) as imitators of Christ (5:1-2).

The list of behaviors to avoid continued in vv. 3-7. It includes fornication, greed, impurity of any kind, and obscene or vulgar language. Those verses set the stage for today's text, in which Paul continues to contrast the old and new way of life through the metaphor of darkness and light: "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light ..." (v. 8). 📌

The use of darkness and light as theological or philosophical metaphors was common in the ancient world. Paul would have been familiar with the Essenes, who made it a central tenet of their theological system. They thought of themselves as the "sons of

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light,” while all others were the “sons of darkness.”

“Once you were in darkness,” Paul says. Before coming to Christ, the Ephesians had lived the same misguided lives as their neighbors. “But now in the Lord,” he says, “you are light.” Those who follow Christ have come to the “light of the world” (John 8:12), and are called to live in his light (1 John 1:7). God has transferred them from the dominion of darkness to the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13).

As he often does, Paul now moves from the indicative to the imperative. “But now in the Lord, you are light,” Paul says, so “live as children of light.” The word translated as “live” (*peripateō*) literally means “to walk about,” implying that we are to reflect Christ’s light as we go about each day. To walk in the light is to live according to the truth revealed by the light (cf. Matt. 5:16, Phil. 2:15).

If we were to mentally list some of our favorite behaviors, would they be characterized as darkness or light?

### From bad fruit to good (vv. 9-13)

The evidence of walking in the light is this, Paul says: a life filled with those things that are good and right and true (v. 9). The Greek words are all nouns rather than adjectives: goodness and righteousness and truth. They mean just what they say, and they suggest that Paul was especially concerned with issues of morality and ethics. As Paul spoke elsewhere of the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22), these could be called the “fruit of the light.”

Walking in the light is not an automatic response for humans. It is not doing what comes naturally. Therefore, believers must consciously “try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord” (v. 10). “Try to find out” translates a word that means something like “to

prove by testing,” or “to find out from experience.” It takes effort to learn what is pleasing to God, but Paul believed it was also a Christian responsibility (compare Rom. 12:2, 14:8; 2 Cor. 5:9; 1 Thess. 4:1; Col. 3:20).

We do not learn what pleases God by living in isolation or by contemplating abstract ideas, but by fully engaging life and responding to what it brings to us, and doing so every day. As we confront each new situation, Paul would have us to ask the question “Would this please God?” Those who make the effort to raise the right questions are much more likely to make the right responses.

While Paul points out the good fruit of the light in v. 9, he insists that the realm of darkness is inherently “unfruitful,” since darkness leads toward death. Those who learn to do what pleases God will avoid participating in these unfruitful works of darkness, but will work instead to expose them for the shams that they are.

How are we to do this? Preachers sometimes think to “expose the works of darkness” by using the pulpit to criticize practices they judge to be immoral. For this reason, many persons think of the word “preach” as having a negative, judgmental connotation. But do public descriptions of lurid behavior accomplish anything more than feeding our own prurient interest in what we condemn?

Paul said, “it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly” (v. 12). By publicizing the “secret sins” of others, we may add credibility to unhealthy practices, and may even plant the seed of temptation in the minds of our hearers. To the Romans, Paul suggested that even speaking against something could tempt the hearer to try it (7:7-11).

There are times when it is necessary to speak specifically about evil – after all, Paul does it on a number of

occasions – but the best way to expose wickedness is not by highlighting the darkness, but by magnifying the light (v. 13). Those who live in the light reveal by their good example what a pitiful alternative the darkness is.

### From death to life (v. 14)

Paul reminded the Ephesian Christians that they had once lived in darkness, but they had been transformed by the light and brought into its realm. The light of God had the power to not only expose their former wickedness, but also to transform their lives into goodness and light.

Paul then quoted from what may have been a hymn as a reminder of his point:

“Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (v. 14b).

The quotation must have been familiar to Paul’s readers. He introduces it (“Therefore it says”) in the same way he normally introduced Old Testament quotations, but it could not have come from the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps Paul was quoting from a hymn typically used during baptismal services, since Christian baptism symbolized a dying to the old self and rising from the dead to a new way of life. 📌

By using the quotation here, Paul challenges his readers to remember their baptism and to reaffirm their commitment to leaving darkness behind for a new life of walking in the light.

We could profit from taking a few moments to reflect on our own baptism and the challenges it set before us. What does it mean to “die to the old self” and live as a new person in Christ? When we meet someone new, what would they see in us: the darkness of self-oriented living, or the light of Christ?

NFJ

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

March 26, 2023

Romans 8:1-11

## Spiritual Guidance

**D**o you think of yourself as a spiritual person? Whether we find meaning in church or think of ourselves as “spiritual but not religious,” spirituality is a crucial dimension of human life. Seminaries develop programs of spiritual formation. Ministers and laypersons alike may seek trained spiritual directors as life coaches, or attend retreats designed to nurture one’s spiritual life.

We don’t need such help in understanding corporality: we all know the hard pull of hunger for physical gratification through food and drink, sex and play, chilling out and being entertained. It seems only natural for us to focus on desire, idolize our bodies, or obsess over financial security.

The Apostle Paul knew what it was like to be torn between the spirit and the flesh. He devoted considerable discussion in Rom. 7:14–8:5 to the inherent tension between spirit and body, good and evil, aspirations to godliness and the reality of failure.

Where does one find the power to overcome temptation and move beyond? Paul claimed that “the law of the Spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 6:2).

Still, Paul knew that spiritual liberation is not a one-time experi-

*To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (Rom. 8:6)*

ence: we live in our bodies every day of our lives, and we are constantly subject to temptation. 🕒🕒

### Spirit and flesh (vv. 1-6)

Paul began Romans 8 by celebrating the redeeming work of Christ, which has “set you free from sin and death” (vv. 1-2). His premise was that we can find true life in voluntarily submitting our will to the Spirit of Christ, rather than leaving our thoughts to be blown about by worldly whims.

The default mode for humans is to think as our culture thinks. Paul often used the Greek word for “flesh” (*sarx*) to describe the nature of a human without Christ. In this he sets “flesh” and “spirit” against each other as two poles of human experience, not as a separate body and soul. While “of the flesh” can refer in a literal sense to the physical body, Paul more commonly used it in the sense of a person’s determination to trust in self rather than God.

In Paul’s mind, trusting in self can lead only to death. Thus, he wrote “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace (v. 6). The KJV avoids the uncomfortable word “flesh,” substituting the term “carnally minded” (KJV), while *The Message* paraphrases it as “obsession with self.” Maintaining the word “flesh” (NRSV, NIV11, NET2,

NASB20), however, reminds us that our minds are firmly interconnected with our bodies and in touch with our physical desires. 🕒

For Paul, the results of following the way of the flesh or the way of the Spirit are self-evident and the proper choice between them is obvious. It involves choosing between hurtful behaviors that lead to disquiet and death, or helpful actions that promote peace and life. The character and quality of our daily experience, along with our eternal destiny, is determined by the direction in which we set our minds. 🕒

### A mortal mind (vv. 7-8)

The power of the mind is an awesome thing. We are familiar with the significant effects of positive or negative thinking. We may have read articles or heard testimonies of people who credit their health or success to persistent positivity. Doctors know that an optimistic outlook can aid in healing.

We may also have observed persons who enter a downward spiral because of negative thinking. We may have experienced it ourselves. Unhealthy thinking habits can ultimately affect our emotional and physical health. Chronic pessimism can become “hard-wired” into our brains, and it is difficult to overcome.

Behavioral coaches sometimes teach the art of “reframing” by training our minds to think in more positive ways. In Romans, Paul urged believers to reframe their thinking by setting their minds on the Spirit rather than on

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the flesh. This, he believed, was essential for both life and peace.

Having established the basic “flesh vs. spirit” dichotomy in v. 6, Paul elaborated in vv. 7-11. The mind that is “set on the flesh” is hostile to God, Paul said: “it does not submit to God’s law – indeed it cannot” (v. 7). A “fleshly” mind cannot submit to God because it has already submitted to self. As Jesus once said, according to Matthew, no one can serve two masters (Matt. 6:24).

Paul saw nothing but danger in being sold out to the worldly idea that a person can be self-sufficient, that one does not need God. The acclaimed southern writer Flannery O’Conner gave voice to that idea through a crazy, obsessed character named Hazel Motes. At some point in the short story titled “Wise Blood,” someone mentioned the subject of redemption. In response, Hazel sneered, “Any man who owns a good car don’t need redemption.” 🗑️

As long as we think our own efforts can achieve all the security that matters, our mind cannot submit to God or please God (v. 8), because God is not even in the picture. The “mind of the flesh” is, by definition, closed to the mind of God.

### A spiritual mind (vv. 9-11)

Having pointed squarely to the mindset that leads to death, Paul challenged his readers to steer clear of that rocky shoal and anchor their minds firmly in the safe harbor of the Spirit: “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (v. 9a). Those who belong to Christ also possess the Spirit of Christ, he said, and the Spirit of Christ possesses them (v. 9b). Thus, having the Spirit is not a “second blessing” for super-surrendered Christians, but an essential aspect of

what it means to live in relationship with Christ.

Paul spoke of the indwelling Spirit in both present and future terms. He taught that the believer’s new position in the realm of the Spirit comes about through the decision to trust in Christ, and that the Spirit of God continues to indwell the believer: “But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (v. 10).

Note that Paul’s writing makes little distinction between the “Spirit of God,” the “Spirit of Christ,” and “Christ in you.” They appear as equivalent expressions, all referring to the same reality, and suggesting that something approaching a Trinitarian view was present in Paul’s thought.

Scholars have spilled much ink over the meaning of Paul’s assertion that, while “the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.” His arguments acknowledge that everyone, believers included, are still destined for a physical death. For those who chose to “live in the flesh,” that would be the end of the road.

But though our bodies are mortal, the Spirit promises a different outcome. New Testament writers believed that openness to God’s Spirit brings a new kind of life (Rom. 6:4), a fruitful life (Gal. 5:22-23), the abundant life that Christ has promised (John 10:10).

Paul contended that life in the Spirit also has a future component. The Spirit who dwells in us is the same Spirit responsible for raising Jesus from dead. Thus, he said, the Spirit will also raise us, even our mortal bodies, from the dead (v. 11). The Christian belief in resurrection retains a hint of the ancient Jewish belief that the body is somehow connected to the spirit even after death. Though beyond our understanding, Paul argued that our resurrection with Christ will have both a physical and

a spiritual component. As we often affirm in funeral eulogies, “this mortal shall put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:53).

To the Corinthians, Paul described Christ’s resurrection as the “first fruits,” assuring his followers that they would participate in a full and final harvest of life (1 Cor. 15:23); that the Spirit now present will bear fruit in a future resurrection and full participation in the kingdom of God. This assertion brings us back to where we began in v. 6: a mind set on the flesh leads to death, but a mind set on the Spirit leads to life.

Paul effectively uses this promise to remind readers that their thinking should include a future component, even if we cannot know in full what that will be. While we avoid the dilemma of being “so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good,” Christians know there is more to the equation than what feels good at the moment.

Our human side wants to enjoy luxury, leisure, and financial security. We want to feel good, have fun, and experience pleasure. Paul would not suggest that we be fiscally irresponsible or deny every pleasure, but he clearly called upon believers to revamp their priorities. While more money in the bank and a vacation home to call our own might be nice, generosity to the poor and personal involvement in missions might be better.

Salvation involves more than the promise of “pie in the sky,” but God’s promise is nothing to be sneered at. Paul believed we have been promised an eternal home with Jesus, an everlasting experience of joy and peace.

To sacrifice our future hope on the altar of present pleasure is a bad deal – a deal Paul hopes his readers will be wise enough to reject. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 2, 2023

Matthew 21:1-11

## Royal Humility

If you ever stand atop the Mount of Olives, then begin to make your way down what is known as the Palm Sunday Road, you may find it hard to imagine what it would have been like when Jesus rode into Jerusalem. The road is paved now, but still quite narrow. It's treacherously steep as it descends into the Kidron Valley. Walls rise on either side of the road, with a handrail mercifully built into the right side.

On the left, a massive cemetery spreads over the western and southern side of the mountain. Thousands of hopeful Jews are buried there with their feet pointing toward temple mount, expecting to stand up and walk directly to the temple when the Messiah comes. On the right, a small church called Dominus Flevit recalls how Jesus paused to weep over Jerusalem.

Near the foot of the hill, where an occasional car pushes its way up through pedestrian pilgrims and hopeful peddlers, the small Garden of Gethsemane and large Church of All Nations are left of the road, which dead-ends at a busy divided highway preventing any closer approach to the city on foot. It matters little: the Eastern Gate in the wall built by the Ottoman Suleiman has long been sealed up. The original gate would be well below the current ground level.

*Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Matt. 11:5)*

The image of a dusty road and crowds of pilgrims shouting "Hosanna!" seems far away.

### The donkey king (vv. 1-5)

But, it was a lively scene on the last week of Jesus' earthly life, with the crucifixion only six days away. The story begins in a village called Bethphage, a bit closer to Jerusalem than Bethany, where Jesus often lodged with his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Bethany was about a mile and a half from Jerusalem, on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives.

The Mount of Olives itself stands about 100 feet higher than the city, with the deep Kidron Valley between them. People atop the ridgeline, then as now, had an unrivaled view of the impressive Temple Mount and the proud walls of Jerusalem.

As reconstructed by Herod, the Second Temple was so amazing that the Talmud famously said "Whoever has not seen Herod's building has not seen a beautiful building in his life." There was more than beauty to the Temple Mount, however. The northwest corner was home to a tower and fortress called the Antonia, where a contingent of Roman soldiers kept a watchful eye. For anyone who opposed the normal way of doing things, the city bristled with danger.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem despite the hazard, because there were

still things he needed to say and do. One of his actions spoke more loudly than words: he rode a donkey into town. 🐴

And why was this so significant?

The gospels never speak of Jesus riding on anything but a boat before this. They always portray him as walking with his disciples. He ate and slept and sweated in their midst. He sometimes drew apart from them for prayer, but never expected any special privilege. Now, though, Jesus had sent two disciples to fetch a young donkey.

Why would Jesus choose to do this? He knew that in Israel's heritage, royals typically rode donkeys or mules, especially during times of peace. 🐴 As King David neared death and named his son Solomon as his successor, he ordered his officials to "have my son Solomon ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon. There let the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan anoint him king over Israel" (1 Kgs. 1:33-34).

Entering the city on a young donkey was a symbolic way for Jesus to assume a recognized royal persona. As crowds longing for a royal messiah shouted "Hosanna," he heard their plea for deliverance, and finally accepted their praise.

In Roman times, a king or victorious general might parade into a city on a fearsome warhorse or in a chariot pulled by strong steeds, but Jesus chose to ride a humble donkey. Despite the crowd's insistence, he refused to become the military messiah that the people – even some of his disciples – wanted.

Jesus chose a young colt that had not been ridden, which points to the sacred aspect of his journey to Jerusa-

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lem. Only animals that had never been used as beasts of burden could be considered suitable for sacred purposes (Num. 19:2, 1 Sam. 6:7). Jesus came not just a king, but as the divine king. His final entrance to Jerusalem was not a political occasion, but a sacred one. 🇺🇸

### The adoring crowd (vv. 6-9)

Imagine what Jesus' disciples must have been thinking as they stood on the Mount of Olives, looking across the deep divide at the impressive temple complex and city of Jerusalem. As Jesus prepared to climb on the donkey's back, a taut string of excitement must have snapped within them and freed their pent-up hopes.

They knew that Jesus was perfectly capable of walking, and not so uppity as to think he should ride. Jesus never did anything without a purpose, so he must have been saying something. Gradually it dawned on them that Jesus was accepting the title of "king."

The disciples had longed for this, but they may have thought it would never happen. Once they realized what Jesus was doing, however, they did all they could to orchestrate a more royal procession. They draped their cloaks over the donkey's back to make Jesus' seat more comfortable and to make the donkey look more presentable. The road was already crowded with pilgrims, and many of them knew about Jesus, so it was not hard for the disciples to stir up the crowd's excitement.

Soon the road was jammed with people who joined the disciples in laying their cloaks across the path to show honor to Jesus. They broke branches from nearby trees, waved them in the air, and spread them on the road. 🇺🇸

While the cloaks and branches suggested a royal procession, the cheers of the people (v. 9) anticipated more than earthly royalty: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes

in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

The shout was a loose quotation of Ps. 118:25, where "Hosanna" precedes "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Both quotations were used in the liturgy of the Jewish feast of tabernacles, when pilgrims would commonly wave branches in the air and pray for God's help. (See "The Hardest Question" online for more on the meaning of "Hosanna").

The kicker in the people's shout is their identification of Jesus as the "Son of David," the one "who comes in the name of the Lord." Their messianic hope was based on beliefs incorporating various prophecies such as Isa. 11:1, Jer. 30:9, and Ezek. 34:23-24, which pointed toward a Davidic messiah. Its roots grew from God's promise to David that his descendants would always rule (2 Samuel 7). When the kingdom was lost, prophets didn't lose hope, but looked for the coming of a Davidic descendant who would arise and lead Israel from subservience to a place of preeminence among the nations. That would be cause for praise, indeed.

### The unfinished story (vv. 10-11)

As we study this scene, we should remember that the story continues. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people all around took notice. Matthew says "the whole city was stirred and asked 'Who is this?'" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

When we read this story, we must also ask, "Who is this?" More specifically, we ask "Who is Jesus to me?"

The problem with palms is that once branches are cut from the tree, they die. The problem with that first Palm Sunday is that the excitement of

the crowd soon faded, and when the disappointing events of Good Friday rolled around, many of the same voices who had shouted "Hosanna!" on Sunday were likely shouting "Crucify him!" Their love for Jesus was shallow and based entirely on their hope of what exciting things he could do for them.

Many pilgrims would happily follow Jesus on the road to the throne, but not on the road to the cross. They would praise the coming king, but they could not accept the Suffering Servant.

Jesus' ceremonial entrance to Jerusalem was significant in many ways. Jesus knew that the end of his earthly ministry was near. It was time to do what he had come to accomplish. It was now or never. This was Jesus' opportunity to be obedient to the will of God, and to accomplish the purpose set out for him.

It was a day in history that speaks to Christians of every age. Are we so shallow that we will wave palms on one Sunday a year and sing occasional hymns of praise, but refuse to obey the Servant King?

There is a life ahead of us, and a purpose for us. None of us knows just how long our lives will be or how much time we have.

We can't know what the future holds, or how long we will be on this earth. But we can know that we have a purpose in life. We are called to love God and love others with the kind of love that makes a difference. Jesus has challenged us to speak out with words of truth and to reach out with hearts and hands of love.

We are called to do that *now*. Many people hold the ideal of one day being truly faithful to Christ, but not yet.

Serious believers recognize that the time is now. We don't know how many more days there will be. 🇺🇸 NFI

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

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

April 9, 2023

Jeremiah 31:1-6

## *A New Heart and a New Start*

**E**aster generates sharp memories. We might recall a chilly sunrise service where faithful folk gathered in a cemetery to hear the Christ's resurrection proclaimed amid the graves of people who died with the hope of a future resurrection – often with breakfast to follow in the fellowship hall.

We might remember a sanctuary decorated with Easter lilies and worshippers clad in bright Easter clothes. We may recall hearing from the gospels and joyfully singing the old Robert Lowry hymn: “Up from the grave he arose (*he arose!*), with a mighty triumph o’er his foes ...”

We are less likely to remember sermons from Jeremiah, a man who lived through the darkest days of Israel's life, the Old Testament lection for the day. Jeremiah saw the city of Jerusalem burned, the holy temple lying in ashes, and the leading families of Judah marched into exile.

It was a bad time. Yet, Jeremiah also saw through the slaughter and smoke to another day, a day of deliverance, a day when God would call all people back from exile and establish them anew in the sacred precincts of Zion.

Jeremiah's words offered much-needed hope to the bedraggled remnant

*I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. (Jer. 31:3b)*

of Israel and Judah, but what is that to us? We live on the other side of Easter, in a time when God's saving work has stretched far beyond the borders and hopes of a renewed nation for the Hebrews. 🇺

Considering Jeremiah's hopeful words on Easter Sunday reminds us that God's love doesn't give up: the good news Jeremiah offered was ultimately fulfilled in the promise of life in a “new Jerusalem” to all who put their hope and trust in God.

### Hope in distress (v. 1)

Today's text falls within a section of Jeremiah generally known as the “Book of Consolation.” 🇺 After many chapters devoted to scathing predictions of Judah's coming downfall, but before Jeremiah's narration of Jerusalem's destruction (chs. 37–39), we find an unexpected but welcome collection of oracles and prose that offer words of hope.

The oracles were probably uttered after the downfall of Jerusalem, as they address an audience in distress. In the final version of the book of Jeremiah, however, they are set before the narrative description of Jerusalem's destruction. This may have been a purposeful way of indicating that, even before using the Babylonians to mediate punishment upon a sinful people, God already had plans to bring them back from exile.

The lectionary text begins with Jer. 30:1, more properly the closing verse of a previous oracle that began at 30:18: “Thus says the LORD: I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, and have compassion on his dwellings; the city shall be rebuilt upon its mound, and the citadel set on its rightful site.”

The hopeful oracle included a divine promise that “you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (30:22). This recalls a much older pledge to the Hebrews who lived in Egyptian captivity: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God” (Exod. 6:7). The promise was repeated in Lev. 26:12: “And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you will be my people.” Jeremiah had echoed the same theme in 24:7.

The repeated formula evoked memories of the covenant between God and Israel, one in which God promised to bless the people with material provision and protection from enemies, and the people promised to serve only God and to be obedient. The negative side of the covenant was that God also promised curses if the people looked to other gods and became disobedient. Jeremiah was one of many who believed the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had been defeated and their people exiled precisely because they had trusted in other gods.

But Jeremiah saw past the punishment to a day of forgiveness and restoration, when once again God would say “I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people” (31:1). The emphasis on “all the families of Israel” pointedly includes people from the northern kingdom, called “Israel,” who had

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fallen to the Assyrians long before, in 722 BCE. The northern tribes had become so scattered and intermingled with other people as to become nearly invisible, but God had not forgotten them.

### Grace in the wilderness (vv. 2-3)

With v. 2, Jeremiah begins a new oracle, marked by the typical messenger formula “Thus says the LORD.” The prophecy begins with a declaration of God’s everlasting love (vv. 2-3), and concludes with three promises that would lead to future joy.

As v. 1 called to mind God’s promise to Israel in Egypt, vv. 2-3 recall God’s faithfulness to Israel as the people traveled through the dangerous wilderness on their long trek to the land of promise.

“The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness,” said the prophet (v. 2a). After escaping from the Egyptian army (Exod. 14:15-30), the Israelites had to fend off an attack by Amalekites (Exod. 17:13-18). Later, they were ambushed by both Amalekites and Canaanites (Num. 14:41-45) before prevailing against the Canaanite king of Arad (Num. 21:1-3).

The historical memory of Israel’s deliverance in the wilderness was designed to remind Hebrews who suffered under Assyrian or Babylonian rule that God had delivered Israel before, and God had not forgotten them. It may have seemed to them that God had become distant, but “when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from far away” (vv. 2b-3a), declaring “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you” (v. 3b). 🇺

God’s love for Israel had persevered from the call of Abraham through the wilderness wandering, the years of the monarchy, and into the exile. Jeremiah,

like Hosea, believed that Yahweh loved Israel too deeply to let them go (Hos. 11:8). Jeremiah could not have known it, but that same abiding love would see its crowning fulfillment on a Sunday morning just outside Jerusalem, when God’s manifestation on earth – Jesus – rose from the dead in victory over sin and death.

### Joy in Jerusalem (vv. 4-6)

Jeremiah’s oracle related to something more tangible for Israel: a return from exile, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and a renewed flourishing in the land. The prophets believed that Israel’s exile was due to years of unfaithfulness and worshiping other gods, so the people were hardly innocent, yet Yahweh would renew them as a virgin maiden going out to celebrate a time of victory and joy: “Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers” (v. 4).

The construction of buildings would be matched by a restoration of fruitful agriculture to the land: “Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit” (v. 5).

Jeremiah’s inclusion of “the mountains of Samaria” is significant: Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom, which had been defeated more than a hundred years earlier. Jeremiah saw a day when all of Israel would be restored, including the northern tribes. The image of planting vineyards and enjoying the fruit envisions a time of peace that would allow time for planting and cultivating the vines, with adequate time for them to mature and produce fruit.

The northern kingdom again comes into play with v. 6. When Israel split from Judah after Solomon’s death, the

new king Jeroboam built rival temples at Dan and Bethel so the northern tribes would no longer venture to Jerusalem for worship. Jeremiah saw a day when such divisions would end, and all the families of Israel would again worship in Jerusalem. The heartland of the northern kingdom had been the hill country populated by the leading tribe of Ephraim. Jeremiah saw a time when the schism would be erased and the tribes reunited, “when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: ‘Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God’” (v. 6).

The people of Judah did return from exile, though they were limited to a small area around Jerusalem under Persian rule. Eventually, Alexander the Great conquered the Persians but died soon thereafter, leaving Palestine and its diverse population to be torn between Egyptian (Ptolemaic) and Syrian (Seleucid) rule. In 165 BCE, a Jewish family known as the Hasmoneans led a rebellion that threw off the Seleucids and regained independence for about a century, but infighting led to internal weakness and the land came under Roman occupation.

Jeremiah’s beautiful vision still awaits fulfillment – the same eschatological promise for which Christians also hope: a day when all people will be drawn to a new Jerusalem to live in harmony and service to a God whose love is everlasting and whose faithfulness will not let go.

The celebration of Easter reminds us, more clearly than any prophecy, of the extent to which God has been willing to go in our behalf. In Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, God’s love has reached from heaven to earth and back again, bringing hope that all people may join in singing praise to the Lord whose steadfast love never fails.

NFJ

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 16, 2023

Acts 2:14-36

## *Making Sense of It All*

**D**o you ever sit and ponder questions for which you have no answers? I can remember, as a boy no more than 10, trying to get my head around the origin of the universe. I wondered, in a double-negative enhanced Southern brogue that penetrated even my thinking, “What was there before there wasn’t nothing?” You may recall similar thoughts.

Some questions have no easy answers. The book of Acts recounts a memorable occurrence in Jerusalem nearly two millennia ago, when a mass of people gathered in a public square. They were asking questions about something they could see, and something they could not see. Word had spread that the followers of Jesus, who had gone underground after his crucifixion, were suddenly out in public. They were preaching strange new ideas about Jesus, and they were doing it in every language spoken in that part of the world.

What was going on? Who could explain this amazing transformation of Jesus’ followers?

### *What you have seen . . .*

(vv. 14-15)

The lectionary’s first readings for the Sundays from Easter to Pentecost in Year A bypass the Old Testament and

*This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. (Acts 2:32)*

come from the book of Acts. The second, third, and fourth Sundays offer excerpts from the post-Pentecost section of Acts 2 in highlighting the earliest days of the emerging Christian movement. The text for today introduces Peter as the speaker in v. 14a, then skips to a latter part of his sermon (vv. 22-32), but stops short of the end. Considering all of vv. 14-36 will enhance our study. 🇺🇸

Peter was generally the most outspoken of the disciples, so it would not have been surprising that he would become the movement’s most prominent spokesperson. On the day of his initial sermon, the streets would have been filled, not only with Jerusalem’s normal inhabitants, but also with thousands of Jewish pilgrims who had come for the Festival of Pentecost.

The Spirit-infused disciples caused quite a stir as they emerged from hiding to speak with boldness in a variety of languages that may have sounded like babbling to others. What could have inspired it? Some accused them of being full of wine.

So it was that Peter stood up before a large crowd of people and shouted “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning” (vv. 14-15).

Wine was generally consumed with the evening meal: the newly loquacious believers were not inebriated by distilled or fermented spirits; they were drunk on the Holy Spirit.

### *And furthermore ... (vv. 29-36)*

Peter spoke as if his listeners should not be surprised at what they saw. He described this miraculous movement of the spirit as nothing more than the fulfillment of a prophecy from Joel, who predicted a time when God’s Spirit would be poured out on all people, so that “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy” (vv. 16-18, Joel 2:28-29).

Peter reminded the crowd that Joel had spoken of this happening on “the Lord’s great and glorious day,” when cosmic portents would darken the sun and turn the moon to blood, signs in heaven and on the earth not unlike the three hours of darkness that Mark and Matthew described in conjunction with the crucifixion (vv. 19-20; cf. Joel 2:30-31, Mark 15:33, Matt. 27:45).

The result, Peter said, again citing Joel, was that “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved” (v. 21, Joel 2:32). Joel had anticipated a cosmic cataclysm and would not have recognized Peter’s reinterpretation of his words, but the early church saw enough of a similarity to believe the prophecy had been fulfilled in ways that Joel had not expected.

### *What really happened . . . (vv. 22-28)*

Knowing that the crowd consisted mainly of Hebrew people, Peter attempted to explain the complex relationship between Jesus and the Jews.

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Addressing the “men of Israel,” Peter said Jesus had been “attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know ...” (v. 22). Jesus was known to them, his reputation was known, and the account of his death was known.

Peter’s next words contained elements of both blame and absolution. He accused the Jews of crucifying and killing Jesus “by the hands of those outside the law,” but also said that Jesus had been “handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (v. 23). It was as if he was saying they were guilty, but not at fault, because Jesus’ death had been part of God’s plan.

That was not all of God’s plan, however: “But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power” (v. 24). The NRSV glosses over a significant word: God did not just deliver Jesus from death, but from “the pains of death” (*ōdinas tou thanatou*). The Greek word translated “pains” typically refers to “birth pangs.” If this was what Peter had in mind, the pain of Christ’s death was akin to the pain associated with being born into new life through the resurrection.

Peter then shifted to a psalm that he upheld as a prophecy from David. He quotes from the LXX version of Psalm 16, whose superscription associates it with David, applying the psalmist’s testimony that God’s presence had saved him from death and applying it to Jesus (vv. 25-28, Ps. 16:8-11).

In the quotation, Peter cites David as confidently rejoicing in God and living in hope, saying “You will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption” (v. 27, a very loose translation of Ps. 16:10).

Some rabbis had also interpreted Psalm 16 as support for the hope of resurrection: the church took the interpretation further.

### And furthermore ... (vv. 29-36)

While Peter spoke of David as both a prophet and the author of psalms associated with him, modern scholars are much more skeptical regarding the accuracy of editorial superscriptions later attached to the psalms. ↓

But Peter was a child of his own time, and not of ours. Like other Jews of the day, he assumed not only that David had written the psalms associated with him, but also that David had the gift of prophecy, giving such psalms the authority of prophetic oracles.

With regard to Ps. 16:8-11, Peter declared that David himself was obviously dead and buried, but since God had promised to put one of his descendants on the throne (an allusion to 2 Sam. 7:12-13 and Ps. 132:11), he must have been predicting the resurrection of the Messiah when he said “you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption” (vv. 27, 31, adapted from Ps. 16:10).

Modern exegetes would consider such logic to be an overly large interpretive jump, but it was fully in line with rabbinic exegesis that looked for deeper meanings in a text, even if not intended by the original author. Thus, Peter felt confident in concluding that David had predicted Jesus’ resurrection (v. 32).

As if that were not enough, Peter also claimed that David had predicted Christ’s ascension to heaven. Jesus had been raised to the right hand of God, he said, and had poured out the promised Spirit that was manifested in what “you both see and hear” (v. 33). David himself had not “ascended

to heaven,” Peter said, yet he wrote “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’” (vv. 34-35), a quotation from Ps. 110:1. Such words could only apply to Jesus, Peter insisted, who had now been exalted to his heavenly throne as the Christ, the anointed one, Israel’s Messiah and Lord. ↓

For Peter, and for the early church, the quotation was further evidence that David had foreseen the coming of Christ as the promised descendant who would sit on a throne at God’s right hand.

Like a modern student of apologetics who seeks to prove the truth of the gospel, Peter believed he had built a case for Jesus that any Jew would find convincing: “Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (v. 36).

For Peter, the texts he interpreted as prophecies were enough to affirm with certainty that Jesus was who they claimed him to be: *asphalōs* means “safely,” or “assuredly.” And his words must have been convincing, for Luke reports that more than 3,000 people sought baptism that day (vv. 37-42). Others were not so sure.

Peter will always be remembered as the first follower of Jesus to preach an evangelistic sermon, with results any proclaimer could envy. Today, when we express our belief that Jesus Christ was the Son of God who came to earth and died and rose again as a part of God’s eternal plan, we are echoing the same basic gospel that Peter and his friends first declared so many years ago. We may not rely as heavily on rabbinic exegesis, but the essential message remains the same: Jesus is Lord. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 23, 2023

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

## An Evangelistic Explosion

Can you remember a time when you “came under conviction” that something needed to change? Perhaps it was when you first accepted Christ and made a decision to unite with a church fellowship. Maybe it was at a time when your life had gone off track and you knew something had to give.

Paul spoke of such a feeling as being “cut to the heart.” The lectionary devotes three weeks to readings from post-Pentecost events in Acts 2. The first focused on Peter’s sermon to those gathered to see what was going as the Spirit-infused disciples began to proclaim the gospel in surprising ways. In today’s lection, the sermon continues and bears fruit.

Peter elaborated on the gospel as a fulfillment of prophecies from Joel and the psalms. Taking David as the author of several psalms, he argued that David had foreseen not only the coming of the Messiah, but he had also predicted the resurrection.

## A charge and a question (vv. 36-37)

Peter pointed his sermon toward a stirring challenge to Jews who were present: “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (v. 36). *Koine* Greek didn’t use much punctuation, but we can guess that an

*Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)*

exclamation point would have been justified.

Peter charged Jewish leaders with engineering Jesus’ death at the hands of the Romans, while at the same time portraying the act as part of God’s plan. We must be careful not to let this lead us into anti-Semitic attitudes, as if modern Jews are somehow responsible for the actions of a few very frightened religious leaders two millennia ago.

We remember that Peter was speaking as one Jew to another. He addressed them as “Fellow Israelites” (v. 29). He knew that he himself had denied Jesus three times. There was plenty of guilt to go around – but there was forgiveness also.

Peter’s message was sufficiently compelling to bring conviction. “They were cut to the heart,” Luke says, and asked, “Brothers, what should we do?” (v. 37).

The expression “cut to the heart” or “pierced to the heart” was an obvious idiom referring to severe emotional distress: we could say they were stunned, dumbfounded, thunderstruck. The Greek reflects this in the address of their question, which is obscured in most translations. They didn’t just say “What should we do, brothers?” The word for “brothers” (*adelphoi*) is preceded by a word meaning “men” (*andres*). It’s as if they were testing whether their relationship as fellow

Jews still held: “What should we do, men ... brothers?”

Peter’s audience had come to understand that his defense was more than an explanation of why so many followers of Jesus were on the street testifying in languages they didn’t know the day before. What Peter was saying mattered. 🇺🇸

The people in the crowd realized that what Peter was saying about Jesus’ death and resurrection as the fulfillment of their longstanding Hebrew hopes called for a personal response.

Peter’s concluding challenge sounded like an accusation, but they heard it as an invitation to learn more and to take action, so they not only asked, but asked with urgency: “What should we do?”

## An act and a promise (v. 38)

So Peter told them: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

*Repent.* That’s where it begins, with repentance, with recognizing that we’ve been going in the wrong direction, and we need to change course. Repentance is more than saying, “I’m sorry.” Repenting is not apologizing. To repent is to turn around. To repent is to leave the old way of life behind and begin anew. Repenting may involve words, but it is mainly about action.

“Repent and be baptized,” Peter said. To be baptized was to make a public declaration of one’s faith and

one's intentions. To be baptized was to mark the end of one path and the beginning of another.

We don't know by what method Peter and the others performed baptisms, but the practice of immersion offers the clearest symbol of what baptism signifies. As Paul later explained it, we go into the water and bury the old self, then rise from the water as a new person committed to a new life (Rom. 6:3-14).

Most people in the crowd probably knew about John the baptizer. Some may have heard him preach and knew about his call for people to repent and be baptized. They may even have heard him declare that, while he baptized with water, another was coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8, Matt. 3:11, Luke 3:16).

Now they heard Peter calling them to repent, be baptized, be forgiven, and receive the Holy Spirit.

Forgiveness we understand: Peter promised that those who repented and were baptized would have their sins forgiven. But what did he mean by "and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"? Was he suggesting that they would also speak in tongues, as they had witnessed among those who emerged from the upper room early that morning (vv. 5-13)? Was he promising that they would receive the "gifts of the Spirit" that Paul later talked about (1 Cor. 12:4-12, 27-31)? Or was it a more generic promise that the Spirit of Christ would be the effective agent in cleansing them of sin?

Some scholars have argued that Peter was pointing to a needed progression of repentance leading to baptism, with the coming of the Spirit as a "second blessing" – but when Peter later preached to a group of Gentiles in Caesarea, they received the Spirit *before* they were baptized (Acts 10:44-48).

We needn't worry too much about such things: Peter was not laying out a precise doctrinal course of action, but relaying the good news that forgiveness, salvation, and the Spirit were available to all who repented and sought baptism as a mark of their faith.

### A sizeable response (vv. 39-41)

Some commentators have interpreted Peter's following statement as an endorsement of infant baptism: "For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (v. 39).

The early reformers, despite their break with the Catholic church, retained the practice of infant baptism, in part due to this verse, since Peter said "the promise is for you and for your children." Again, we must note that Peter was not teaching doctrine, but preaching good news. The point of this verse is that the gospel was not only for the Jews who heard Peter that day, but also for their descendants, *and* for all who were far away. While this may include a reference to Gentiles, Peter probably had in mind the Jewish diaspora: by the first century, Jewish people were scattered across the known world. 📌

Peter would later come to the certain conviction that the gospel was for Gentiles when he visited Cornelius in Caesarea and declared what he had learned: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35).

We shouldn't write off the possibility that Peter (or at least Luke, who wrote the story), was including Gentiles in the promised opportunity to repent, be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit. The promise, he said, was

available to "everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." That sounds like a promise to all peoples.

Yet again, we must be careful not to read too much doctrine into Peter's statement. Those who hold a firm doctrine of predestination and believe that only the "elect" can be saved have used this verse to argue that God calls certain people but not others. That does not appear to be Peter's intent. He himself still had much to learn, but he had caught the vision that the good news was for everyone.

Peter had not only gained this new understanding, but he also had become passionate about it. This was not the end of his sermon or of his appeal, for he apparently went on for some time: "And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation'" (v. 40). 📌

The verb for "testified" suggests a solemn witness before God. The verb for "exhorted" (*parakaleō*) literally means "call to one's side," and could be used in the sense of comforting, but here it has the sense of urging, admonishing, or pleading. It's in the imperfect tense, indicating a continual act.

The "corrupt generation" Peter warned against was not limited to the Jewish establishment that had opposed Jesus, but to all who refused to hear and respond to the gospel.

Peter's message was ultimately effective, according to Luke. He reported that about 3,000 people "welcomed his message" and were baptized, a huge spurt of growth for the nascent movement of Jesus followers that would become the church. Many of those who believed would have been from the diaspora, and they could have returned home to spread the gospel or start new fellowships in their own lands. That was good news indeed. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

April 30, 2023

Acts 2:42-47

## *A Common Cause – and a Common Pause?*

**D**o you think of yourself as an exceptional or uncommon person? Television commercials and magazine advertisements, especially prior to Christmas, promote luxury cars, watches, or perfumes as indicators of high-class people who rise above the common.

We don't like to think of ourselves as "common," do we? We may remark on someone else's misbehavior with "That's so common." Wealthy people and "celebrities" typically avoid having to associate with "common people."

In contrast, New Testament writers admired the first Christians as common folk who lived in an uncommon relationship with each other: they chose to share a common fate, eat at a common table, and to support a common treasury.

Would this surprising movement last? Yes! We still gather as the church of Christ, as people who are continuing to be saved and to learning to follow Christ. Whether the trademarks of the movement's first glow remain is another matter.

Acts 2:42-47 is often described as a portrait of the early church, but we should keep in mind that no formal organization yet existed. Luke's intent was to portray behaviors marking the

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42)*

mass of new believers in the early days following Pentecost, not to depict a model church. 📖

It would be a mistake for us to think we must pattern churches of our era after the halcyon days following Pentecost, but we would also err if we ignore the characteristics that made the early Christian movement so distinct and powerful that it has persisted – in a wide variety of forms – for two millennia.

Luke mentioned four notable characteristics of the first Christians (v. 42), adding a few details in vv. 43-47. He noted that the early Christians devoted themselves to: (1) listening to the apostle's teaching, (2) experiencing fellowship with one another, (3) breaking bread together, and (4) devoting themselves to prayer. 📖

### *Devoted to teaching (v. 42)*

Luke says the early believers were "devoted to the apostle's teaching." Where else could they turn? Jesus was no longer with them, so they had to rely on the disciples' memory of Jesus' teaching in addition to their Spirit-empowered preaching. There is little distinction between "teaching" and "preaching" at this point: both were designed to proclaim the gospel (good news) in ways designed to convict and instruct new believers.

The samples of their teaching/preaching that Luke provides show

that it was firmly grounded in the Old Testament. Early believers are portrayed as coming entirely from the Jewish community: the people who heard the Spirit-empowered believers speaking their own languages may have been "from every nation under heaven," but were also "devout Jews" (2:5).

No doubt, the days following Pentecost were filled with much searching of the scriptures and listening as the disciples recounted Jesus' core teachings. Luke focused mainly on Peter's evangelistic preaching, but we may assume the apostles also explained ways in which Jesus had reframed the Jewish law and called for an ethic focused on love for God and for one another.

Ongoing instruction was necessary, not only to orient new believers to Jesus' teachings, but to keep them on track through continued reminders of what it means to follow Jesus.

For the new Christian community, it was important to understand how the Jewish roots of the first believers had born fruit in the person of Christ. Modern believers should likewise recognize that the Old Testament is part of our Bibles. Our genealogy may not be Jewish and we don't live under the covenant instituted at Sinai, but the roots of our faith grow from Israel's story. Just as knowing the story of our own family background contributes to our self-identity, being in touch with our spiritual ancestors promotes a more well-rounded image of who God has called us to be. 📖

### *Devoted to fellowship (vv. 43-45)*

Luke noted that "Awe came upon

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everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles” (v. 43). This implies miraculous healings or other surprising acts, but perhaps the biggest miracle to emerge from Pentecost was a new sense of fellowship that bound together Jews “from every nation under heaven” in common cause and common concern.

The Greek word for it is *koinonía*, a term that came to be used as a prime description for people who lived in a close fellowship of mutual appreciation and generous sharing. “All who believed were together and had all things in common,” Luke said, “they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need” (vv. 44-45).

This is the point at which modern readers breathe a sigh of relief that today’s church members are not generally expected to follow their example.

👇 The spirit of sharing in the days following Pentecost may have been less ideal than we often imagine, but it still represented a sea of change in values for many, as the new believers demonstrated a care for others that went beyond what the law required. It’s likely that the apostles’ teaching had included Jesus’ condensed version of what it means to live rightly: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

Do we still hold to that teaching, or do we think first and always of ourselves and our wants before considering others’ needs? Should any community member ever go without food or medical attention or housing when there are Christ-followers who could help?

As we follow the first believers in learning from the apostles’ teaching, we do so in community, with an

awareness of real people all around us, and their very real needs. If the Spirit of God is in us, the call to community will be there, too. 👇

### Devoted to breaking bread (v. 46)

A sign of the early believers’ newfound sense of community was their notable interest in eating together. Indeed, the focus on time spent together over food recalls the many scenes in which Jesus enjoyed table fellowship with others, particularly with people who were considered too “common” to eat with upright folk. We like communal meals, too.

Luke’s characterization of this as “the breaking of the bread” (literally) has led many to suppose that this is a reference to the Eucharist, and that may have been part of it, though Will Willimon suggests that early believers may not have recognized the difference: “In good Jewish fashion, when the blessing is said at the table, the table becomes a holy place and eating together a sacred activity” (*Acts, Interpretation* [John Knox Press, 1988], 41). 👇

If the Lord’s Supper is implied, it must have been observed daily, for v. 46 tells us that “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home (or, “house to house”) and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.” 👇

Whether or not the Lord’s Supper was included in each meal, eating together was clearly seen as an outward sign of inner feelings of love and sharing within the community.

### Devoted to prayer (v. 47)

Luke’s reference to prayer in v. 42 includes the direct article: they devoted themselves to “the prayers.” This may indicate a continued observance of the assigned Jewish hours of prayer. The

new believers continued to worship at the temple: they had not stopped being Jewish, but celebrated Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of their Hebrew hopes. Thus, “they spent much time together in the temple,” and did so “day by day” (v. 46). Their prayers were punctuated by praise, “the goodwill of the people,” and continued growth as “the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (v. 47). 👇

Prayer is an important element of private devotion, but there is something particularly powerful about the experience of praying in community, within the context of worship. The early believers were wise enough to know that they needed prayer. People who are oppressed or living closer to the margins of society or survival are often particularly dependent on prayer. Have you noticed, however, that the more successful and self-sufficient we feel, the less emphasis we put on prayer?

Prayer not only honors God and refreshes our spirits, but when we pray together, it also builds community.

We need not read Acts 2:42-47 with the idea that it portrays a model of the early church that we should try to copy: we rarely consider the first version of something to be the best, or prototypes to be better than the later models. Whether it’s a new car or a developing democracy, we like to think it will improve with time and effort.

Striving to be just like the first century church is not what the 21st century world needs, but that doesn’t mean we can’t learn important lessons from those early believers. They focused on growing in community through learning together, sharing together, eating together, and praying together. If those elements aren’t present in our churches, perhaps a reevaluation of our priorities is in order.

NFJ

## Part 2: 2017–2021

# DONALD J. TRUMP

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

**G**regg Barak is emeritus professor of criminology and criminal justice at Eastern Michigan University, and founder and North American editor of the *Journal of White Collar and Corporate Crime*.

In his book, *Criminology on Trump*, Barak examined Trump's "fraud and deception ... violating the law almost every day of his life." He marveled at Trump's genius in getting away with so much.

Many within Trump's white Christian nationalist base also marveled at his genius, rewarding him with unwavering loyalty. Unpopular apart from his far-right base, Trump nonetheless sought a second term as president.

### STIRRING THE BASE

On June 1, 2020, seeking to rally his loyalists, Trump played to conservative white fear following the May 25 murder in Minneapolis of African American George Floyd at the hands of police.

Across the street from the White House, protesters demanding justice for Black Americans had rallied for days in Lafayette Square in front of St. John's Episcopal Church.

In prior evenings some protests had turned violent, once resulting in a quickly contained fire in the social-justice-oriented church's basement. Now, the protesters were peaceful, and the church's pastor, the Right Rev. Mariann Budde, and her congregants were ministering to them.

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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.

From the White House, Trump issued a statement he knew would please his loyalists. Declaring himself "your president of law and order," he demanded that governors deploy National Guard units and "dominate the streets."

As if on cue, U.S. Park Police and National Guard troops marched to Lafayette Square, deploying "pepper ball rounds," "stinger ball grenades," and white smoke munitions to disperse protesters.

Minutes later a stern-looking Trump emerged from the White House with his Attorney General William Barr and other administration officials by his side, and camera crews in tow.

Striding through the debris-littered square to the church, he halted beside St. John's sign and turned to the cameras. Holding a Bible aloft, he spoke live to the nation: "We have the greatest country in the world. Keep it nice and safe."

### RESPONSES

The strongman photo-op was clearly designed to rally Christian nationalists to vote for him in the upcoming presidential election.

Washington's Episcopal bishop was horrified at the president's stunt. But some of Trump's Christian nationalist advisers gushed that his actions had been "important" and "absolutely correct" in defense of God's chosen nation.

As Trump tried to strong-arm his way to another presidential victory, some congressional lawmakers sought to work with him in order to pass helpful domestic legislation.

Sometimes the man in the White House — whom evangelical leader and close presidential ally James Robison would later characterize as the equivalent of "a little elementary schoolchild" — could be coaxed to legislate for the common good.

One notable instance was his signing of the bipartisan Great American Outdoors Act. Securing badly needed funding for America's long-underfunded national parks and forests, the legislation was perhaps the most significant lasting legislative achievement of Trump's presidency.

Successes aside, 2020 turned into an unprecedented year. It began with Trump assuring conservative evangelicals: "I do really believe we have God on our side. Or there would have been no way we could have won [in 2016]."

Intentionally timed or not, his words arrived even as a deadly pandemic was emerging in China.

### COVID

Quickly spreading, COVID-19 arrived in the U.S. by January 2020. Federal health officials warned that the virus would cause mass deaths. The National Institutes of Health began working on a vaccine.

Fearing the virus would hurt the good economy that had thus far marked his presidency — and hence his re-election chances — Trump denied its seriousness and voiced hostility toward health care officials.

As deaths climbed, some conspiracy theorists called COVID-19 a hoax. By March, states began declaring states of emergency and issuing stay-at-home orders for non-essential workers, forcing many businesses to shutter and schools to transition to online classes.

Trump grudgingly declared a national emergency. Congress passed and Trump signed a bill authorizing stimulus payments to Americans and businesses as unemployment soared and the economy plunged downward.

Death rates climbed rapidly into April, then declined with the arrival of warmer weather. Stay-at-home orders were gradually lifted. But with the coming of cooler fall



Crowd of Trump supporters marching on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 (WikiCommons).

weather, a second peak of deaths surpassed the first.

At times the president signaled anger over some of the health measures. Among the American public, reactions to the pandemic varied.

Some faithfully followed federal and/or state guidelines while others embraced false conspiracy theories about the virus, criticized and resisted wearing masks, refused to social distance, and condemned hasty efforts to develop vaccines, the first of which was granted full approval in December.

### QANON

As Trump's chaotic approach to the virus contributed to deaths climbing into the tens of thousands and beyond, he dove ever deeper into the expanding world of far-right conspiracy theories, particularly those hawked by a nonsensical and mysterious cult movement known as QAnon that had emerged online in 2017.

Rooted in the far-right Christian belief of a coming apocalyptic battle between good and evil, QAnon summoned believers to war against Satan — that is, against liberals.

Fox News — a television network at odds with progressives and typically supportive of Trump's presidency — dismissed QAnon as “centered on the baseless belief that Trump is trying to save the world by waging a secret campaign against enemies in the ‘deep state’ and a child sex trafficking ring run by global elites who are satanic pedophiles and cannibals.”

When questioned in August 2020 about QAnon's dismissal of COVID-19 as a liberal hoax, the president deflected.

“They like me very much,” Trump declared of QAnoners. “I heard that these people are people who love our country. We're saving the world from a radical left philosophy that will destroy this country.”

### SCOTUS

As the pandemic cast a lingering pall over the nation, an unexpected opportunity for Trump suddenly emerged in the death of liberal Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg less than two months from the 2020 presidential election.

Quickly Trump and Republican Senate Leader Mitch McConnell seized the moment, with record speed putting forth

the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett, a Christian nationalist, to replace Ginsburg.

A rushed confirmation process for Barrett elicited loud criticism from Democrats who claimed not to have enough time to examine her judicial record. Installed as a Supreme Court justice on Oct. 27, Barrett was in place prior to the presidential election, her addition giving conservatives a 6–3 majority on the Court.

Christian conservatives celebrated the suddenly increased likelihood that *Roe v. Wade* would be overturned, fulfilling a decades-long quest.

Polling behind just weeks from the election, Trump had his own reasons. Barrett, his third far-right appointment to the Court, gave him yet another ally — or so he thought — should he lose to Democratic contender Joe Biden but contest the loss.

Energized by a conservative majority on the Supreme Court, Trump and his loyalists began spreading a preemptive lie that should Trump lose in November, the election would have been fraudulent.

### LOSING

Trump insisted he could not possibly lose and in rallies ginned up the evangelical vote: “My administration will never stop fighting for Americans of faith.”

Before the actual election some surrogates claimed prematurely that Trump had already won. However, Biden garnered some seven million more votes and a solid electoral margin of 306–232. In an unprecedented manner, Trump privately acknowledged his defeat but publicly condemned the election as fraudulent.

Many in the president's base rallied around his obvious lie. Adding to the tension, Trump told staffers, “I'm just not going to leave” the White House, according to *New York Times* reporter Maggie Haberman with whom the president often freely confided.

“We're never leaving,” Trump told one aide, as relayed by Haberman. “How can you leave when you won an election?”

“Why should I leave if they stole it from me?” Trump asked Republican National Committee Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel, according to Haberman.

Yet when another reporter asked if he would leave the White House when Biden's win was certified by the electoral college, he replied affirmatively, although with a dire warning: "Certainly, I will, and you know that. But I think that there will be a lot of things happening between now and the 20<sup>th</sup> of January. A lot of things."

Even then, a plan for stealing the election from the president-elect was underway.

## STRIKING OUT

With Trump denying his loss and his most loyal followers eagerly believing his most dangerous lie yet, the nation faced another Trump-manufactured crisis.

Christian nationalists staged Old Testament-styled "Jericho March" rallies at state capitols, praying to God for intervention and demanding that Trump remain in the White House. Out of sight, Trump-allied lawyers grasped for schemes to argue he had actually won.

Absent any proof of voting fraud, lawyers Rudy Giuliani, Sidney Powell and Lin Wood strove to convince key judges to deny Biden the presidency. In Arizona, Georgia, Michigan and Pennsylvania, they filed dozens of lawsuits falsely purporting that votes had not been counted properly.

Judges by the dozens — including Trump appointees — quickly dismissed the suits as frivolous, often harshly criticizing the bogus legal maneuvering.

In December one petition brought by Texas and supported by Trump and some 100 House Republicans reached the U.S. Supreme Court, where it, too, was denied — to Trump's great ire.

On another front the White House pressured Republican state legislators in Arizona, Pennsylvania and Michigan — key swing states that had voted for Biden — to appoint a fraudulent, alternative slate of electors to replace the actual Democratic electors. The state legislatures wisely refused.

On December 14 the electoral college met as prescribed by the nation's Constitution and cast members' votes according to whom their states had voted for as president. Biden properly won the electoral college vote.

Still, Trump persisted in his efforts to steal the election, pressuring various election officials to change key vote totals to his favor. Georgia became a primary target — with the state having gone to Biden by fewer than 12,000 votes.

Calling Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger on Jan. 2, 2021, Trump said "I just want to find 11,780 votes," the minimum needed to overcome Biden's victory in Georgia.

Raffensperger, a Republican, refused. Trump's subsequent efforts to corrupt other election officials also failed.

Although striking out on all accounts, Trump and his allies continued to claim without evidence that voting fraud had taken place in key states.

## DESPERATION

Trump tried to bully the U.S. Justice Department into taking the extraordinary step of effectively annulling the election in order to keep him in power. Justice Department officials refused.

With the clock ticking down, his remaining option was to pressure his vice president to object to the constitutional-required reading aloud counting of the electoral college votes during a joint session of Congress, a formality scheduled for Jan. 6, 2021.

Increasingly desperate, Trump and his lawyers devised a fraudulent legal theory that Vice President Mike Pence could refuse on January 6 to recognize Biden's electoral votes, and instead accept alternative electors chosen by Trump's White House.

Or, Trump's team argued, the vice president could declare the election in dispute, thus triggering a constitutional process by which Congress would choose the president.

The ensuing delay of the electoral vote-reading might be enough to convince some state GOP-led Republican legislatures in states Biden won to replace Biden's electors with an alternative slate of Trump electors, who in turn would help flip the election to Trump.

As with his previous schemes, Trump's electoral college "Hail Mary" was in violation of the law, as his own legal advisor warned him. Nonetheless, the president

repeatedly pressed Pence to do his corrupt bidding.

As the president's schemes came down to one final chance, Trump tweeted on Dec. 12, 2020 to his devout followers: "WE HAVE JUST BEGUN TO FIGHT!!!"

They listened, understood, and were ready, particularly "many Christian nationalist leaders and organizations," as noted later by a Baptist Joint Committee report.

## VIOLENCE

Later that month a private intelligence company, SITE Intelligence Group, warned federal law enforcement agencies with whom the company worked that users on a pro-Trump internet forum were planning violence on January 6.

"[A] supposedly violent insurrection by [Trump's] supporters has 'always been the plan,'" read the warning. The FBI and other agencies circulated the warning well in advance of the day.

Plans were firmed up, with Trump tweeting on Dec. 27 — "See you in Washington, DC, on January 6th."

On Jan. 1, 2021, he tweeted that the "BIG Protest Rally in Washington, D.C. ... at 11.00 A.M. on January 6th" would "StopTheSteal!" — the latter phrase summarizing Trump's lie that the election had been stolen from him.

"Donald Trump knew and oversaw what happened on January 6," evidence later gleaned from the House select committee's January 6 investigation hearings revealed.

As Pence steadfastly refused to violate the Constitution by declining to certify Biden's electoral college votes, Mark Meadows, Trump's chief of staff, was warned of potential violence on January 6.

On January 5 the president repeatedly tried to convince his vice president to break the law on his behalf. Pence refused. The same day Trump called his friend and ally, white nationalist Steve Bannon.

Afterward Bannon went on a right-wing talk show and declared: "All hell is going to break loose tomorrow. It's all converging, and now we're on, as they say, the point of attack; ... strap in."

On the appointed day, Trump's troops came — streaming into the Ellipse, a park south of the U.S. Capitol — the morning of

January 6. The assembled crowd was restless and on edge, anxious for Biden's presidential win to be annulled.

Capitol security was suspiciously light considering the weeks of warnings about violence. Some attendees at the rally had stashed guns nearby, while others managed to sneak weapons past security checkpoints.

Whether brought with them, stolen from law enforcement during the ensuing assault, or improvised along the way, many of the president's foot soldiers would variously deploy knives, axes, hatchets, chemical sprays, police batons, riot shields and flag poles as weapons.

### FIGHT

With thousands assembled at the Ellipse, the president knew his lies about the election being stolen from him had riled up those who had answered his tweets to "FIGHT" for him. He repeated the lie that "radical-left Democrats" had stolen the election from him.

The crowd roared: "We Love Trump. We Love Trump. We Love Trump."

He loved it. We can win today, Trump told the crowd.

"We're going to walk down to the Capitol," he declared early in his speech. Soon some began the trek, though Trump was not yet finished.

Winding down, he told his faithful: "We fight ... and if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

He closed with, "We're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue ... to the Capitol ... and give them [Republicans refusing to back Trump's plan for stealing the election] the kind of pride and boldness they need to take back our country.... God bless you and God bless America ...."

The remaining crowd turned and joined the march, chanting along the way. Trump tried to join them, but his Secret Service agents intervened, whisking him — despite his resistance — back to the White House.

Arriving at the Capitol complex in the early afternoon, the mob of thousands milled outside amid a sea of banners and flags, many Christian-themed.

Chants of "USA" and "Hang Mike Pence" rang out, as well as calls for the death of Democrat House Speaker Nancy Pelosi

and other politicians who resisted Trump's will.

Gallows and crosses pointed skyward. Bibles were held aloft. Some of Trump's warriors knelt in prayer, calling on God to help them overthrow the U.S. government.

In their traitorous mission — blessed by the angry and vengeful god of their imagination — the angry mob surged forward, tearing down police barriers, pushing aside law enforcement officers, and swarming around the Capitol.

The unholy battle to destroy American democracy had begun.

### TRANSFIXED

Some two miles from the U.S. Capitol, Trump was at a dining table near the Oval Office, glued to live television coverage of the domestic terrorist assault. These were clearly his people.

He had called them to assemble and told them to fight. They had responded. He needed them to stop the electoral college count.

Three people with Trump on that dark day heard him approve of the terrorists' calls to hang his vice president for refusing to call off the electoral college vote. The extent of Trump's effort to overthrow the U.S. government seemingly had no bounds.

Transfixed, Trump watched as his terrorists assaulted law enforcement officers guarding the Capitol building and democracy.

Besieged, Capitol Police frantically called the Pentagon for help. There was no response. Frantically, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser asked Army Secretary Ryan D. McCarthy for help from the Pentagon. Her request was denied.

Months after the insurrection, evidence pointed to a refusal on the part of military leaders to deploy the National Guard for fear Trump would use the troops to help him stay in power.

Seemingly encouraging his own army, Trump tweeted a video of his Capitol Mall speech that earlier galvanized his followers to "fight like hell."

Assaulting and brutally beating — one fatally — some 140 law officers defending democracy, Trump's terrorists breached the Capitol. Shattering windows and

tearing down doors, they entered the stately building, milling around and looking for politicians.

"Jesus Christ, we invoke your name!" one shouted. Another led a group of terrorists in a prayer of thanks to their "divine, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent creator God" for "allowing" them to storm the Capitol and "exercise our rights, to allow us to send a message to all the tyrants, the communists and the globalists that this is our nation, not theirs."

### PLEAS

Learning of the breach, Secret Service agents evacuated Pence from the Senate floor. Congressional leaders recessed the electoral count proceedings. They and their colleagues were hustled away to safety, some barely escaping the terrorists.

Congressional aides and reporters on site were not so lucky. Left to defend themselves, they fled to whatever hiding places they could find — closets, bathrooms, utility rooms, under desks.

"Hang Mike Pence! Hang Mike Pence!" the terrorists chanted, looking for the vice president.

Enraged that Pence had seemingly escaped, Trump, watching on a television screen, turned to Twitter and lashed out at his vice president with angry lies.

"Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution," he tweeted, "giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth!"

A GOP official later testified of this moment, noting that the president didn't "think they're [the insurrectionists] doing anything wrong" in wanting to kill Pence. "Maybe our supporters have the right idea" in executing the vice president, Republican Congresswomen Liz Cheney of Wyoming later recalled Trump saying.

In the presidential dining room with Trump, officials and aides implored him to stop the insurrection. In the Capitol, terrorists clutching Trump and Christian flags were assaulting cops.

Trump's aides pleaded with him to make a public statement. He finally relented.

“Please support our Capitol Police and Law Enforcement,” he tweeted. “They are truly on the side of our Country. Stay peaceful!”

Trump still refused to condemn the violence. Paramilitary Oath Keepers, roaming the Capitol in an effort to halt the electoral college count, noted that the president had said nothing in support of the politicians in hiding.

More and more law enforcement officers were under attack. With the assistance of part of the mob, one terrorist tried to break through the Senate chamber door. Officers guarding the door repeatedly warned her to stop or be shot. She refused and was shot by law enforcement as she climbed through the door. Her colleagues backed off.

An hour into the violence, Trump tweeted disingenuously: “I am asking for everyone at the U.S. Capitol to remain peaceful. No violence! Remember, WE are the Party of Law & Order — respect the Law and our great men and women in Blue. Thank you!”

Although the instigator of the insurrection, Trump refused to tell his violent followers to leave the Capitol. This was his Gethsemane, his moment of destiny to crucify America’s democracy and to rule unrestrained.

When House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy called to ask Trump to halt the violence, the president responded: “Well, Kevin, I guess these people are more upset about the election than you are.”

## TIDE TURNING

With Trump in front of his television, willing his coup to succeed, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, now in a safe location, took charge. Communicating with leaders from both parties, she led the defenders of democracy.

With Senate Leader Chuck Schumer, she issued a joint public statement demanding the president call off the rioters. Collaborating with Pence, she contacted regional law enforcement agencies and tried to persuade the National Guard to send backup forces.

The tide was slowly turning. More law enforcement contingents began to arrive. The terrorists’ momentum was stalling.

Evermore urgently, Trump’s aides pleaded for him to make a public statement condemning the violence. But again, he refused — awaiting his destiny.

Slowly reality began to seep in. Unable to locate the political targets of their anger, his foot soldiers were wandering around the Capitol, looting, plundering and destroying government property. Some were slowly being forced out of the building by law enforcement.

Pence was still alive, somewhere. Against his will, the president was emerging from his self-centered stupor with words of alarm coming into focus: He could be forcefully removed from office by the invoking of the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment for his refusal to “discharge the powers and duties of his office” by calling off the insurrection.

As a presidential candidate in 2016, Trump had gloated that he could murder someone on New York’s 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and still win the election. But now?

He was not going to pick up a gun and personally murder Pence. He had always conned others into doing his dirty deeds, and it had worked — until now. On the cusp of his greatest glory yet, he had failed.

He could not win. Nor could he bring himself to acknowledge losing, something he was taught by his father to never do.

## ‘REMEMBER THIS DAY’

Aides called for Trump to film an announcement in the Rose Garden — knowing his loyal followers wanted to hear from him.

In front of the camera, he tried to compose himself but struggled. With tears seemingly welling in his eyes, he stiffened his resolve and stared into the camera with his trademark sternness. After several video takes, he was finally satisfied.

There were no concessions. “We love you; you’re very special,” he said to his terrorist supporters. The “we” apparently a plural reference to himself.

“But you have to go home now,” the president said. Glossing over the violence he had set in motion, he added: “We have to have peace. We have to have law and order. We have to respect our great people in law and order. We don’t want anybody hurt.”

Then Trump painted himself and his terrorists as the victims:

“It’s a very tough period of time, there’s never been a time like this where such a thing happened, where they could take it away from all of us. From me, from you, from our country. This was a fraudulent election, but we can’t play into the hands of these people. We have to have peace. So go home, we love you, you’re very special. You’ve seen what happens, you’ve seen the way others are treated that are so bad and so evil. I know how you feel, but go home and go home in peace.”

Clearly disappointed, and with law enforcement prodding, Trump’s insurrectionists began streaming out of the Capitol. Minus instructions from the president to detain them, they were allowed to leave the premises.

National Guard troops finally arrived — some three hours after their help was requested — and began securing the Capitol. The greatest threat ever to America’s democracy had been thwarted.

And, seemingly in his mind, the greatest president ever had been denied his self-perceived right to dismiss democracy and reign as a dictator like his friends, Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un.

But Trump never loses. In one final defiant tweet that day, he falsely portrayed himself and his rioters as patriots:

“These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!”

Broken furniture, smashed doors, shattered windows, strewn paper and human feces littered and soiled the Capitol. But there was important work to do.

Democratic congressional leaders Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi were undaunted, calling Congress back into session that evening. The constitutional mandate for reading aloud and tallying electoral college votes resumed, the final step in certifying Biden’s presidential win.

## BUT WAIT

Surely democracy’s brush with death had unified the nation’s two political parties. Or had it?

Astonishingly, most Republican congressional Representatives, their lives literally in danger from a domestic terrorist mob mere hours ago, in their official capacity cast votes against democracy and in support of Trump and his lies by objecting to Biden's electoral wins in Arizona and/or Pennsylvania.

The scene surreal, the objectors clogging up proceedings for hours before finally being voted down. Not until 3:33 am was the joint session adjourned, and Biden formally declared president-elect.

Seven days later, all of the House Democrats and a handful of Republicans impeached Trump yet again, this time for inciting the January 6 domestic terrorist insurrection. He is the only president twice impeached.

Senate Democrats attempted to take up the House's articles of impeachment in order to bring Trump to accountability but failed to garner enough Republican votes to put the former president on trial. Unapologetic, Trump dismissed his impeachment as irrelevant. Many white Christian nationalists concurred.

Meanwhile, federal law enforcement agencies began hunting down the terrorists, many of whom recorded themselves on social media storming the Capitol or on the Capitol grounds. The first arrests took place within days, many of those apprehended having been turned in by family members and friends, or other Americans sleuthing the internet and providing evidence to the FBI.

To date some 1,000 have been arrested and charged with crimes. Many have been tried and sentenced, some to more than 10 years of jail time. In numerous trials January 6 insurrectionists blamed Trump for their actions.

Having failed in his coup attempt, Trump's vitriolic presidency came to end, his approval ratings never reaching 50 percent despite his boasts of his own popularity. He departed the White House in angry haste, not attending Biden's inauguration.

On Jan. 20, 2021 Biden was peacefully sworn in as president, the ceremony heavily guarded to thwart further domestic

terrorist activity that, fortunately, failed to materialize.

## DISRUPTION

How did the sordid Trump presidency come about, and why was he able to come dangerously close to destroying two-and-a-half centuries of American democracy? The nation will long struggle to fully answer those questions.

Historians, almost all critical of Trump's devotion to himself above the nation he once led, ranked Trump among the worst of U.S. presidents. In the 2022 Siena Presidential Survey of 141 historians, Trump ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> out of 45 presidents (Biden, still in office, was not included).

On measures of intelligence, integrity, executive appointments, foreign policy and domestic policy, Trump ranked last or next to last. By far his best-ranked attributes as president were luck (16<sup>th</sup>) and risk-taking (23<sup>rd</sup>).

The two defining moments of Trump's presidency, according to these historians, were the coronavirus pandemic and the January 6 insurrection, existential crises in which Trump placed himself above the good of the nation.

Jeffrey Engel, director of the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University, in 2022 offered an assessment of Trump that both critics and supporters of the former president can agree on: "He came in to be a disrupter, and of all of his accomplishments, I think it's very easy to say that he accomplished that one."

American Christianity, in turn, is left wandering amid the moral and ethical rubble of Trump's disruptive presidency. Where to begin? Perhaps at the beginning.

Trump was born into wealth in Queens, New York City, in 1946. As a child he was confirmed into the Presbyterian world of Norman Vincent Peale's "positive thinking" gospel of wealth.

From a young age Trump learned to be ruthless and bend others to his will. This self-serving perversion of Christianity linked Trump to those who embrace far-right expressions of the faith.

Many conservative white evangelicals insisted the June 2022 Supreme Court

decision *Dobb v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* — made possible only by Trump's restructuring of the Court — was worth the price of supporting Trump.

The decision reversed *Roe v. Wade's* right to abortion and granted individual states the legal right to freely regulate any aspect of abortion not preempted by federal law.

Conservative evangelical leader Russell Moore disagreed. From the beginning he warned fellow evangelicals that their support of "a disruptive figure who would be willing to do whatever it took to appoint the sorts of people who would hand down the Dobbs case" was a mistake.

The rubble bears witness to his prophecy. "I don't think you can have, long term, a pro-life ethic without a concern for vulnerability, a concern for women, character," Moore concluded.

Placing the government in control of women's and girl's bodies, as the *Dobb v. Jackson* decision did, is widely opposed by the American public, as the 2022 midterm elections clearly revealed.

Sifting through the rubble, too, are judges, courts and juries busy identifying, untangling and prosecuting criminal activity committed by or associated with Trump. Seventeen convictions of tax fraud by the Trump Organization have already been handed down by a jury.

Currently the Justice Department is building cases against Trump for criminal actions related to the January 6 domestic terrorism and for his illegal handling of classified government materials following his presidency. Numerous other Trump-related criminal cases are also working their way through the courts.

In a 2021 interview, journalist Maggie Haberman asked Trump about his decision to run for the presidency in 2016. Would he do it again, in retrospect?

"The answer is, yeah, I think so," Trump reflected. "Because here's the way I look at it. I have so many rich friends and nobody knows who they are."

On Nov. 15, 2022 Trump announced he was running yet again for the office of President of the United States of America. As in early 2016, he is not favored to win.

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# BAREFOOT EULOGIST



Discovering deeper appreciation for the role of eulogies

BY BRUCE SALMON

According to Exodus 3, Moses led his father-in-law Jethro's flock of sheep from beyond the wilderness to Horeb, called the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared in a flame of fire out of a burning bush — that blazed but was not consumed.

God called out from the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And Moses answered, "Here I am."

God told Moses to move no closer and to remove his sandals "for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exod. 3:5).

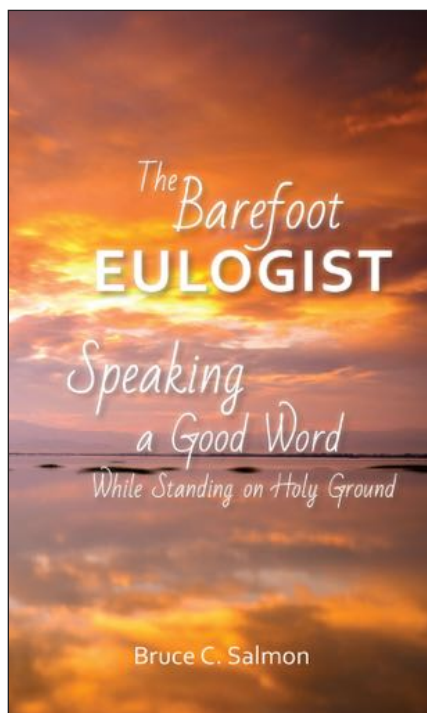
In Joshua 5 the command from Exod. 3:5 is quoted in another context. Joshua was near Jericho when he saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword.

Joshua asked, "Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?" The man replied, "Neither; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come."

Joshua fell on his face and worshiped. He asked, "What do you command your servant, my lord?" The commander of the army of the Lord said to Joshua, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy" (Josh. 5:15).

Acts 7 contains the speech that Stephen gave to the high priest and council after he was arrested and charged with prophesying against the temple.

In his speech, Stephen reminded them of Moses and the burning bush and the command, "Take off the sandals from your



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feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Acts 7:33).

So, in two places in the Old Testament, and recalled in the New Testament, the appropriate response to standing on holy ground is to remove one's sandals and become barefoot.

That's the way I feel every time I deliver a eulogy: I'm standing on holy ground. The word "eulogy" comes from the Greek *eu* and *logos*, meaning "good word."

In essence, every eulogy is "speaking a good word while standing on holy ground." That's why I am a "barefoot eulogist."

During the recent pandemic, I delivered eulogies for seven persons. Two had died of COVID-19.

The first eulogy was for a friend from my former church who died of COVID in May 2020. His wife, a nurse, unknowingly had brought the virus home due to the lack of adequate personal protective equipment.

They got sick on the same day. She recovered after two weeks, but he was in the hospital for a month. She was not allowed to visit him, even though she was a medical professional. She watched him die via Facetime.

During the early days of the pandemic, in-person funerals came to a halt. We began to experience a new ritual of mourning: the virtual memorial service.

I conducted the service for my friend from my home, staring into a computer camera and delivering the eulogy to his wife, daughters, and other family members and friends who were staring at their computer screens wherever they were.

There was no way to be physically present with one another without putting each other at risk.

The second eulogy was for my brother-in-law who died of a brain tumor in August 2020. He was diagnosed when the pandemic was spreading, so it was not possible to visit him in person, especially since he lived about 600 miles away.

We spoke on the phone regularly, and he asked me to give his eulogy when the time came. Near the end, my wife drove to





## I remain a barefoot eulogist, speaking a good word while standing on holy ground.

see him. He was largely unresponsive, but she believes he knew she was there. He died the next day.

Once again, I conducted a virtual memorial service. Some friends from his church were able to take part, and my wife paid her own tribute to her brother before I gave the eulogy, again from our home.

The third eulogy during the pandemic was at a cemetery gravesite. It was for the daughter of one of my best friends. I had given the eulogies for him and his wife years earlier.

This was now the fall of 2020, and although we were still vulnerable to the virus, it was considered safe to gather outside with everyone wearing facemasks and practicing social distancing.

I stood at the head of the casket and delivered the eulogy. Since I was about 15 feet from the closest attendee, I felt it was safe to remove my facemask to speak.

I gave another eulogy during the committal service at a cemetery for a former church member. Before I retired, she had moved to Texas to be close to her son and his family.

A funeral was held there, but then the casket was transferred to Maryland so she could be buried alongside her husband and her other son.

Before the words of committal, I gave a brief eulogy because there were family members at the cemetery who had not been able to attend the funeral in Texas. Again, it was difficult to be physically present but not to touch or get too close.

Early in 2021 I gave the eulogy at a virtual memorial service for another friend

who had died of COVID-19. Her daughter in Arizona set up the Zoom meeting, coordinated the order of service, recruited participants, and arranged for a slide show set to music with pictures of her mother that would be played before and after the service.

For about two weeks before the service, I was receiving emails or phone calls almost every day from people who wanted to share their memories of the one I would be eulogizing. Again, I delivered the eulogy from my home with people viewing and participating from many locations.

I finally led an indoor in-person service in February 2021 at a funeral home. Most people were still not fully vaccinated, but the funeral home instituted precautions such as limiting seating in the chapel, live-streaming the service to those in the parking lot with portable devices and requiring facemasks for everyone.

A violinist provided music, wearing a facemask. My hesitation came from the pre-service visitation where a stream of visitors came into the chapel to view the body in the casket and to convey their condolences to the family.

Since the attendees at the funeral were spaced out, I removed my facemask to speak, trying not to be concerned about the many people who had processed through the small chapel for the visitation just minutes earlier.

I led another indoor in-person funeral service in April 2021 in the chapel at a veterans' cemetery. The service was limited by cemetery policy to 15 minutes, so the eulogy was shorter than usual.

After the service a color guard folded the flag that had draped the casket and

presented it to the family, before conveying the casket to the hearse. Cemetery policy did not allow for a graveside committal, so the service in the chapel included a few remarks that normally I would have given at the grave.

These experiences of funeral, memorial and committal services during the pandemic helped me develop an even deeper appreciation for the importance of eulogies. Because many of the rituals of mourning had to be altered or suspended, the eulogy became even more significant.

Reflecting on these and other experiences, I wrote the book, *The Barefoot Eulogist: Speaking a Good Word While Standing on Holy Ground* (2022, Nurturing Faith).

The book contains some of the eulogies given during the pandemic, along with others I gave during my 33 years as pastor of Village Baptist Church in Bowie, Md. The book's purpose is to provide examples of how eulogies can be the means of remembering the person who died, offering consolation to family members and friends, and lifting up our Christian hope.

I remain a barefoot eulogist, speaking a good word while standing on holy ground.

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—Bruce Salmon is a retired pastor in Bowie, Md. His latest book, *The Barefoot Eulogist*, and five other titles from Nurturing Faith, is available at [goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore](http://goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore).

# A real head scratcher

By Tony Cartledge

**Y**ou never know what someone may find worth writing about. In an ancient time when people in the Sinai desert were just working out the first rudimentary alphabet — probably 3,700 years ago — the subject was lice.

We know this because linguists have recently deciphered the earliest known sentence in a primitive script that came to be used — through several developmental iterations — for Northwest Semitic languages including Canaanite, Phoenician, Moabite and Hebrew.

The findings were published in Hebrew University's online *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology* (2: 76–119).

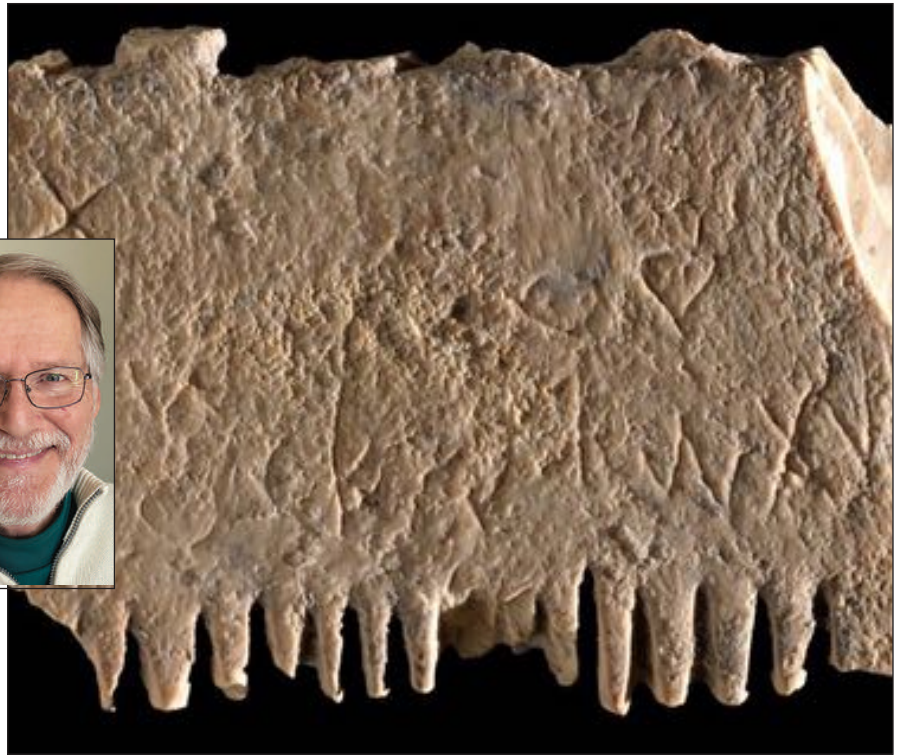
The inscription was found on the remains of a well-worn ivory comb with large teeth (now broken off) on one side to detangle hair and smaller teeth on the other, designed to weed out lice.

The artifact was found in Lachish during the 2016 season of the Fourth Expedition to Lachish led by Yosef Garfinkel, Michael Hasel and Martin Klingbeil — just a year after my wife Susan and I dug with the same expedition.

The small object, made from imported ivory — and probably a gift to a high-status person — was found in a pit containing material from different periods. The lack of stratification makes it difficult to date, but the script points to around 1,700 BCE.

When found, the artifact was first put into a bone bag, then set aside for later study along with three other lice combs that had been found at Lachish.

It was only in 2021 that Madeleine Mumcuoglu, after previously studying the comb without noticing the script, used her



A 17th century BCE inscription in proto-Canaanite script from Lachish, incised on an ivory lice comb. (Credit: Dafna Gazit, Israel Antiquities Authority)

iPhone to take a close-up photograph and discovered the shallow inscription. She alerted colleague Daniel Vainstub, and the game was on.

After painstaking work, the comb's 17 pictographic letters were carefully compared to the few other known proto-Canaanite inscriptions — whose letter shapes vary widely — and deciphered to mean: "May this tusk root out the lice of the hai[r and the] beard."

The comb apparently did its job, as the remains of a louse nymph's outer membrane, made of tough chitin, were found between the comb's second and third teeth.

I usually take initial translations with a grain of salt, but eminent epigraphers including American Christopher Rollston, Israeli Haggai Misgav and the French polymath Michael Langlois have affirmed both the accuracy of the translation and the

significance of the find for the contribution it makes to the study of the alphabet.

It was this very system of pictographic writing that developed, primarily through the Phoenician iteration, into the alphabet used by English and other Latin-derived languages to this day.

The more things change, the more (in some ways) they stay the same. Parents still use a fine-toothed comb to remove lice and their nits from the hair of unfortunate children who manage to pick up an infestation.

And, when we writers scratch our heads while contemplating a difficult sentence, we're using letters whose predecessors emerged nearly 4,000 years ago. **NFJ**

—Tony Cartledge is contributing editor/curriculum writer for *Good Faith Media*.

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# ‘WE WERE THE FIRST’

Faith and an unimaginable future of freedom

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

In the shadow of the single largest slave auction in U.S. history, a local historian — a descendant of slaves — quietly sang a long-ago song of yearned-for freedom.

**H**er soulful voice traveled back to a painful world of which mere words cannot do justice. It is the sadness she conveyed that I especially remember, a sadness without end.

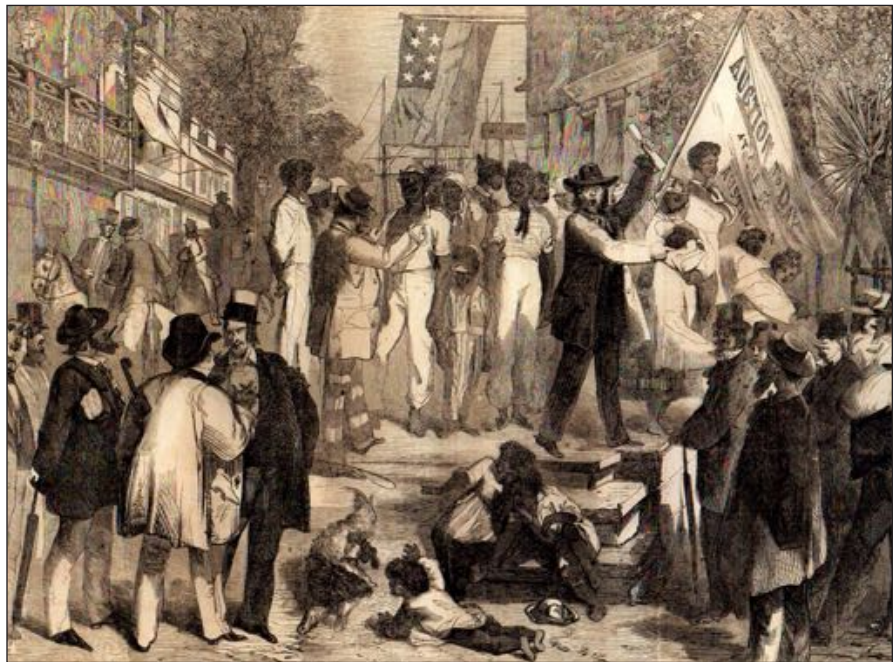
On that hallowed ground for well over the course of a century fell the anguished tears of hundreds of thousands of human beings — men, women, children — sacrificed on the altar of greed.

There in Savannah’s modern hustling and bustling historic downtown, it was as if the two of us were a tiny island around which locals and tourists flowed, oblivious to the evil that for many long years had enveloped “America’s Most Haunted City.”

## BONDAGE

Due to its strategic coastal location, the nearly 300-year-old port city has survived numerous bloody battles, epidemics of massive proportions, and several fires that destroyed hundreds of buildings. But nothing shaped historic Savannah more than human bondage.

This so-called “peculiar institution” played a central role in making the city arguably the most beautiful, richest and prominent city in the American South from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century through the Civil War.



Depiction of a slave auction. This scene took place in many cities of the South for generations. The largest slave auction in American history took place in Savannah, Georgia.

From its warm coastal climes suitable to growing rice and cotton, Savannah cast slavery’s long shadow and illicit riches southward across the region’s coastal plains and islands, and northward far away to Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love.

Living in both worlds in the early 1800s, Pierce Mease Butler — grandson of Pierce Butler, a revolutionary war officer, delegate to America’s 1787 Constitutional Convention, South Carolina’s first U.S. Senator, and a wealthy slaveholder — prospered in antebellum America.

In his Philadelphia mansion — Butler Place — he lived a life of luxury and leisure matched by few. The ease and elegance were

financed by riches stolen from the backs of African slaves toiling on his three plantations — actually, slave labor camps — along the Georgia coast.

But Butler’s Philadelphia was a city conflicted. Long ago, in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, abolitionist sentiment bubbled up in some Quaker communities, and in 1775 the Pennsylvania Abolition Society was founded as the nation’s first secular anti-slavery organization.

More recently and in Butler’s 21<sup>st</sup> year, abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison had in 1831 established *The Liberator* newspaper, the leading anti-slavery publication in America. Two years later the national

**Editor’s note:** Made possible by legacy funding from the former Whitsitt Heritage Society, Bruce Gourley traveled along the Sea Islands and coastal plains of South Carolina and Georgia in 2022, listening to voices and memories in a region now recognized as the Gullah Geechee corridor. Gullah Geechee refers to the centuries-old culture of west and central Africans kidnapped from their native homeland, transported across the Atlantic, and sold into slavery in the southeastern U.S. In slavery they retained much of their African spirituality, while most by the Civil War era also laid claim to the Baptist faith. Their enduring stories during slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction speak uniquely and prophetically to the important issues of freedom of conscience and soul liberty to which the Whitsitt Society was dedicated. This article is the second in a series.

American Anti-Slavery Society was formed in the city.

Both the Society and Garrison's *Liberator* refused to compromise with slaveholders, instead calling for immediate, uncompensated, universal abolition. Philadelphia's Black community heartily supported both entities. Not so, many of the city's white citizens.

## TENSION

As anti-slavery, abolitionist momentum rose in Philadelphia, a backlash of anti-abolition and anti-Black sentiment grew, the tension between the two ideologies erupting into a series of riots in the late 1830s and into the 1840s. The City of Brotherly love was anything but.

Into this charged environment — but prior to the riots — famed abolitionist and European Shakespearean actress Frances Anne (Fanny) Kemble performed in Philadelphia during a tour of America's eastern seaboard in 1832. There she was introduced to, and fell in love with, the young slaveholder Butler.

It was an odd pairing, emotional love overpowering their vast ideological differences. She was independent; he wanted her devotion. She could not be moved from her abolitionist convictions; he was not about to criticize the institution of slavery that had made him one of the wealthiest men in America.

Still, the courtship persisted for two years, leading to their wedding in 1834 at Philadelphia's Christ Church.

Now living together in the vastness of the beautiful and refined Butler Place mansion, their opposing convictions increasingly overshadowed their surroundings. Neither gave an inch on their expectations of the other. Fanny's devotion to her husband was qualified; Pierce's determination to contain her was unyielding.

She penned an anti-slavery treatise, but he refused to let her publish it. She wanted to visit Butler's plantations, where he periodically traveled, but was rebuffed. Amid their growing conflicts a baby arrived, then a second. Still, Pierce and Fanny grew increasingly distant and cold toward one another.

Five years into their stalemate, Butler relented to Fanny's request to visit his plantations. For nine days in December 1838 the family — along with the children's nurse — traveled southward by train, stage and steamboat to the Georgia coast.

There in the warmth of his Georgia plantations on St. Simons Island near Brunswick and Butler's Island near Darien, Pierce hoped to persuade Kemble that slavery, the source of the comfortable life they enjoyed at Butler Place, was not a bad lot for Black people. He failed miserably.

Kemble, both compassionate and passionate, recoiled at seeing slavery's evils up close and in person. In moral agony she journaled her firsthand "observation of all the miseries of which this accursed system of slavery is the cause."

## THE HELL

Living in rags, barely given enough food to eat, often ill from diseases and forever peniless, Butler's slaves lived as if neglected animals. He hoped to see his chattel treated somewhat better, Pierce insisted, but that would require his constant presence in the forced labor camps, an impracticality.

Horrified, angry and helpless all at the same time, Fanny talked with slaves and tried to bring them comfort. She could salve festering welts from the lash of whips, and medicate those suffering from diseases, but it amounted to little.

The slaves looked at her with hollow eyes, the sons and daughters of the African continent who enriched her family. The utter hopelessness of their cruel lot haunted her.

They had no meaningful control over their own bodies and those of their loved ones. Under threat of the lash, they were powerless to prevent Butler's plantation managers from ripping children from mothers and separating husbands and wives.

Surely there was a voice of morality and humanity somewhere? Yet a disturbing conversation with the white Baptist minister in Darien disavowed the distraught Fanny of any seeds of hope that may have remained.

The minister, in charge of the spiritual oversight of the imprisoned African Americans on her husband's Butler Island

plantation, evidenced not even the slightest concern for "the present life" of the slaves. Instead, his interest was confined to their afterlife in heaven.

"Almost all of them Baptists here," she observed, and they were forced to be.

Unable to bear watching human beings "trampled beneath" her husband's feet in the "hell of slavery," and unable to relieve their suffering, Fanny Kemble's own world became a personal hell in the winter and spring of 1839.

Four long months slogged by with husband and wife each growing angrier and more embittered. Upon their return to Philadelphia, Pierce went out of his way to make Fanny miserable, going so far as to prevent her from spending time with her own children.

Finally giving up, she returned to England and her theatrical career. Prolonged divorce proceedings eventually concluded in 1849.

## FOR SALE

In Shakespearean fashion, Butler gambled and speculated away his fortune and fell into bankruptcy by the late 1850s. To satisfy his debts, the Philadelphia mansion and property were liquidated. But it was not enough.

Traveling to Georgia, trustees of Butler's estate surveyed his southern holdings. The plantation lands themselves were of far less value than the bodies of the 919 slaves Butler owned, half of whom were selected to be sold in one singular, massive slave auction, the largest in American history.

From February into early March the sale, brokered by the slave-dealer Joseph Bryan, was advertised in newspapers in Savannah and throughout the southeast:

### FOR SALE. LONG COTTON AND RICE NEGROES.

*A Gang of 460 Negroes, accustomed to the culture of Rice and Provisions; among whom are a number of good mechanics, and house servants. Will be sold on the 2d and 3d of March next, at Savannah, by JOSEPH BRYAN. Terms of Sale—One-third cash; remainder by bond, bearing interest from day of sale, payable in two equal annual*

*instalments, to be secured by mortgage on the negroes, and approved personal security, or for approved city acceptance on Savannah or Charleston. Purchasers paying for papers. The Negroes will be sold in families, and can be seen on the premises of JOSEPH BRYAN, In Savannah, three days prior to the day of sale, when catalogues will be furnished.*

For days prior to the auction, the slaves were held at the city's Broeck Race Course, in miserable, open-air conditions "quartered in the sheds erected for the accommodation of the horses and carriages of gentlemen [who attended] races."

Prospective buyers inspected these human beings as they would livestock — poking, prodding, and feeling the hapless men, women and children.

Two days before the auction a violent storm settled in, with sheets of rain and howling winds lashing the exposed human bodies. Then came the sale, with eager buyers lining up to purchase human flesh for financial gain.

Despite promises, many families were separated forevermore. It became known as "the Weeping Time," a vivid spectacle of the sheer inhumanity and evil of slavery covered by newspapers nationwide.

Many northerners were already enraged about the illegal landing of the slave ship *Wanderer* the previous November on Jekyll Island immediately south of St. Simons — bringing 409 African slaves. The African slave trade had been banned 50 years earlier.

Politicians were pressed all the harder to end slavery as the 1860 presidential election drew near.

## WAR

Riding an upswell in northern abolitionist sentiment, the only anti-slavery candidate — a country lawyer from Springfield, Ill., named Abraham Lincoln — won the presidency.

Immediately, powerful planters in South Carolina — the leading slave state since the 18<sup>th</sup> century — convened a secession convention in the prestigious First Baptist Church of Columbia, a congregation consisting of many slaveowners.

Within days South Carolina declared independence from the United States. Other Deep South states followed suit in the following months, forming the Confederate States of America upon the God-blessed "cornerstone" of African slavery.

Raising an army to fight the godless anti-slavery North, in April 1861 the southern slaveocracy fired upon the U.S. government's Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. The war over slavery had begun.

Lincoln quickly turned his attention to the South's greatest weakness: the absence of a navy, and hence the vulnerability of the southern ports that were critical to the South's economy. Vulnerable, too, were the thousands of coastal slave plantations from Charleston southward to the St. Johns River in northeast Florida.

In that coastal corridor were many of the wealthiest counties in the entire nation, almost all the riches bound up in slaves' bodies. There, Pierce Mease Butler, now impoverished, had once been among the wealthiest of planters. And there Lincoln and his advisers saw an opening to strike an early blow to the treasonous South.

With little resistance, Union naval vessels blockaded the South's two largest ports — Savannah and Charleston — in early summer. Soon the blockade extended to other ports along the southern Atlantic and Gulf coasts. The South's cotton exports and English imports ground to a near halt.

Having secured the southern coast, the Lincoln administration poured over maps in search of the best place to land soldiers, settling on Beaufort. The little-known South Carolina town of some 2,000 inhabitants was located on Port Royal Island north of Savannah.

Founded in 1711, the tree-lined picturesque community and county seat of Beaufort County was disproportionately important to the pre-war South for its cotton shipments. Yet as late as Nov. 6, 1861, the small town still received virtually no attention from the northern press.

Cotton signified the immense wealth of the Beaufort region. Unmatched throughout the South, more than 100 planters in the county each owned 80 to more than 500 slaves.

Most of those slaveowners had homes in the town of Beaufort. Although a mere 6,714 whites lived in Beaufort County according to the 1860 U.S. census, it numbered among the richest counties in the nation.

Slaves numbered 32,530 total — some five times the white population. Their bodies were treated as business assets, capitalized via mortgages, return on investment, and depreciation over time.

## CHURCH

Local religious institutions reinforced the town's capitalistic slaveocracy. Like many other high church Episcopal congregations in the Deep South, the Parish of St. Helena catered primarily to educated and moneyed slaveholding families.

"On any Sunday," historian Willie Lee Rose observed of the church, "as high a concentration of aristocracy per pew" could be seen as anywhere in the South.

Masters forced their house servants to attend with them, the slaves sitting in the balcony and the whites down below.

According to oral history accounts, in order to make certain that their chattel were in attendance to hear the sermon that almost always included some reference to the godliness of slavery, slaveowners stood near the stairs to the balcony. Before ascending the steps to their allotted place, slaves were required to touch the hand of their master.

Beaufort being a small town, the Baptist congregation was only a few blocks from the Episcopal church. Although far less influential than St. Helena, the Baptist Church of Beaufort was also among the most notable congregations in the South. There far more slaves attended church services, an arrangement sanctioned by planters who observed that African slaves responded better to less formal religion.

But the Baptists shared some formalities in common with the Episcopalians, including slaves' hand-checking their masters as they climbed to the balcony, and the minister routinely preaching the godliness of Black slavery.

In a congregation comprised of a mere 180 white members and some 4,000 slave members, white supremacy reigned.



Union military forces captured South Carolina's Sea Islands early in the Civil War. This is an 1862 photo of Union-occupied Beaufort, S.C., on Port Royal Island.

Far too small to accommodate all its slave members, the Baptist church in Beaufort operated plantation mission outposts scattered around the nearby Sea Islands. All told some 13,000 captives labored on the islands, St. Helena Island foremost.

Connecting Beaufort to St. Helena Island, the deep inter-coastal Broad River, three miles wide at its mouth, emptied into the Atlantic Ocean via the adjacent Port Royal Sound. Across the Sound from St. Helena Island lay Hilton Head Island, with a slave population of a thousand or so.

Seamen considered Port Royal Sound the “finest harbor south of Chesapeake Bay.” A dozen miles upriver Beaufort’s wealthy elites lived extravagant lives. Of both the South’s strategic waters and the region’s immense wealth, Lincoln took notice.

To this heart of the southern slaveocracy the biggest flotilla ever assembled in the U.S. — 14 warships and more than 50 additional vessels, including transports carrying 12,000 troops — set sail in late October.

## BIG GUN SHOOT

In Beaufort, dinner discussions often turned to the Confederacy’s envisioned glorious future — with conversations continuing over evening drinks on columned front porches bathed in pleasant autumn breezes.

That is, until a cable arrived on Nov. 4, 1861, warning that the Union Navy was assembling off the Sound.

Startled, white residents reacted with a mixture of disbelief and defiance. Surely, Beaufort’s elites told themselves, the two Confederate forts at the mouth of the Broad River — one on each side of the three-mile-wide expanse — would hold the Union vessels at bay. Nonetheless, unease settled across the town. Some began making preparations to leave. Others maintained outward confidence. Slaves sensed a change in the air.

• • • • •

Three days later at dawn, the mouth of the Broad River lay still with no wind to trouble the water. Into the Sound, Union warships steamed ahead.

The booming of cannons reverberated miles away across the Sea Islands. The battle was underway.

Startled, slaves working the cotton fields on nearby St. Helena Island ran to the big houses of planters, to their surprise and joy finding their masters’ families in a panic. Gathering what valuables could be easily carried, the island’s whites jumped into nearby boats and were gone.

The battle lasted but a few hours, with the superior firepower of Union naval forces overwhelming the limited munitions of the undermanned Confederate forts. By nightfall Union forces had seized control of the Sea Islands.

Under protection of the U.S. government were hundreds of abandoned plantation mansions, a vast wealth of cotton crops, and some 10,000 slaves — Gullah Geechee peoples of West African heritage — who had not been evacuated.

For the rest of their lives the African Americans of the Sea Islands would call this glorious day the “Big Gun Shoot.” It was when their overlords fled at the sound of cannon fire, and generations of slavery’s horrors came to a sudden end.

## FIRST

“We were the first ones,” Director Maria Gibbs of the Penn Center, whose great-grandmother had been born a slave, told me of that historical moment of freedom.

Penn Center, originally founded as a leading educational center for former slaves,

is now a museum and retreat center on St. Helena Island.

Gibbs’ great-grandmother and her family were freed on Nov. 7, 1861 during the Big Gun Shoot, a day that brought pandemonium upriver in the city of Beaufort.

“Trunks were packed, carts and horses were drawn up, and household servants began busily loading family possessions. For some slaves, it was the last act they were to perform for their masters,” wrote one eyewitness.

Like no other, it was an acknowledgment that many captives of evil had been loyal to their captors only out of necessity.

Soon no white citizens were to be found in the city, other than one drunkard, “for the enemy flew in panic leaving public and private property, letters, portfolios ... clothes, arms, etc.,” noted Union Admiral Samuel Du Pont upon arriving in Beaufort.

Freedom had come first to St. Helena Island, and then to Beaufort.

Though not fully recognized by anyone at that time — when Confederate armies were winning the major battles of the War of the Rebellion, as the conflict was officially known — upon the Sea Islands lay the beginning of the end of the entirety of the Old South.

Unrecognized, too, by the northern liberators of the Sea Islands was the remarkable power of the religious faith of most of the island’s inhabitants — a Baptist faith adopted within and shaped by slavery, yet always transcendent of white supremacy.

During those early celebratory days of long-awaited freedom’s arrival, a Baptist church building on St. Helena Island, constructed by slaves in 1855 for white planters and their families but abandoned during the Big Gun Shoot, now seemed a vestige of the past.

But soon a previously unimaginable future of expansive freedom throughout all of America would incubate within the church’s brick walls. The first ones freed would change the world. **NFJ**

*“The journal is simply jam-packed with thought-provoking material.”*

# Print media’s important role continues

By Mitch Randall

**D**igital media is currently all the rage. The world is plugged into all facets of new media, from slick websites to various social media platforms.

Everyone, everywhere, seems to have their heads down, staring at screens. The rapid rise of digital media has caused some people to conclude that traditional print media is dead.

According to Pew Research, newspaper and magazine circulation has indeed declined since the mid-2000s. During the 1960s and 1970s, newspaper circulation was at an all-time high, with some 60 million American subscribers.

By 2020, circulation dropped to approximately 20 million. This especially impacted daily news delivery.

While these numbers do not lie, they don’t tell the whole story. Traditional print media — newspapers and magazines — remain the most trusted source for reporting the news.

While delivery methods have evolved with the rise of digital media, professionalism and standards have largely remained the same.

In addition to a commitment to high-quality journalism, there is something about holding a printed newspaper or magazine in one’s hands that will not fully be replaced by the cold metal of phones, tablets and computers. The printed page still creates an intellectual and emotional connection between the reader and the writer.

Readers often tell us they love sitting down with the latest edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal and Bible Studies* or one of many books by Good Faith Media’s outstanding authors (though both the



journal and books are available in digital form for those who choose that option).

For many, the journal and books help them in their discipleship as they attempt to live out the teachings and example of Jesus. For these good reasons and others, Good Faith Media remains committed to print journalism.

We join our journal-related colleagues — Johnny Pierce, Bruce Gourley, Jackie Riley, Tony Cartledge, Cally Chisholm, Missy Randall and Stephanie Bruggeman — in celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Nurturing Faith Journal*.

They work tirelessly to ensure that each deadline is met and that the latest journal hits mailboxes on time. From content development to distribution, they are committed to publishing the best quality publication for our loyal readers.

While circulation has dropped over the last decade, following the trends of other print media companies, our subscribers’ commitment to the journal has never been stronger. And Good Faith Media is seeking — with your help — to expand the journal’s reach and influence.

Good Faith Media consistently receives positive feedback from subscribers who compliment the journal’s original and stimulating content. Lectionary-based Bible studies by Tony Cartledge are commended for their depth and how

something insightful and applicable is learned each week.

Columns by staff and other contributors are well appreciated, as are the history-based series by Bruce Gourley and astrophysicist Paul Wallace’s unpacking of faith-science issues.

The journal is simply jam-packed with thought-provoking material.

Alongside the journal is our robust online bookstore with a variety of titles and topics. Under the Nurturing Faith imprint, GFM has published more than 150 books — with others always in the pipeline.

Book lovers can peruse our inventory while reading a portion of the book and, in some cases hearing from the authors themselves on GFM’s “Good Faith Reads” podcast.

Several authors have written multiple books, but others are being published for the first time. Our team works closely with each author, carefully guiding them through the publishing process.

GFM echoes the words of Toni Morrison: “If there’s a book that you want to read but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”

As we celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Nurturing Faith Journal*, we extend our gratitude to our loyal subscribers. We work hard to publish the journal because of you.

You are in our minds and hearts as we envision each issue, write and edit each word, select images and create an attractive design, and make sure it gets delivered to you on time.

Happy 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary to this excellent journal you are now reading. We can’t wait to see what the next decade brings. **NFJ**

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



# Watch Out for the Cross!

Reconsidering the worldwide symbol for our faith

By Alyssa Aldape

One of my earliest memories of church was the Sunday night my dad portrayed Jesus in a play about the crucifixion. With no interest in staying in the church's childcare area, I wandered into the sanctuary to see what "big church" was up to.

It was one of the biggest church mistakes I have made to date.

Unfolding in front of me was my father in a ripped tunic being nailed to a wooden cross with what looked to be blood running from his wrists and legs. The church sound system operator timed the nail poundings just right for added effect.

I was confused and horrified. Why were people hurting him on the cross — the symbol of what I believed to be a faith that calls us to love one another?

It took me screaming at the sight of a deacon dressed as a Roman soldier, shoving a spear into my dad's side, for someone to realize I was in the sanctuary.

I knew some church members thought my dad wasn't strict enough with the youth group. But that was no reason to murder him in front of a crowd.

The horror, the betrayal... Would I ever trust church people again?

I was returned to the childcare area, inconsolable. The rest of the night is a blur.

Returning home, I remember my dad showing me how the blood was fake and how he was fine and that it was all pretend.

A few weeks later he portrayed Jesus again — this time at my pre-K graduation pageant as we sang a song about how Jesus loves the little children. As he exited the stage, I yelled out a warning for him to "Watch out for the cross!"



If the deacons or church mothers were not going to look out for Jesus, I would.

From then on, I had a love/hate relationship with the cross, and wondered why and how we decided it would be the worldwide symbol for our faith when the majority of Jesus' ministry was about living in a way that embodied God's love alongside others.

The cross was a shadow just looming over my shoulder, waiting for the right moment to get me. I remember more church skits about bearing a heavy cross but never really understanding what the load was other than the cross itself.

The idea of God needing a sacrifice never sat well with me as a child processing the Christian faith — nor did the idea of a violent God rather than one who calmed storms, swept Elijah away on a cloud to care for the weary prophet, and called the faithful to love the most vulnerable people when the world tosses them aside.

Sunday School teachers, pastors and dorm hall Bible study leaders would explain away at an atonement theory until I would nod in agreement. But never did I really feel great about the answer.

I took seminary classes in hopes of defining or making clear what theologians believed happened on the cross, beliefs that have guided our faith for centuries and are still rooted in the idea that Jesus' death — state-sanctioned murder — was necessary.

Also, I took classes on how we teach these stories to people in different life stages. You wouldn't dare tell a 4-year-old the same Easter story you told a 40-year-old.

Nor would you go into detail about the woman at the well in children's church the way you would with young adults.

Can you imagine toddlers flipping over their Fisher-Price picnic tables because they heard Jesus did that?

Teaching the biblical narrative in ways that make sense to people where they are in life is an art. It invites us to find creative ways to point to Jesus' mission in the world.

Some would say it should always point to the cross. But what if the most common and tangible concept understood by people of any age is not the cross, but the table?

Is it not a table where little ones learn how to feed themselves while sitting with adults? Is it not around a Sunday School table where children sit in small wooden chairs eating Goldfish while learning about a mythical big fish that swallows a prophet?

Around a table in an upper room, Jesus ate one last meal so good he used what was in it to say "remember me when you eat and drink."

And it is a table we gather around — whether each Sunday, once a month or quarterly — and remember that the table is not for the few but is widely open because the table does not belong to us.

The good news is not just some up-in-the-sky idea for after death. It is for here on earth, where we pull our chairs around the table and taste bits of the "kingdom" around us. *NFJ*

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

# Questions Christians ask scientists

An astrophysicist said the universe in the future will be cold, dark and lifeless.

How do you reconcile that with belief in a blessed afterlife?

BY PAUL WALLACE



**N**ot until in the fifth grade did I think much about the end times. One day in Sunday School a visitor presented us with a timeline printed on a large poster. In large uppercase letters across the top it read: THE PLAN OF THE END.

It was a full-color flowchart of the future. Based on the books of Daniel and Revelation, it was divided into three main sections: (1) the Church Age (you are here), (2) the Tribulation (seven years), and (3) the Kingdom Age (1,000 years).

The Rapture and Second Coming demarked these segments. Featured prominently were the binding and loosing of Satan and something about judgment seats and bowls. Armageddon was in there somewhere, and biblical citations were scattered throughout.

Old Testament Saints, New Testament Saints, the Unsaved of All the Ages, the Beast, and the False Prophet all played starring roles, but the lead belonged to none other than Jesus Christ himself. Arrows indicated who would go where and when.

All arrows, if faithfully traced, led to one of two terminal stations: The New Heaven and New Earth (in the upper right) or the Lake of Fire (in the lower right). The New Earth is where you want to end up, in glory with Jesus and all the saints.

I was somewhat alarmed, but there were incongruities. Chief among them was that Dad knew a lot of stuff about a lot of stuff but he had never mentioned the Rapture or the Beast or the Lake of Fire. If something so terrible was true, he would have surely briefed us.

So I found him at his desk to ask him about it. He looked up from whatever he was working on and said, “Son, that’s not true.” Ok then, I wondered, what was true? If the Rapture and the Lake of Fire weren’t on the calendar, what was?

A year or two later a man named Carl Sagan provided an answer. Dad had a copy of his new book *Cosmos*. I found it on the shelf in the den. On pages 228-229 I discovered, in the form of four images and a caption, what I was looking for: another plan of the end, this time with science.

The first image showed a bright seaside: the blue sky dotted with white clouds; the ocean; an abundance of green growing things along the coast; the yellow sun low on the horizon, its light amplified by reflection off the sea. It was a scene of obvious natural beauty.

The caption, however, was foreboding: “The last perfect day.”

The following frames showed the exact same view at progressively later times but, thanks to the slowly dying sun, everything changes: living things perish, the sea evaporates, the atmosphere escapes into space, the land dries out and cracks in the heat.

Above it all the sun, having exhausted its supply of hydrogen fuel, grows redder and larger. By the final frame the sun is a hideous red bloated thing filling the sky above an airless lunar waste. All these things will happen, wrote Sagan, “several billion years from now.”

Several billion years is a very long time, but this fact did nothing to soften the existential blow. I became obsessed with the future. When would the streets of Atlanta be emptied of cars? It seemed

**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).

impossible, but I knew they would be emptied eventually, and for a fact.

A few years earlier I had watched the city's tallest building at the time, the Peachtree Plaza, rise. When would it fall? One day I stood inches from my house and looked up close at the bricks and wondered: On what precise calendar day will these bricks be separated? Because one day they will be, and for a fact.

I pondered these questions with complete seriousness. Professor Sagan's vision haunted me.

As a scientist, I have learned some details about the fate of the universe. I teach a regular course on thermal physics, and central to that subject — and indeed to all of physics — is the second law of thermodynamics.

This law states that a quantity called entropy must always increase. Entropy is a measure of order and complexity. It may decrease locally for short amounts of time, but overall the cosmos is headed toward a state called "heat death" wherein entropy reaches its maximum value and nothing interesting ever happens.

Heat death is to life and order and complexity in the cosmos as white noise is to music. It is featureless, static and monotonous. It is the future, and it is inevitable.

It is also slow to arrive. For us on earth the shift will begin in about a billion years, but even the most rapid changes will be imperceptible over the course of a single human lifetime. This story contains no sudden drama or surprise turns, nothing like Jesus returning in the clouds amid the sound of trumpets or the falling of stars, just a gradual encroaching darkness.

But scripture describes the future state of the universe as quick to arrive, fleshy, tangible, and embodied. Human beings are not described as spiritual essences or ghosts but as skin and bone, bearing marks of our normal human lives, just as the resurrected Jesus bore them on his fully touchable hands and side.

This is why, traditionally, Christians have buried their dead and not cremated them: bodies are one day to be reconstituted.

## 35 Questions Christians Ask Scientists

By Paul Wallace

"Drill deep into the heart of matter, and we do not bump into God. Peer outward to the edge of the big bang, and we do not find God. But what we do find is beauty, and plenty of it, all the way down and all the way out. Granted, this is not the obvious beauty of a double rainbow. It builds over time... But does it fill us with God? I believe it does."

—Astrophysicist/Minister Paul Wallace

Available now from Nurturing Faith Books at  
[goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore](http://goodfaithmedia.org/bookstore).

35 Questions  
Christians Ask Scientists

Based on the series of articles from Nurturing Faith Journal



Paul Wallace

On one hand we find our religious tradition promising a new heaven and a new city on a new earth, heralded by sudden cosmic events, and emphasizing the bodily resurrection not only of Jesus but also of the saints (that's us). On the other hand we find a scientific consensus insisting on a slow imperceptible burning-out of the universe, terminating in a cosmos marked by cold, darkness, lifelessness and silence.

I confess that I have no solution. At many points my scientific and religious training complement one another. I have resolved, in this column and elsewhere, and at least to my own satisfaction, religious questions that arise from evolution, the big bang, genetics, geology, the search for extraterrestrial life, and other fields of science. But I have been unable to square my hope for an embodied future with the second law of thermodynamics.

As a scientist and as a minister of the gospel — I am one man — I do say that the sun will one day run out of hydrogen fuel and swell into a red giant and bring all life on earth to a final end. As for the rapture and the millennium and new

heaven and new earth, I come up a little fuzzy.

I just don't know. Perhaps my scientific training has on this point limited my imagination. I just don't know.

But I live in hope. In Luke 25:34-36 we find Jesus telling his followers this about the future apocalypse and his eventual return: "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these [catastrophes] that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Jesus is telling us that, no matter how much or how little we understand the theology and science of the end of the world, that we are to remain in prayer, stay on guard, stay awake and fear not.

How little I know! But this I understand: Jesus awaits us at the end of all things, calling us forward in courage and prayer, calling us into life. **NFJ**

# PREACHING JESUS

Expanding initiative,  
retreats lead to sermon  
series, resources

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

“It’s the best retreat I’ve ever been on — ever!” said Wade Bibb, pastor of Central Baptist Church of Bearden in Knoxville, Tenn.

He was referring to his participation in a Jesus Worldview Retreat in 2021 that led to a yearlong preaching series for 2022 titled “Jesus 365.” He offered two reasons for the experience being so impactful.

First, the location was well removed from the daily demands and multiple distractions of life as a pastor. Based on a Montana ranch in West Yellowstone, the retreat included excursions into nearby Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks.

Second, he noted, was the largely unscheduled schedule.

“It was not what I expected at all,” said Bibb, noting there were only two structured sessions — one being upon arrival at a Bozeman coffee shop and another around a fireplace in a ranch cabin.

“It was very organic, and it worked,” said Bibb. “It worked very well.”

He spoke of how the format planted the topic of the weekend into the environment with materials sent ahead of time and various prompts along the way. Yet the deep and wide conversations — about the shocking absence of Jesus within much of Americanized Christianity — occurred throughout the week during shared meals, van rides and walking trails.

“I was so challenged by the whole experience,” he said. “It just resonated with me.”



These five ministers joined Good Faith Media and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship leaders in a Montana-based Jesus Worldview Retreat in 2021: (left to right) Stacy Nowell, Will Dyer, Wade Bibb, Benny McCracken and Tamara Smathers. (Photo by John D. Pierce)

## PREACHING

Bibb returned to his Knoxville church with a commitment to ensure that the following of Jesus is the clear priority conveyed throughout congregational life. So he started with the most visible place to make that clear: the pulpit.

His yearlong series, “Jesus 365,” was launched on the first Sunday of 2022 and continued until Advent with its natural focus on preparing for the coming of Christ.

“We were returning to the life and teachings of Jesus every Sunday,” said Bibb, who assumed the pastorate in 2010, of the yearlong series. “It was the easiest preaching since I’ve been here.”

The series was well received, he said, leading to post-sermon discussions that were more frequent and robust than usual.

Late in the year, one member told Bibb: “We vote for doing it another year.”

Indeed, Bibb said he hopes the emphasis is more lasting than a prescribed period.

“We’re just going to keep going back to Jesus,” he said. “It has been very refreshing.”

Also, he noted, the series became a familiar topic in his meetings with other pastors who are interested in doing a similar emphasis — and sharing resources.

Bibb organized his yearlong preaching by starting with the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Then three of Jesus’ parables were sermon fodder.

“We worked up to the Sermon on the Mount for the last quarter leading into Advent,” he said.

## 52 WEEKS OF JESUS

Similarly, Glen Money, now pastor of First Baptist Church of Murfreesboro, Tenn., returned from an earlier Jesus Worldview Retreat with a similar commitment.

At the time he served First Baptist Church of St. Petersburg, Fla., which he said was composed of people from a variety of backgrounds and lacked “a dominant shared identity.”

Following his participation in a Jesus Worldview Retreat in Montana, Money developed an emphasis called “52 Weeks of Jesus.”

“So, I had this ‘radical’ idea: What if our shared identity was birthed from prioritizing the person of Jesus — his divine identity and purpose, and a commitment to take his teachings and interactions with people seriously?”

He continued to probe: “What if we could let those things stand, if not alone, at least apart from other isolated or, honestly, divergent scriptures that have tended to dominate the evangelical mindset?”

“So I went for it,” said Money, noting that the congregation “really got behind it.”

“I think we know we should be listening to and learning from and about Jesus,”

he continued. “But let’s face it, though folks tacitly do it all the time, it’s not easy to say out loud you would prefer your pastor ignore Jesus and stick with Moses and Paul.”

The emphasis, however, picked up steam as it unfolded, and Money began to notice a positive response to the singular focus. For some, he said, it revealed just “how much Jesus stands out from what we are used to paying attention to.”

In 2022, his second year in middle Tennessee, Money resurrected the yearlong emphasis for his current congregation. He noted a similar positive response.

“I discovered a few things when you make Jesus the intentional focus of 52 sermons,” said Money. “First, it’s hard to squeeze everything in there you want to preach.”

“There are just so many great stories and texts that demand more than a glossing over,” he continued. “In contrast, I really came to realize how few major themes Jesus had.”

He noted those: “The Kingdom of God was the dominant one that everything flowed into and out of. Forgiveness. Care for others. Humility. Redemption. The wideness of God’s mercy and reach. Grace. Desire for us to be whole in every measure. Judgment reserved for those who wanted elevated status and exclusion clauses for doing the right things. Sacrificial love.”

“Well, I guess that’s more than a few,” he confessed. “But they show up so consistently and clearly when you don’t let your attention run elsewhere.”

Money added that while Jesus’ teachings and actions may be hard to accept, they are not hard to understand. “You have to go past the Gospels to get really confused.”

## REVELATION

Retreat participants often acknowledge that the realization that much of Americanized Christianity is being defined apart from Jesus had not fully dawned on them.

“Participating in the Jesus Worldview Retreat was such a gift and a pleasure,” said Stacy Nowell, pastor of First Baptist Church of Huntersville, N.C. “I experienced the beauty of creation, enjoyed the company of new friends, and was given the space to

reflect deeply on the callings of ministry and discipleship.”

She was part of one of two retreats in collaboration with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 2021.

“In particular, it was eye-opening to reflect on the role Jesus plays in today’s American church,” he said. “Is Jesus central — or have we made him peripheral?”

Nowell said she reflected on whether Jesus has become a mere token that is used to justify preferred ideologies as opposed to being the standard against which Christians measure those beliefs.

“Uncomfortably,” she confessed, “I came to the conclusion that the answer is the latter more often than not.”

In addition to impacting her preaching, Nowell led her congregation to engage in a year-long study of the Gospel of Mark.

“The series is punctuated by other topics, but we’ve decided to slow-walk through the Gospel in order to better immerse ourselves in the life, thoughts and behaviors of Jesus,” she said.

“My hope is that the better we know Jesus, the better we’ll know what faithful discipleship does — and does not — look like in these complicated times.”

Dock Hollingsworth, pastor of Atlanta’s Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, participated in the first retreat — and shared his experience in his first sermon following his return.

“The topic of the week was how much of the current American conversation about Christianity actually factors in the life and teachings of Jesus...” he told his congregation. “I expected stimulating conversation; I did not expect to come home with a disturbed sense of purpose and priority.”

## RESOURCES

Participation by clergy from Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches, in addition to Baptists, as well as lay leaders have broadened the discussions around



State Cooperative Baptist Fellowship organizations in Arkansas and Florida collaborated with Good Faith Media in a Jesus Worldview Retreat with these ministers: (left to right) Steve Sheely, Frank Granger, Bruce Gourley, Glen Money, Ray Johnson and Ray Higgins. (Photo by John D. Pierce)

advancing a Jesus worldview — in contrast to familiar, ideological-driven “biblical” or “Christian” worldviews that downplay or deflect from Jesus.

Interest in expanding the Jesus Worldview Initiative into churches has resulted in ongoing, customized presentations on the subject (in sermon or lesson forms) by initiative leaders and in producing congregational resources.

Good Faith Media, through its Nurturing Faith book-publishing arm, offers veteran pastor Jack Glasgow’s book, *Seeing with Jesus: Developing A Worldview Shaped by the Gospels*. It is designed for individual or group reading, with discussion questions at the end of each chapter.

A free, downloadable study guide by Christian educator Frank Granger is available at the book’s purchase site in the Good Faith Media online bookstore.

Last year, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship released a multi-week video series for congregations titled *Seeing Through the Eyes of Jesus*. Information on these resources is available at [goodfaithmedia.org/jesus-worldview-initiative](http://goodfaithmedia.org/jesus-worldview-initiative).

## WHAT’S NEXT?

Those interested in helping to advance and/or participate in the next phase of the Jesus Worldview Initiative are invited to contact Executive Editor John Pierce at [john@goodfaithmedia.org](mailto:john@goodfaithmedia.org). Two small-group retreats are planned for September 2023, with additional retreats and resource development to follow as support allows. **NFJ**

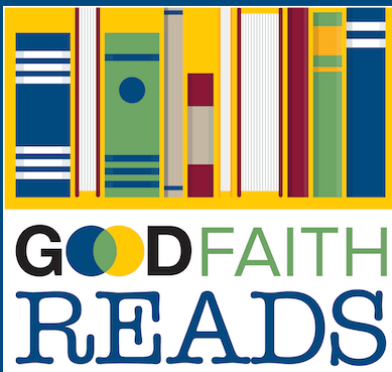
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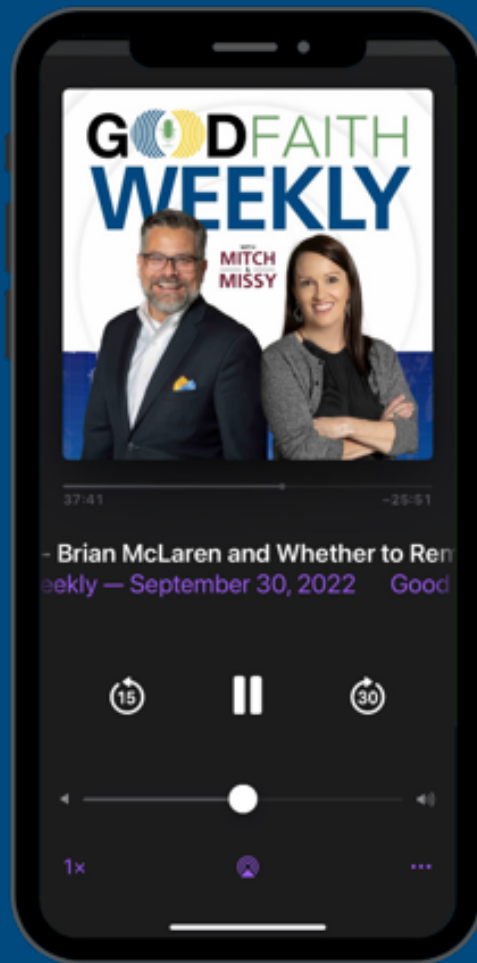


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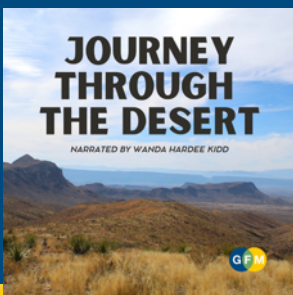
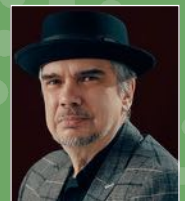
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*featuring...*



## 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.



# LEAVE & LEARN

Three unique Good Faith Experiences offered in 2023

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Three in-person travel experiences are being offered by Good Faith Media this year — but not the ones first advertised.

The Good Faith Experience: Colorful Colorado is rescheduled for 2024 to avoid conflicts with other planned events. In its stead is another opportunity to live and learn among the Amish of Lancaster County, Penn.

“This year we have expanded our offerings both far and near,” said Bruce Gourley, coordinator of Good Faith Experiences.

Here are the three experiences from which to choose — with dates far enough apart to participate in two or all three:

**Civil Rights Experience**  
Birmingham/Montgomery/Selma, Ala.  
April 25-26

**Iceland Experience**  
July 17-24

**Amish Experience**  
Lancaster, Penn.  
October 11-14

“For those seeking a far-flung adventure, our eight-day Iceland Experience will be a journey to one of the most enchanting places on the planet,” Gourley added.

Points of exploration will include national parks, UNESCO World Heritage sites, awe-inspiring glaciers, geysers, waterfalls, coastlands, flowing lava fields and seeing the famed Icelandic horses. Those wishing to do so can even swim in geothermal waters.

While this experience accommodates more people than the typical small-group experiences in the western U.S., reservations are coming in quickly. So those wishing to attend should register soon.



Shared meals, new friendships and wonders aplenty mark the uniquenesses of Good Faith Experiences.

“Closer to home you are invited to join us for what will be a remarkable Civil Rights Experience in Birmingham, Montgomery and Selma, Ala.,” said Gourley, who is assisting Good Faith Media colleague Starlette Thomas, director of the Raceless Gospel Initiative, in planning the experience.

“The civil rights movement in America is the result of nurtured faith, evidence of what it takes to enact change that ‘turns the world upside down,’” Thomas said. “The Civil Rights Good Faith Experience will center the history of social activism and resistance in the African-American religious experience.”

Gourley, a historian, added: “From the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church to the Edmund Pettus Bridge and civil rights museums, for two days we will tread upon sacred soil and immerse ourselves in the stories of courageous people who sacrificed their lives to make America a more just and compassionate nation.”

Another up-close, learning-through-living opportunity comes from spending time in the homes and businesses of Old Order Amish families.

“This experience goes far beyond driving through beautiful Pennsylvania farmland while gawking at people wearing plain clothes and driving horses,” said GFM’s Tony Cartledge, who along with his

wife Susan will again host the Pennsylvania experience.

“We spend hours sharing time, meals and conversation with a variety of Amish families who have grown to be friends,” he added. “From dairy farmers to barn builders, schoolteachers, homemakers and ministers, we discover that we share many of the same aspirations and obstacles that make life both interesting and challenging.”

These in-person experiences provide unique opportunities for participants who often build close relationships with each other and return for shared experiences to other destinations.

“This is the 10<sup>th</sup> year since *Nurturing Faith Journal* introduced these now-deemed Good Faith Experiences to our readers who seek such customized and immersive group experiences in remarkable places that foster meaningful conversations and connections,” said Gourley.

Hundreds of people, he noted, have collectively journeyed to Hawaii’s Big Island, western national parks and historic destinations in the eastern U.S., in addition to Israel and the West Bank. The three experiences set for this year will bring even more people together in more places.

Visit [goodfaithmedia.org/experiences-and-events](http://goodfaithmedia.org/experiences-and-events) for more information and registration. **NFJ**

APRIL 25-26, 2023

# The Birmingham- Montgomery Civil Rights Good Faith Experience

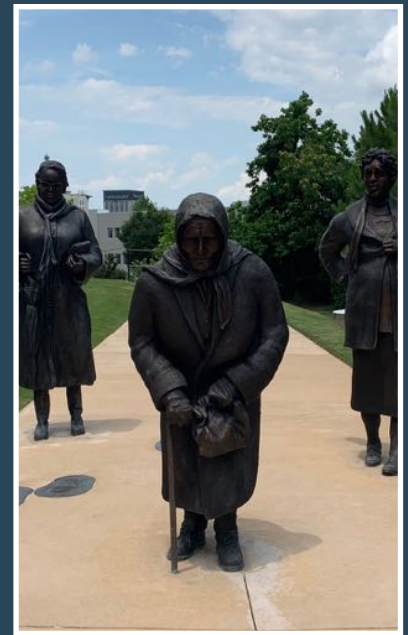


**Participants can expect to visit iconic sites such as:**

- the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum
- the National Memorial for Peace and Justice
- the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala.
- 16th Street Baptist Church

**and more!**

Visit [goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org) for more information.



**Join Starlette Thomas, Bruce Gourley and other Good Faith Media staff to tour historic sites of the civil rights movement in Alabama.**

An occasion to reflect and to walk circumspectly, this experience will leave an indelible impression on your spiritual journey.



Photos by Starlette Thomas.



# ICELAND ADVENTURES

JULY 17-24, 2023



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OCTOBER 5-8, 2023

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Scan QR code for information on itineraries, reservations and pricing.

# 40 and counting

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

**A**pril marks 40 years since founding editor Walker Knight, along with his associate Susan Taylor and a horde of volunteers at Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., rolled out the first edition of what was then called *SBC Today*.

As a young campus minister reading that inaugural issue and the ones that followed, I never imagined becoming the publication's editor. However, much more than my own career redirection has changed during the past four decades.

In the 1990s, the broadening coverage of the issues and events impacting those who identify as Baptist — but not fundamentalist — led then-editor Jack U. Harwell and his directors to rename the newspaper, *Baptists Today*. And the changes kept coming.

My 23-year editorship has occurred at the dizzying intersection of a rapid and continually shifting culture (religiously and at large) and fast-changing technology that impacts the delivery of information and much more.

Between my election to the editorship in late 1999 and the beginning of service on Feb. 1, 2000, I attended an editors' meeting in Hawaii. Arriving at the Honolulu airport, I walked briskly to baggage claim beside another passenger who was traveling alone.

Walking stride in stride, I recognized him to be golfer Larry Mize, and invited myself to his home in Columbus, Ga., to interview the 1987 Masters champion. He was gracious and we reconnected upon returning home.

That feature story appeared in the April 2000 issue — the first I oversaw. This was the mere beginning of engaging a wide spectrum of persons in order to share their lives and perspectives with readers.

Such conversations and resulting writings have been memorable. A few among many come to mind: Gardner Taylor, Will Campbell, Fred Shuttlesworth,

Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, John Claypool, Barbara Brown Taylor.

Not all were recognizable names, but no less insightful. The afternoon I spent in Wadley, Ala., with pioneering pastor Ruby Welsh Wilkins rises to the top. And interviews that turned into friendships — like with civil rights bridgebuilder Albert Brinson and songwriter Pat Terry — are well appreciated.

In recent months I've turned every page in the 40-year history of this publication. It was striking to see the depth, breadth and evolution of its coverage.

In addition to the physical changes leading to a full-color, magazine format, the content focus has shifted from denominational news to exploring issues of importance to individuals and congregations seeking to follow Jesus faithfully in times of rapid changes.

The publication started as an independent, national newspaper to provide unrestricted coverage of the battle within the Southern Baptist Convention — which the fundamentalists won. The newspaper, in tabloid format, was offered monthly or twice-monthly — often determined by available funds.

In fact, the survival of this autonomous venture has never been a given — and has continued only because of the often-sacrificial support of those who value its unique role of providing truth through editorial freedom. Thank you!

While retaining its independence, valued relationships developed: Today we publish books in collaboration with the Alliance of Baptists, an organization formed in 1987 which at the time provided the publication to all of its growing membership.

Relationships with the broader Baptist family continued with emergence of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in the early '90s and other organizations and movements such as the multi-fellowship New Baptist Covenant gathering in 2008.

This publication tracks historically alongside the rise and devastating effects of

Editor's note: Online columns like this one appear daily at [goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org)

the religious right that brought its authoritarianism and discrimination to the religious and political forefront.

Addressing ethical issues — such as hunger, war (nuclear proliferation), gender equality, homelessness, abortion, AIDS, LGBTQ justice, earth care, racism, sex abuse and church-state relations — is a thread that runs throughout the decades of publishing.

Realizing that the issues facing thoughtful Christians today are not defined by denominational labels, the moniker *Nurturing Faith Journal* (which already carried the *Nurturing Faith Bible Studies*) seemed more accurate and welcoming.

This renaming coincided with an ongoing shift from focusing on Baptist institutional life to thoughtfully exploring timely issues and impactful trends — while providing needed resources.

As online news delivery increased, so did the journal's shift to providing more analysis, features and other less time-sensitive original content. More than 90 percent of content in every issue now can be found nowhere else.

Trusted colleagues have shared this journey — some for many years, like my longtime friends Jackie Riley, Bruce Gourley and Tony Cartledge. Others have shared their gifts along the way, and an enlarged team was formed with the creation of Good Faith Media.

More than once Walker Knight gifted me with the affirmation that he saw the evolution of this publication with the pride of a parent watching a child grow up to do well.

When honored for his overall service long after his retirement, Walker said, "May this be a publication that continues to bring light in dark places."

Let it be. **NFJ**

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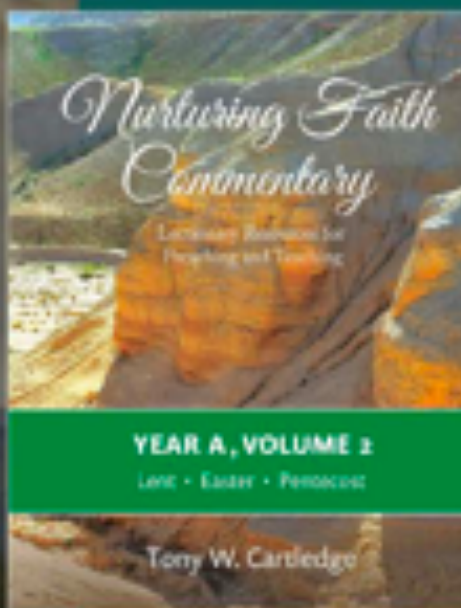
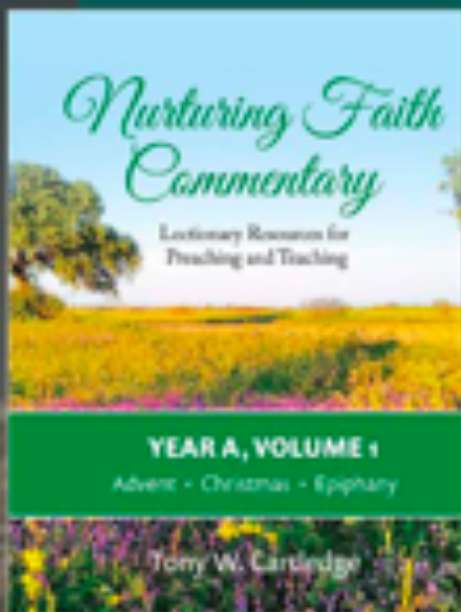


An experienced writer, editor, academician and teacher, **Tony W. Cartledge** is well known for his weekly Bible lessons and teaching/preaching resources that have impacted individuals, classes, and congregations in seeking to learn and apply biblical truths.



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