

The background of the cover is a misty, atmospheric landscape. A dirt path leads from the bottom center towards the horizon. On either side of the path, there are four perfectly conical, dark green trees. The sky is a pale, hazy blue. The title text is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

Under the
WINGS
of GOD

Twenty Biblical
Reflections for a Deeper Faith

Cornelius Plantinga

“This subtle yet profound collection of meditations is the fruit of a lifetime of listening to the Word. Combining a keen mind and a pastoral heart, Plantinga is attuned to the depths and secrets of Scripture. Listen with him and hear from God in ways you never have before.”

—**James K. A. Smith**, Calvin University; editor in chief, *Image*; author of *How to Inhabit Time*

“Reading *Under the Wings of God* is like sitting down for a one-on-one conversation with a wise and gentle friend. Neal Plantinga has such a gift for the word, both the Word of God and his own use of language spoken and written. With this collection he invites the reader into the strange old world of the Bible and makes it seem oh so familiar. He sees both the ways of God and the broken world we live in with such faith-filled eyes that he enables his reader to see the extraordinary holiness of our ordinary lives.”

—**David A. Davis**, pastor, Nassau Presbyterian Church

“Plantinga holds up well-known passages of Scripture to the light to show us the beauty and mystery hidden within. Like a delighted geologist, he points to the gravity, fracture, and luster in these gems, helping us to see what we hadn’t before. Beautifully written and thoroughly researched, this book is a gift to the church.”

—**Rev. Mary S. Hulst**, university pastor, Calvin University

“This little book is chock-full of spiritual protein and vitamins, delectably prepared. You’ll be tempted to overeat. Don’t do it. Read slowly, and be nourished.”

—**Robert C. Roberts**, Baylor University (emeritus)

“Hearing Neal Plantinga’s sermons as a student years ago made me want to be a preacher. Though I grew up with solid preaching, his sermons (many of which are included in this collection!) showed me new possibilities. Neal opened up familiar texts with fresh insight, careful exegesis, and literary imagination. The Holy Spirit used them to stir both my mind and my heart. I cannot recommend this book highly enough.”

—**Peter Jonker**, minister of preaching, LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

Under the
W I N G S
of **G O D**

Under the
WINGS
of **GOD**

Twenty Biblical
Reflections for a Deeper Faith

Cornelius Plantinga



BrazosPress

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2023 by Cornelius Plantinga Jr.

Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
www.brazospress.com

Ebook edition created 2023

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-1-4934-4041-2

Scripture quotations in chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 17, 19, and 20 are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations in chapters 3, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 18 are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The author is represented by and this book is published in association with the literary agency of BBH Literary, LLC, www.bbhliterary.com.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

For my grandchildren:
Micaela, Ben, Adde, Haley, and Parker

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Endorsements](#) [i](#)

[Half Title Page](#) [iii](#)

[Title Page](#) [v](#)

[Copyright Page](#) [vi](#)

[Dedication](#) [vii](#)

[Introduction](#) [1](#)

[1. Under the Wings of God](#) [5](#)

[2. God on the Loose](#) [15](#)

[3. With All Your Mind](#) [24](#)

[4. Are You the One?](#) [33](#)

[5. The Inescapable God](#) [41](#)

[6. Clothe Yourselves with Patience](#) [49](#)

[7. In the Interim](#) [58](#)

[8. God Just in Case](#) [67](#)

[9. Christ Lifted Up](#) [76](#)

[10. On the Receiving End](#) [84](#)

[11. The Mark of Cain](#) [92](#)

[12. Self-Deception](#) [97](#)

[13. Splendor in the Grass](#) [107](#)

[14. Afraid of Easter](#) [115](#)

- 15. Neighbor Love 125
- 16. Spiritual Momentum 134
- 17. Clothe Yourselves with Humility 143
- 18. For All Who Are Far Away 152
- 19. Practice Hospitality 161
- 20. If Only There Were Someone 171

Notes 179

Back Cover 183

Introduction

Christians have long practiced certain spiritual disciplines to help strengthen their godliness. They practice prayer, fasting, solitude, silence, good works, and study of Scripture.

We may add meditation or reflection on Scripture. The person who practices this discipline mulls over a passage of Scripture, considers it, dwells on it. You might say they chew on it like a cud, pressing out its juices and swallowing them. Simply put, they want God's Word to feed them.

The twenty reflections in this book are meant to help. Some of them may help us see into a text more deeply. We want to avoid superficial readings of texts that give us misleading notions of what the text is saying to us. I'm thinking, for example, of Mark 4:25, in which Jesus says, "For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away" (NRSV). On a surface reading, Jesus appears to endorse a familiar fact—namely, that the rich tend to get richer and the poor tend to get poorer. But Jesus had in mind something else entirely, and I invite you to read "Spiritual Momentum" (chap. 16) in the collection to ponder it.

Or, consider the title piece, "Under the Wings of God" (chap. 1). It reflects on Psalm 91, which is extravagant in its promises to believers, saying that if you make the Lord your refuge, then "no harm will overtake you" (91:10 NIV). A surface reading of the text suggests that believers will never be harmed—neither by accidents, nor disease, nor the treachery of a spouse, nor anything at all. And that's plainly false. Believers suffer from harm every day. And yet, there *is* a reliable promise here, one we may deduce when we consider the bigger, broader teachings of Scripture. So, one of the main benefits of reflecting on Scripture is that it enables us to move past superficial readings of it and find the deeper meanings pulled up by serious thought. In this way, all the reflections in the book are conducted "under the wings of God."

Another good reason to reflect on Scripture is that doing so sharpens our loves and hates, aiming them at their proper objects. In Romans 12:9 Paul writes, “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (NIV). Hating what’s evil and loving what’s good is the heart of true religion, said America’s greatest theologian, Jonathan Edwards.¹ You learn to hate all devilry—all lying, cheating, idolatry, assault, injustice, ingratitude, adultery, and cruelty. And you tend to act in accordance with your hatred. On the other hand, you learn to love all godliness—faith, hope, compassion, kindness, humility, patience, impartiality. You learn to love God. And you tend to act in accordance with your love. In sharpening our loves and hates, several of the reflections in this collection may help. “God Just in Case” (chap. 8), for example, hones our hatred of idolatry, and “Clothe Yourselves with Patience” (chap. 6) hones our love of patience, a surprisingly strong virtue.

Finally, reflection on Scripture helps us see how to live as good citizens of the kingdom of God. This is the obvious implication of getting our loves and hates appropriately sharpened. So, for example, “On the Receiving End” (chap. 10) invites us to be like infants in simply receiving God’s love and living off it. No need for suspicion or skepticism here. God’s loving presence is an unequivocal good, and our thriving on it the key to a successful Christian life.

I hope that you find something nourishing among these reflections. If you do, I will have fulfilled my purpose.

But one note: each reflection begins with a proposed reading from Scripture. Don’t ignore them. The reflections won’t nourish you much if you remain unfamiliar with these readings. Dive into them. Ponder them. Think them over. If you do, what I have to offer will then make a lot more sense.



1

Under the Wings of God

Reading: Psalm 91 (NIV)

He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge. (Psalm 91:4)

Many adults can recall a certain childhood feeling that has now pretty much faded away. It's a childlike feeling of security in the nest. It's a sense that you are protected, sheltered, perfectly safe. It's the feeling that somebody else is in charge—somebody big and strong and experienced. In properly functioning homes, children often have this feeling. Adults do not, and they miss it.

Years ago, on the old *Candid Camera* TV program, someone interviewed a beefy truck driver—a man of about fifty. They asked him what age he would be if he could be any age he wanted. There was a silence for a while as the trucker thought it over. What was he thinking? Was he hankering for age sixty-five and retirement so he could trade his Kenworth four-and-a-quarter semitrailer down to a John Deere riding lawnmower? Or was he yearning for age eighteen and the chance to go back and take some turn he had missed?

The trucker thought it over. Suppose he could be any age he wanted. Finally, he turned to the interviewer and said that if it were up to him, he'd

like to be three. Three? Why *three*? the interviewer wanted to know. “Well,” said the trucker, “when you’re three you don’t have any responsibilities.”

When I first heard the interview, I thought the man was trying to be cute. But I now think he said something wistful. What he knew was that when you are a child, and if your family is running the right way, your burdens are usually small. You can go to bed without worrying about termites in your house beams. You don’t wonder whether the tingling in your leg is a symptom of some exotic nerve disease. You don’t wrestle half the night with a tax deduction you claimed, wondering whether some federal person might find it a little too creative. No, you squirm deliciously in your bed, comforted by the murmur of adult conversations elsewhere in the house. You hover wonderfully at the edge of slumber. Then you let go and fall away.

You dare to do this, not only because you expect that in the morning you’re going to wake up, but also because you are sleeping under your parents’ wing. If parents take proper care of you, you can give yourself up to sleep, because somebody else is in charge. Somebody big and strong and experienced. As far as a child knows, parents stay up all night, checking doors and windows, adjusting temperature controls, driving away marauders. They never go off duty. If a shadow falls over the house, or demons begin to stir, parents will handle it. That’s one reason children sleep so well. Their nest is sheltered, and they love it just as they should.



I think children might be alarmed to discover how much adults crave this same sense of security. Adults need to be sheltered too. Some of us have been betrayed. Some of us have grown old and are not happy about it. Some are deeply disappointed that their lives have not turned out as they had hoped. Others have been staggered by a report that has just come back from a pathology lab. Still others are unspeakably ignored by people they treasure. Some are simply high-tension human beings, strung tight as piano wire.

To all such folk the psalmist speaks a word of comfort. It’s one of the great themes of the Scriptures: *God is our shelter*. “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge” (91:4).

The image here is that of an eagle, or maybe a hen. In any case, it's a picture of a bird that senses danger and then protectively spreads its wings over its young. An expert on birds once told me that this move is very common. A bird senses the approach of a predator, or the threat of something falling from above, and instinctively spreads out its wings like a canopy. Then the fledglings scuttle underneath for shelter. The move is so instinctive that an adult bird will spread those wings even when no fledglings are around!

And the psalmist—who has almost surely seen this lovely thing happen—thinks of God. “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.” The point is that God is our shelter when the winds begin to howl. The point is that under God's wings we are defended, protected, perfectly safe. The point is that someone else is in charge. Someone big and strong and experienced. Someone who never goes off duty.

In one of his books, John Timmer tells of his experience as a boy in the Netherlands at the start of World War II. German troops had invaded a few days before, but nobody knew just what to expect. Then, on the second Sunday of May 1940, as the Timmer family was sitting around the dinner table in their home in Haarlem, suddenly they heard an air-raid siren and then the droning of German bombers.

Of course, everybody was scared out of their minds. “Let's go stand in the hall,” John's father said. “They say it's the safest place in the house.” In the hall John's father said, “Why don't we pray? There's nothing else we can do.”

John Timmer writes that he has long ago forgotten the exact wording of his father's prayer—all except for one phrase. Somewhere in that prayer, Mr. Timmer, who was praying for God to protect his family from Hitler's Luftwaffe, said, “O God, in the shadow of your wings we take refuge.”¹

God spreading wings over us is a picture that all the Jewish and Christian generations have memorized and cherished, in part because the phrase invites us to recover our childhood feeling of security in the nest. Or to discover it for the first time if we are working away from a terrorized childhood.

It's a special feeling, and only a pretty numb Christian would fail to be touched by it.

Still, if you are thinking, one disturbing little question is pricking you. How *true* is the picture of a sheltering God? How secure *are* we in the nest? I wonder whether in 1940 on the second Sunday of May some other Dutch family begged God to spread wings over their house. I wonder whether the bombs of the German air force pierced those wings and blew that house and its people to rubble.

You read Psalm 91, and you begin to wonder. It offers such comprehensive coverage. "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge. . . . You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday" (91:4–6).

Really? I need not fear any of these things? I can sleep in a dangerous neighborhood with my windows open? I will not fear the terror of the night? My child's temperature soars and his white blood count plummets: I will not fear the pestilence that stalks in darkness? My spouse develops fever, weakness, and pounding headaches: I will not fear the plague that destroys at midday? Really? Is there a level of faith that can honestly say such things even after all allowance has been made for the fact that Psalm 91 is God's Word in poetry?

Let's face the truth. Faith in the sheltering wings of God does not remove physical danger or the need for precaution against it. We cannot ignore Middle East tourist advisories, or feed wild animals on our camping trips, or jump a hot motorcycle over a row of parked cars and trust God to keep us safe. We cannot smoke cigarettes like the Marlboro man and then claim the promises of Psalm 91 as our protection against lung cancer. A person who did these things would be a foolish believer and a foolish reader of Psalm 91.

Remarkably, in Matthew's Gospel, Satan quotes Psalm 91 to Jesus in the temptation at the pinnacle of the temple (Matt. 4:5–7). "Throw yourself down," says Satan. After all, it says right in Psalm 91:11–12 that God will give his angels charge over you. And Jesus replies that it is not right to put God to the test. It seems that God's protection is good only for certain

events and that restrictions may apply. Jesus was teaching us that we may not act like a fool and then count on God to bail us out. God may do it—and some of us recall times when we acted like fools and God bailed us out. But we may not *count* on it.

And then, of course, some believers get hurt, terribly hurt, by no folly of their own. Suppose a drunk driver smashes into your family car. Suppose an I-beam falls in on you in a storm.

Or suppose you are a devout middle-aged Christian woman, and one August you start not to feel very well. So you visit your primary care physician, who sends you for tests, and then for a visit with a specialist, who orders more tests. When the test results come back, one of your doctors says, “Ma’am, I’m sorry to say that you had better get your affairs in order.” He says more, far more, about treatments and research and making you as comfortable as possible—on and on with all kinds of stuff that is well-meant. But you have grown deaf. All you can think is that you are forty-six years old, and you are going to die before your parents do and before your oldest child gets married.

Whatever happened to the wings of God? Can you get brain cancer under those wings? Get molested by a family member? Get knifed by some emotionless teenager in a New York subway? Can you find, suddenly one summer, that your own seventeen-year-old has become a stranger and that everything in your family seems to be cascading out of control?

Where are those wings?

I think that what troubles us is not so much the sheer fact that believers suffer along with everybody else. If the children of God were always saved from floods like Noah and his family; if every time somebody pointed a gun at a Christian, the gun just turned to salami; if we really had a money-back guarantee against hatred, disease, and the acts of terrorists, then of course we wouldn’t have to worry about church growth, would we! Our churches would fill with people attracted to the faith for its benefit plan. We *already* have people becoming Christians because they want to get rich or get happy. What would happen to people’s integrity if becoming a believer really did give you blanket protection against poverty, accident, and the wages of sin?

No, it's not the fact that we must take our share of the world's suffering that surprises us. Not that. Our experience and the rest of Scripture have taught us to *expect* hardship. *What worries us is that Psalm 91 tells us not to worry.* It says, "A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you" (91:7). This is advertising that sounds too good to be true. In fact, the psalmist says, "If . . . you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you" (91:9–10). And the statement troubles us. No harm at all? What about Paul? What about Stephen? What about our Lord himself? He wanted to gather the citizens of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks. And one day the soldiers took him outside the city and nailed his wings to a cross.

So, what is going on in Psalm 91? How can its extravagant promises be God's Word to us?

What Psalm 91 does is express *one*—one of the loveliest, one of the most treasured—but just *one* of the moods of faith. It's a mood of exuberant confidence in the sheltering providence of God. Probably the psalmist has been protected by God in some dangerous incident, and he is celebrating.

On other days, and in other moods—in other and darker seasons of his life—this same psalmist might have called to God out of despair and a sense of abandonment. Remember that when our Lord was crucified, when our Lord shouted at our God, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he was quoting one of the Psalms (Ps. 22:1). Despair or astonishment at what can happen to us under God's providence—that too is natural and biblical.

Psalm 91 says no harm shall befall us. Other psalms and the rest of Scripture testify to God's presence in the midst of real evil. Weighing these two scriptural witnesses together, we may conclude that Psalm 91's teaching is that no *final* evil shall befall us. We all know that we can believe in God with all our heart and yet have our heart broken by the loss of a child or the treachery of a spouse or the menace of a fatal disease. We know that: every one of us knows that. And yet, generation after generation of saints has known something else too and has spoken of it. In the mystery of faith, we find a hand on us in the darkness, a voice that calls our name, and the sheer certainty that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God—

not for this life and not for the life to come. We may be scarred and shaken, but we are also loved.

We are like fledglings who scuttle under the wings of their parent. The forces of evil beat on those wings with everything they have. The pitchforks of the evil one, falling tree limbs in the storm, rain and hail—everything beats on those wings. When it is finished, when evil has done its worst, those wings are all bloodied and busted and hanging at wrong angles. And, to tell you the truth, in all the commotion we get roughed up quite a lot.

But no final evil can get to us because those wings have never folded. They are spread out on the cross to be wounded for our transgressions and bruised by our iniquities. And when the feathers quit flying, we peep out and discover that we have been in the only place that has not been leveled. Yes, we have been bumped and bruised and hurt. Sometimes badly hurt. But the other choice was death. I mean that the other choice was to break out of the embrace of God. The truth is that, if we had not stayed under those wings—if we had not stayed in the shadow of the cross—we could never have felt the body shudders and heard the groans of the one who loved us so much that those wings stayed out there no matter what came whistling in. This is the one who protects us from final evil, now and in the life to come—in which it is safe at last for God to fold those wings.

“He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.” It’s not a simple truth, but it is the truth. And we ought to take it to heart this very day.

Prayer

O God, spread your wings over us. Protect us, we pray, in Jesus’s name. Amen.

An earlier version of this chapter appears in Cornelius Plantinga Jr., “Can God Be Trusted?,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 42, no. 7 (June 15, 1998): 45–48, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/june15/8t7045.html>.



2

God on the Loose

Reading: Mark 5:1–20 (NIV)

When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. (Mark 5:15)

This is a story that's about as rugged as the gospel gets. There's so much violence here. The man with the demons breaks his chains and smashes his handcuffs. He howls and bruises himself with stones. He runs at Jesus and shouts at him and pleads with him. He pleads with Jesus not to torture him. Maybe he thinks Jesus is going to draw out his demons one at a time, and this poor man swears to God it will hurt too much.

An exorcism has to be quick, you know. It's like taking an adhesive bandage off your arm. You don't want to dawdle over an exorcism.

And Jesus doesn't dawdle. He throws all the demons out of this shrieking man at once, and the demons enter a herd of swine and run them right down into a lake.



What a story this is! You know, Mark has his own way of telling us about Jesus. When Mark gets his Gospel going, what he really wants to say is that in Jesus Christ God is on the loose. God is on the loose, and we're never safe from God's liberating power. It's as if Mark says to us: "Friends, believe the good news. In Jesus Christ, God is *after* you."

In his Gospel, Mark is telling us what the human problem is, and he's telling us how Jesus is the answer to it. Our problem is not that we keep banging our heads on the glass ceiling as we try to go home to God. Oh no. Just the opposite. As Professor Donald Juel remarks, the heavens get torn open during Jesus's baptism (Mark 1:10) not so that we can get at God, but so that God can get at *us*.¹ God wants to get at us because we're fugitives. We're runaways. We're like Cain or Jonah or the prodigal son.

And now, says Mark, because the heavens have been ripped open, God has gotten out. God is coming after us in the person of Jesus. Jesus brings God a lot closer to people than they want, and when Jesus does this, he frightens them. Jesus in Mark 5 isn't a gentle Savior who gathers kindergarteners onto his lap. This is a rough Savior who battles demons in a graveyard. This is a Savior who starts two thousand hogs on a death march. This is a Savior with fire in his eye.

You might say Jesus was his mother's son. Mary was a fierce woman, you know. Such a fierce virgin she was! You remember that she's the young girl who sings that song in Luke 1 about how God scatters the proud and brings down the mighty from their thrones. This is the God who sends rich people away when they plead for food. C. S. Lewis once wrote that Mary has in her "a terrible gladness" over all the calamities that come to people when they've moved over to the wrong side of God.²

Jesus was his mother's son. Sometimes he's tender, but sometimes he goes after people. He goes after demons too, and it upsets them. In Mark 5 they *know who Jesus is*. It's almost a kind of professional privilege among supernatural beings that they know each other. The demons know who Jesus is without an introduction, and they fear him and plead with him. I think we understand. I think we understand that evil has something to fear from God, and therefore something to fear from Jesus.

The demoniac is afraid of Jesus, and the demons are afraid of Jesus, because he brings God much too close. Even the townspeople fear Jesus, and in such an unexpected way.

Here they have this pathetic man who lives in their cemetery. They have this horribly sick man who's crawling with demons. He's out in the cemetery howling among the tombs, and it's awful what he does out there. But that's not what frightens people. Everybody thinks *that's* normal. A man rattles around in a graveyard all night, shrieking and mutilating himself, and people shrug. What are you gonna do? they say. Hey, that's the way these demoniacs are.

What frightens people is that Jesus heals him. What frightens people is that Jesus gets him all dressed up and calmed down. It's when the Lord of life raises up a man who lives with the dead—*that's* what frightens people. To these people resurrection is a terrifying event.

“When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid” (5:15).

They were afraid.

Sanity scares them. The power of God scares them. Resurrection scares the daylights out of them. So, they tell Jesus to leave. They beg Jesus to get out of town. These people want nothing to do with God, and especially not when God is on the loose.

Why? Because they're used to their crazy demoniac just as he was. A cleaned-up demoniac doesn't look normal to them.

But, as Donald Juel says, these people also get stuck on the one question that sticks in all of us when we read the story. People always have one question here. What about those pigs? Why would Jesus have anything to do with stampeding those pigs? Why does the Savior choose such a nonecological method of demon disposal?

You know, a lot of preachers steer clear of this story in Mark, and the reason is that they don't know what to say about this part of the story, and I don't quite know either.

But let me say at least a little.

One thing to understand is that in Mark's biblical world pigs are unclean. In fact, everything here is unclean. The Gerasene territory is unclean because it's full of Gentiles. The graveyard is unclean because it's full of corpses. The demoniac is unclean because he's full of demons. And Jesus is willing to *become* unclean to save this hopeless man who is thrashing around in the cemetery. Jesus is a wilderness Savior who gets his hands dirty when he works.

And, yes, two thousand pigs become a casualty of the healing process. I guess the point is that demons have to go *somewhere*. Demons are parasites, after all. They can't just float free. They've got to attach somewhere. So, Jesus negotiates with the demons, and what follows is the death march of the swine.

Maybe the idea is that the unclean spirits will drown right along with their unclean hosts. If so, then the march of the pigs is like the march of Pharaoh and all his hosts into the Red Sea. It's something to grieve, but also something to celebrate.

But of course, the Gerasenes don't feel like celebrating. They want to know why two thousand animals have to die to save one crazy man. They want to know how they're going to make a living now after their livestock have drowned. And that's a question the story never addresses.

But isn't it interesting that nobody gets excited about the redemption of the demoniac? Even now, nobody gets excited by his redemption. People just get excited about the pigs. Jesus sets a man free from a legion of demons. Everybody says, "But what about the pigs?" Jesus blesses a suffering man with a wonderful relief—you might say with a wonderful housecleaning. And everybody says, "But what about the pigs?" The grace of God liberates a human spirit, and everybody wants to talk about property loss and ecology.

At minimum this strange story tells us that God's interests sometimes differ from ours and that God uses emergency methods for redemption. And, frankly, we're not so comfortable about some of these methods. We're

not so comfortable with God on the loose. At the center of this story is miraculous healing, and it upsets us. Exorcism disturbs us. We think exorcism belongs in the movies.

For one thing, dramatic signs of the power of God are wide open to abuse. Faith healing and exorcism can easily become the tools of spiritual imperialists who want to mess with other people's lives, so we get shy about them. But, for another thing, these supernatural ministries have an eerie feel to them. I, for one, don't like that very well. I like a good, solid Christian ministry that won't move around on me. I like the borders of reality to stay put, so we all know what's natural and what's supernatural, and then for things to stay more on the natural side of the border. I think a lot of Christians are inclined to be like that.

Think of this: if you ever laid hands on somebody who then got healed, I think you'd be scared to death. As Professor Juel remarks, you'd grab the first physician you could find and say, "Talk to me about germs and antibiotics and imbalances in brain chemistry."

When we discover that a faith healer is a fake, are we disappointed? I don't think so. I think we're relieved. We like the lines of reality to stay put. We like God to stay in heaven where he belongs. We'd like our demoniacs to stay out in the graveyard where *they* belong. And we don't really want Jesus to go around stirring them up.

My point is that we aren't any more comfortable with God on the loose than any of the Gerasenes were.

Juel once had a seminary student who visited a seriously sick woman. This woman was so sick and so old, and so sick of being old and sick, that she wanted to die. She wanted the Lord to take her home. So, the student asked her a few questions on his visit: "Do you believe in God your Savior?" "Yes," she said. "Do you believe that God could take you to himself and reach gently for you when he did it?" "Oh, yes," said the woman, "I believe that." "Well," said the seminarian, "have you ever had people pray with you about this, and go ahead and ask God to take you?" "No," she said, "I haven't done that." "OK," said the student, "would you like me to pray for you?" "Yes," said the woman, "I would like that a lot."

So the student prayed a prayer that went something like this: “O God, Mrs. Tiffany has suffered a long time now, and she’s your daughter and she believes in you. Please take her to yourself soon, so that she may be at peace with Christ.”

The woman died on the spot, and the student was so spooked that he never mentioned his prayer to anybody for three years. He hadn’t meant it to come to *that*! He hadn’t expected God to *act*! It was only a prayer!³

“When [the Gerasenes] came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.” They were afraid because if exorcism can happen, miracles can happen. If miracles can happen, resurrection can happen. And if resurrection can happen, anything can happen.

The Jesus of our baptism, the Jesus we stand up to confess—this Jesus is God on the loose. He’s a beautiful Savior, but he’s also big trouble. He’s the mediator of all creation, but he’s also the Savior who brawls with demons in graveyards.

Jesus Christ is God on the loose. We’re never safe from his approach. The love of God is strong and true, but it’s also out to kill our old self and raise up our new self, and this means pain. We can’t rise until we die. And so, God slays in order to save. People sometimes talk as if meeting God would be like meeting a friend for coffee, or taking a walk in a garden with somebody who looks pleasant and friendly. People think that meeting God would be like meeting Mr. Rogers.

The truth is that meeting God would be more like getting electrocuted. God slays in order to save, and the desire to meet God is therefore a death wish. Our addictions have to die. Our pride and envy have to die. Our terrible despair has to die. All that drags us down has to die. Only then can we arise, dress up in the virtues of Christ, and step out into the sunshine like Jesus walking out of his tomb.

Prayer

*O Lord, Jesus Christ, God on the loose, have
your way with me today, and with all your
followers. Amen.*



3

With All Your Mind

Reading: Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Matthew 22:34–40 (NRSV)

[Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your . . . mind.” (Matthew 22:37)

In one of his speeches, Howard Lowry tells of a time he attended a rehearsal of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* in Princeton.¹ The conductor was trying to get the choir to sing the main chorale a certain way. (If you imagine the hymn “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded,” you’ll have the music.) The conductor kept rehearsing the choir, and they kept trying, but they weren’t giving him the sound he wanted.

So he called a halt and said something like this: “Look, your singing is skilled and it’s full of talent, but it’s not right for thi music. The really good singing of music like this is congregational singing. You’ve got to sing this chorale more simply and deeply.” And then the conductor told some of his boyhood memories of going to church in Germany and the way people sang there. Finally, he said to the choir, “Now sing this chorale as if you were back in my childhood church.”

So they sang again. They sang with simple depth, with deep simplicity. Of course, they didn’t sound exactly like a congregation. They probably couldn’t have sounded like that if they had tried. The reason, of course, is that they brought all their musical understanding to the singing of the

chorale and so sang it with an educated simplicity, with a second simplicity, with a simplicity that lay *beyond* complexity.

We all know about second simplicity. According to a famous story, the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth was once asked to sum up the thousands of pages of his dense theology in one sentence. He paused. Then he said, “Jesus loves me; this I know; for the Bible tells me so.”

Well, it’s one thing for a child to recite these words, and quite another for Karl Barth to say them. It’s one thing to fool around at a piano by plunking out the notes of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” with your index finger. It’s another thing to hear that tune as a reprise just after a fine pianist has played Mozart’s variations on it. As a reprise the tune seems loaded.

Second simplicities lie beyond complexities and incorporate them.

And so it is with loving God. A child can do it. In some ways a child can become our teacher in doing it. But there are also adult ways to love God, and these take some time to learn. Adults learn to love God thoughtfully. Adults learn to love God with all the powers of a mature mind. Adults bring to God a love that has all the law and the prophets compacted in it.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” says our Lord (Matt. 22:37). In other words, you shall love God with everything you have and everything you are. Everything. Every longing, every endowment, each of your intellectual gifts, any athletic ability or computer skill or musical talent, all capacity for delight, every good thing that has your fingerprints on it—take all this, says Jesus, and refer it to God. Take your longing, and long for God; take your creaturely riches, and endow God; take your eye for beauty, and appreciate God. With your heart and soul and mind, with all your needs and splendors, make a full turn toward God.

That’s the great commandment, and Deuteronomy and Matthew give it to us in two versions. Have you ever noticed the difference? In Matthew’s Gospel a lawyer asks Jesus what may have been a trick question, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (22:36), and Jesus replies by quoting famous words from Deuteronomy 6:5, words that were on the lips of pious Jews morning and evening, words as familiar as “Now I lay me down to sleep.”

“Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” And Jesus says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your *mind*”—not with all your *might* (that’s Deuteronomy), but with all your *mind* (that’s Jesus in Matthew).

Here’s a change worth a little gasp. What if a four-year-old prayed one night, “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my brain to keep”? You would notice.

“Love God with all your mind,” says our Lord. Take it as a charter for a thoughtful Christian life. Take it as a charter for a Christian getting educated. What’s the project for Christians engaged in these pursuits? What’s the big idea within them? The simple answer is that we’re trying to become better lovers. We want to love God with all our mind. Of course, we want to offer our hearts and souls to God. But we are also intellectual beings, and Jesus Christ calls us to intellectual love; he calls us to mindful love.

“Love with all your mind.” The command sounds simple, but it requires from us a second simplicity, a simplicity that incorporates a good deal of complexity.

So what does the command mean?

To love God intellectually is to become a student of God—a student who really takes an interest in God. Have you ever noticed that a fair number of Christians are not particularly interested in God? Some of them are ministers. These are people who don’t ask about God, don’t talk about God, and maybe don’t even think about God unless they really have to. Their interest in God seems merely professional.

Isn’t this strange? Shouldn’t we be somewhat *preoccupied* with God? Isn’t that what lovers do? They get preoccupied with their beloved. They notice things about the one they love.

And isn’t there quite a lot to notice about God? Isn’t God remarkable, after all—so surprisingly fierce, so surprisingly tender? You know, the Scriptures give us a portrait of God we would never have guessed. Sometimes the portrait makes us squirm. Think of some of the biblical images for God. In the Bible, God is lion and lamb, church and home, fire and water. God is not only a leopard, an eagle, and a bear, but also a moth;

not only a parent, but also a child; not only a king and a warrior, but also a barber and a whistler.

Think of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The creeds give us a symmetrical doctrine of the Trinity—one God in three coequal persons. You would never guess from this tactful portrait that in Scripture the triune God is, so to speak, a bachelor father, his single son, and their agent. That's God.

Loving God with all one's mind means taking an interest in God and in the peculiarities of God. It means letting God be *God*. This is mere courtesy toward God, and you can't have love without it. The idea is that God gets to write God's own autobiography. The idea is that God gets to write God's own drama of life with us, including God's own character description. Our calling is not to rewrite the script but to find our role there and fill it.

Mindful love of God means other things too. Catholic philosophers Dietrich von Hildebrand and Alice von Hildebrand once observed that lovers give their beloved a good-sized benefit of the doubt.² So, if our beloved acts well, we look upon the action as typical. If our beloved acts badly, we look upon the action as an aberration. To love somebody is to give that person a big line of moral and spiritual credit.

So it is with our love of God. God does not act badly, and if we really thought God did, then we ought to give up our religion. But it sometimes *looks* as if God acts badly. It looks as if God goes off duty while traffickers enslave women and children. It looks as if God blesses a lot of the wrong people and ignores a lot of the right ones. It looks for all the world as if God has a lot of explaining to do. That's what Job thought, and Job is in the Bible.

How do you love God when, for a while, you can't make any sense out of God? This is a question that is a lot bigger than I am, but I think we must trust Jesus Christ. Even before his crucifixion Jesus suffered a lot more than most of us, and *he* says we ought to love God with everything we have. *He* clears the way to love God with a second simplicity. Doesn't God deserve at least the same benefit of the doubt that we give to anyone we love? It's a matter of faithfulness. It's a matter of intellectual humility. It's a matter of mere loyalty.

“Love the Lord your God with all your mind.” It means giving God the benefit of the doubt because we know the limits of our understanding.

Further, loving God with all our mind means taking an interest not only in God, and in the peculiarities of God, but also in the works of God. I’m thinking of creation in all its strength and majesty; creation in all its stupendous variety; creation in all its unguessable particularity. I’m thinking of humanity itself, in all its multicultural riches. It turns out that God loves not only humankind, but also human kinds, and it’s our delight to love what God loves.

To respect creation is to show love for its creator. How do you respect creation? You give it room to be itself. You let it unfold before your watchful eye. You search it and know it with the preoccupation of a lover. Then you tell the truth about the actual state of creation, including not only its bird songs, but also its terrible carnivorousness; including not only the way purple and coral impatiens thicken into great mounds of color in a cool northern September, but also the way lions in Kenya beard themselves with the blood of fawns. You tell the truth even when you have to tell it about us—human creatures who look so much like God, and act so little like God, and have fallen so far from God.

To hear in the world both the song of God and the groaning of all creation, to prize what is lovely and to suffer over what is corrupt, to ponder these things and to struggle to understand them and God’s redeeming ways with them—these are ways of loving God with all our mind. Becoming a real student of God and of the works of God is an act of flagrant intellectual obedience because it is an act of flagrant intellectual love.

Let me add a word about where all this love must lead. Intellectual love must lead us out into the lives and habitats of other human beings in order to do them some good. Even that—doing people some good—sounds simpler than it is, of course. It’s another of those second simplicities. Isaiah tells us right away in his first chapter that we must *learn* to do good (Isa. 1:17), suggesting that good in a fouled-up world is often elusive and

ambiguous. The point is that we need to study lest we unwittingly do a half-cooked good, a dangerous good, a ruthless good. We need to study first and do good second.

But when we actually do it, then once more God's kingdom comes, and God's will is done. Once more we become effective lovers of God. Once more we take a creature's role in the big project of building God's shalom.

So "love the Lord your God with all your mind." Let this command defeat every anti-intellectualism. What a sin this is, and how much of the Christian church happily commits it! Anti-intellectualism is anti-Christian. Never give in to it. Never concede anything to it. Never quit fighting against it. Anti-intellectualism is the sin of lazy people or of fearful people who content themselves with first simplicities and who resist the pain it takes to grow beyond them.

"Love the Lord your God with all your mind." Let this command also defeat every selfish intellectualism, every worldly intellectualism, every idolatrous intellectualism. Let it remind us that the life of the mind has nothing to do with carving a niche for ourselves, or making a name for ourselves, or conquering some area of study as if it were an enemy. The life of the mind is an act of love, an act of reverence. It's an act in which we get pulled out of our nervous little egoisms and combined into a kingdom project so much bigger than any of us, so much grander than all of us, that we cannot help getting stretched by this move.

Intellectual love of God means, for most of us, that we will deliberately read some things that make us ponder God's world. We will deliberately attend events that stretch us a little. When we are with our friends, we will sometimes lay aside the chatter and gossip that so easily creeps into conversation, and we'll talk about more serious things—about who God is, what justice demands, what it would be like in the world if just for one day people kept the Ten Commandments.

"Love the Lord your God with all your mind." Whether we are nine years old or ninety, whether students or lifelong students, our job is to love God with everything we have, including with the trillion-cell wonder that is the human brain.

At the end of the day, mindful love of God is a matter of mere obedience to Jesus, who told us to do it.

Prayer

Great and loving God, you are rich with possibilities and achievements beyond human comprehension. But if I love you with all of my mind, you will reveal at least some of them, thereby enriching me for Jesus's sake. Amen.

An earlier version of this chapter appears in Cornelius Plantinga Jr., "Pray the Lord My Mind to Keep," *Christianity Today*, vol. 42, no. 9 (August 10, 1998): 50–52, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/august10/8t9050.html>.



4

Are You the One?

Reading: Matthew 11:1–6 (NIV)

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11:2)

The question has doubt written all over it, but the man who asks it is a man of faith. John the Baptist is a believer, and he has a pretty high-decibel way of saying so. Back in chapter 3, John is a voice crying in the wilderness, a voice crying for repentance. “Repent,” he says, and he says it just like that (Matt. 3:2). “Repent!” he says—not one of those mealy-mouthed substitutes we sometimes hear in pious places these days from preachers who don’t have the courage to use the biblical word “repent.” Preachers today say, “I’d just like to share that holiness is expanding into more of a growth area, and maybe you’d like to get in on the ground floor.”

No, John the Baptist says it straight. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 3:2). It’s all very dire and apocalyptic, but there’s no doubt it’s the cry of a human heart. John believes in Jesus. John believes Jesus is the one who will come in power. Jesus is going to baptize people with fire, and John has to get them ready. John’s job is to wake people up, shake people up, snap them to attention so they’ll be ready for Jesus.

“John the Baptist,” says Barbara Brown Taylor, “has always seemed to me like the Doberman pinscher of the gospel.” We want to come to Jesus, but we have to get through John the Baptist, who is always growling and snapping and stretching out his leash. We want to come to Jesus, and here’s Jesus’s guard dog with a big old spiky collar and two-inch incisors, and he’s got us by the ankle. “Before he is through,” says the Reverend Taylor, “our heads are pounding with vipers, wrath, axes, and unquenchable fire.”¹ And we wonder, Does coming to Jesus have to be this rough?

“Repent,” says John. The kingdom of heaven is coming because Jesus is coming, and he’s coming with an ax in one hand and a pitchfork in the other hand, and he’s going to cut down some trees, and he’s going to set some fires.

Well, that was John back then. That was John back in chapter 3. Here we are in chapter 11, and now John the Baptist is in prison. He has tangled with King Herod, and he’s paying for it with the loss of his freedom.

Here he is, crammed into a cell and waiting for Jesus to launch D-day. In a jail cell, a person spends a lot of time thinking about what’s what. John sits there, trying to get comfortable, and he wonders. Is this jail sentence part of God’s plan? Is this part of getting ready for Messiah? A cell, and some tough guards, and all the screaming of all the prisoners at night—are these what you get if you run ahead of Jesus?

John pulls his knees up under his chin, and he wonders. A man takes his stand for what he believes is right—and what he gets out of it is the privilege of sitting in jail, waiting for Herod’s men to come in and finish him off.

You understand that John isn’t the sort of man whose faith wobbles every time he catches a cold. He’s a believer. He does believe. All his personal misery will not destroy his faith that God has a plan for Israel and a plan for Messiah. The thing is that John had thought *Jesus* would move at the center of this plan. John thought *Jesus* was the one who was to come, but the thought keeps coming to John like a brick to the side of his head—the thought keeps coming that Jesus is *too slow*! He’s not *doing* anything! He’s

not lighting any fires. All he's doing, for heaven's sake, is preaching and pastoral care.

And John is devastated. It's a terrible thing to blaze the way for someone and then to have that person fizzle. John had been so *sure*. He had been so sure that the Mighty One was coming, and he had gone way out on a limb to say so. Jesus would clear the Roman rubble out of the land. He would chop out all the deadwood in Israel and bring in the day of the Lord. John had been so certain—and that's what had kept him going. That's what gave him courage to get in Herod's face. That's what was keeping John alive.

But now he's been getting some garbled bits of news from the battlefield. And his heart is sinking. What he hears is that there's *no battle*! The one who is to come isn't *doing* anything! For some reason, Jesus is holding back! There is no sound of the trumpet; there's no call to arms. Messiah isn't doing what a messiah ought to do, and John can't figure it out. Why is Jesus wasting his time? Where's the cataclysm? Where's the apocalypse?

John hears the news of Jesus, and the questions start pounding in him like a headache. Where is Jesus's band of guerrillas? Why is he with these fishermen all the time? And why isn't he in Jerusalem? What's he doing in the backwoods of Galilee? And why is Jesus wasting his time on pastoral ministry? How's that going to help? Healing a sick servant or two—that isn't going to budge the Roman Empire. Straightening out life for Peter's mother-in-law—*that's* not going to shake men like Herod!

And so, finally, John sends two of his friends to ask Jesus a terrible question. A terrible, heart-sinking question. "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matt. 11:2).

We have to understand that there's frustration and maybe a note of accusation mixed into John's question. Look! he says, are you the one or *not*? Are you the one, or do we have to find someone else to get it done? John is saying, in effect, "If you're the one, get on with it! Light a fire under the Pharisees! Thresh Herod out of the system. Get Caesar off our backs. And while you're at it, why not proclaim release for prisoners and maybe start the release program right here."

Are you the one or not?

The question is still with us. It's the central question of Advent. And in all our Christmas wrapping and sending and singing and planning, in all our commotion, maybe we'd better pause and ask the question ourselves. Are we sure we're centered on the right one? Is he the one? Are we so very sure?

Much of our world seems to go on completely immune to anything Jesus stands for. In England, the land of the Thirty-Nine Articles, maybe 4 percent of the population will go to church on a Sunday. In the Muslim world, Jesus is not the one because he didn't launch jihad. Even in the US, which is seemingly so religious, how much does Jesus Christ really matter? How much does Jesus matter even in the Christian church, which sometimes looks as if its programs could keep right on rolling even after Christ has been long forgotten?

Don't we ourselves shift away from him? Don't we find—including some of us who are ministers—that we need to be converted to Jesus Christ again and again, as our attention wanders? The Christian life becomes a sequence of conversions as we slide away and then turn back, slide and return. Over and over, we do this till one day someone cries in the wilderness that we need to die and rise with Jesus Christ once and for all so that we may enter the kingdom of heaven.

“Are you the one who is to come?” John the Baptist sends his question out to the ages, and the answer comes back from Jesus in the messianic language of Isaiah: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see,” says Jesus; report to John that

the blind receive sight
the lame walk
those who have leprosy are cleansed
the deaf hear
the dead are raised
and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. (Matt. 11:4–5)

To a crooked generation Jesus would give no sign of his credentials, but to John the Baptist, to this noble freedom fighter in prison, Jesus Christ

quotes old words from Isaiah. He says that this shall be a sign to you that the kingdom of heaven has come near: the blind see; the deaf hear; and the poor—the *poor* are getting filled to the brim with the gospel.

John would have known these words by heart—which makes it remarkable that Jesus leaves out one part. My friend Mary Hulst once pointed this out to me. Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 about bringing good news to the poor, and then he stops. He doesn't go on to quote the one part John is listening for—the part about proclaiming liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. John is in prison, and Jesus leaves out the one part John is aching to hear. And when John hears that Jesus has left it out, he gets the message. The message is that Messiah has come, and John will pay with his life for having blazed the way.

Jesus honors John by inviting him to join the ranks of saints and martyrs who have followed Jesus by paying the ultimate price. And one day Jesus *would* follow John to the grave and lie down beside him. But now Jesus tells John that John will go to the dead first and lie down beside them. All this so that the kingdom could come near.

Blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me, says Jesus. Blessed are you, John, if you are not scandalized by me, because you will not be getting out of prison. Blessed are you, John, if you are willing to be a forerunner in your death as well as in your life.

The kingdom of God has come near in Jesus, but it has not yet come home. The scandal of the gospel is that it comes to us in between the first advent of Jesus Christ and his second advent—and being a believer means to live with poise in the interim. Our faith centers on the Christ who did heal, and did speak comfort to the poor, and did on the first day of the week rise mightily from the grave. But we are people poised between one advent and the next, looking for God's final shalom in which *every* tear will be wiped from our eyes, and *every* leper will be cleansed, and God's world will know its Lord.

“Are you the one who is to come?”

He's the one. And when we make a full turn toward him, we find *God*, more God than we could ever grasp or absorb. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Word of God, the light of God—God's Messiah. Jesus Christ, who would honor John the Baptist by lying down beside him in death. Jesus Christ, who does what it takes to carry away the sin of the world.

Prayer

*Lord Jesus Christ, you are the one, and the
revelation fills us with joy. Amen.*



5

The Inescapable God

Reading: Psalm 139 (NIV)

You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you, LORD, know it completely.
You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain. (Psalm 139:1–6)

To read Psalm 139 is to be reminded why all the generations of Jews and Christians have loved this psalm. Here is one of the treasures of the Bible. Here is a prayer so lyrical, so intimate, so revealing at its heights and depths that if you hear it in faith, you will probably be converted to God all over again.

It's hard to know the circumstances in which this prayer was written. Maybe somebody has accused the writer unjustly, and maybe that's why he gets so indignant against the enemies of God. Maybe that's why he wants so

much for God to search him and to know his heart. But whatever his reason for writing, the inspired author of this psalm tells us something of God that we need to know.

What does he tell us? He tells us a truth that can sound downright scary. He says that God is inescapable. The psalmist says that we can conceal our thoughts from each other, but not from God. We can hide our shame, but not from God. We can outsmart our competitors, but nobody outsmarts God. We can move out of town—in fact, we can *keep* moving away from each other the way people do in C. S. Lewis's picture of hell, so that the landscape fills with abandoned houses as people keep moving away, always farther and farther away in a kind of mad desolation.¹

The point is that we can out-move each other, but we can't out-move God. We can outlive each other, but we can't outlive God. We can keep each other in the dark, but we can't keep God in the dark, because God has perfect night vision. We can try to drown our anxieties by drinking ourselves stupid, but when we come to our senses, God will still be there. Even death brings no escape. People who hope to end it all discover that at the end there is God, and now they have to begin with God all over again.

Facts are stubborn things, aren't they? And the sober fact is that I can't get away from God. Where would I go? As the psalmist says, If I fly high, so does God. If I sink low, so does God. If I rise with the dawn, or set with the evening sun, God rises and sets right along with me. Up, down, east, west, never mind. No exit anywhere. Even burrowing into the womb of the earth brings me back to God. I can't get outside him. God's house has no outdoors.

I can't even retreat to the sanctuary of my own mind, because God tracks every thought. God records all the devices and desires of my heart. God knows not only what I say but also what I think. God knows not only what I say but also what I almost said. God knows the kind word I forgot to say and the kind word I never dreamed of saying.

It can make a person crazy. I always have company. I never have privacy. Everywhere I go, I am being watched.

In 1998, actor Will Smith played a labor lawyer named Robert Dean in the film *Enemy of the State*. In this film Dean has a good job, a Georgetown house, and a lovely family. All is sunny-side up till the day an old classmate surreptitiously slips a video into Dean's shopping bag. The video has a murder on it; it has the evidence that could jail a government official. So the official comes after Dean. Using the vast power of the federal government, the murderer taps Dean's phones and bugs his house. He hacks into Dean's computer and traces each keystroke. He films every move Dean makes. He even bugs Dean's clothing!

As the film goes on, you get this awful, creepy sense of what it means to be watched. Somebody knows when I sit and when I rise. Somebody knows when I come and when I go. Somebody knows which pair of lateral incisors shreds my dental floss. Somebody is familiar with all my ways, because somebody is watching! Somebody is listening. Somebody is studying me as if I were trapped in a lab.

Here's the nightmare that turned Orwell and Kafka into household names. Here's the threat to personal privacy that people dread so much that they will do anything to escape it. And now, the psalmist reveals that our lack of privacy is not just some Orwellian vision. It's Bible truth. God has us hemmed in. God is watching! God is listening! Around every corner, at the end of every hallway, up or down any flight of stairs, there is God.

We have no escape, no retreat, no privacy at all—and, as Paul Tillich once said, this is why people have sometimes wanted to kill God.² If God keeps impinging on me, if God keeps crowding on me—if this God will give me no room to live and move and have my own being—then I will attack God. I will get rid of God. I will deny God, reject God, remove God. I will pass a law that outlaws God. I will organize a conference that reimagines God. I will write a book that reconceives God so as to get him out of my hair. I'll go off to the kind of seminary where the main job is telling students what they no longer have to believe, and I'll become the kind of minister who tells his congregation that God does not rebuke and does not judge. It's a no-fault congregation in the midst of a no-fault society. Here you may ignore God, or domesticate God just as you wish,

and all that will happen is that God will enfold you in a warm blanket of permission.

I'm saying that people will try *anything* to escape the inescapable God.

The mere fact of God's Godness, the sheer fact that God is God and not we ourselves—this fact has always been intolerable to us in our sin. This is one reason our Savior ended up on a Roman cross. The Gospels tell us that Jesus Christ brought God too close, much too close for comfort, and when God gets too close, people want to cross him out.

The Gospels tell us

that priests plotted against him,
that Judas betrayed him,
that three disciples fell asleep on him,
that witnesses lied about him
and that Peter denied him.

Each was a stake in his heart, long before the Romans drove them through his wrists and feet.

That's the killer's response to the inescapable God, and centuries of modernity show us that you don't have to be Friedrich Nietzsche to be tempted by it.

"You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me" (Ps. 139:1–5).

Such knowledge is _____? What does the psalmist say next? Such knowledge is *terrifying* to me? Such knowledge is *intrusive* to me? Such knowledge is *intolerable* to me?

No, says the psalmist with a wistful tone, your knowledge of me is wonderful to me. It fills me with wonder that you know me so well.

This changes everything, doesn't it? What if God's knowledge of me is the knowledge of a loving creator who wove me together in my mother's womb? What if the all-knowing God has got me, not trapped in a lab, but cradled in his grace? What if I quit fighting the inescapable God and surrender to him? What if I give in to the God I cannot escape?

You know, St. Augustine fought off God for years. He tells us all about it in his autobiography. He tells us of all the years he wondered among the labyrinths of thought and desire, and how late he had come to find his heart's true home. His confession of alienation from God and of God's breakthrough to him is one of the treasures of Christian devotional literature: "Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. . . . You were with me, and I was not with you. . . . [But] you called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. . . . You put to flight my blindness. . . . You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours."³

The writer of Psalm 139 is at peace. It's a comfort that God alone knows me through and through, because nobody else is up to the job. Our secrets are safe only with God. Think about it. When our bad secrets get out, other people discuss them, and exploit them, and get self-righteous about them, but they do not respond to them with the perfect sorrow and perfect love of God.

When our good secrets get out, other people may doubt them, or envy them, or mock them, but they do not respond to them with the perfect joy and perfect love of God.

Nobody else can know our secrets and still love us unconditionally. Nobody else can know us through and through and still be a comfort to us. O God, you hem me in behind and before. You have laid your hand on me. And we're so afraid that God's hand on us will be too heavy.

But what if the hand of God upon us is a wounded hand—wounded by our transgressions and bruised by our iniquities? What if God keeps his watch, not like Big Brother, but like Jesus Christ in Gethsemane, watching and waiting to do his terrible work of love even though it is midnight in his soul?

Robert Dean was under surveillance and wanted out. We are under care by God, and we want in, now and forever.

What I want to say in this reflection is simple: it could be terrifying to be watched. Or it could be a comfort beyond all imagining.

Everything depends on *who* is watching.

Prayer

*O God, I know deep down that I am safe
under your watchful eye, that you watch not
to condemn but to bless. I give you thanks
through Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen.*



6

Clothe Yourself with Patience

Reading: Colossians 3:1–4, 12–14 (NIV)

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ . . . clothe yourselves with . . . patience. (Colossians 3:1, 12)

Every day brings us a little array of things that try our patience. You buy something that needs to be assembled, and the instructions don't make any sense. You're on a golf course, and you hit a straight drive, but when you get to where the ball ought to be lying, it's not there. You toss sixteen socks into a clothes dryer, and you get fifteen back. Where do all those singles go, by the way? The late Erma Bombeck speculated that single socks go to heaven, where they meet other singles and mate.¹ But she never cited any Scripture.

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ," says Paul, "clothe yourselves with patience." When we are clothed with patience, we can absorb nuisances. We can absorb them the way a good cotton shirt takes in a few drops of water from a sprinkler.

But how about *persons* who annoy us? Well, we have to take them in too. Some of them are strangers. Pokey drivers in the left lane. People who let their dogs bark all night. Or the person ahead of you in the fifteen-item

express line at the supermarket. This person puts nineteen items on the belt, chats with the checkout clerk, and then fishes for a checkbook only after everything has been scanned.

Strangers try our patience in lots of little ways, but they're no match for members of our own family. The classic cases of annoyance are domestic. "When two humans have lived together for many years," said C. S. Lewis, "it usually happens that each has tones of voice and expressions of face which are almost unendurably irritating to the other."²

I think we understand. It's not that your family member does anything wrong, exactly. It's just that she sometimes lifts one eyebrow in a certain way that drives you nuts. It's not that your family member does anything wrong, exactly. It's just that in certain moods his voice sounds like a bearing that's ready to go.

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ," says Paul, "clothe yourselves with patience." "Bear with each other." We need this piece of clothing, don't we? We need patience in order to manage annoyances and the low-level anger that accompanies them.

One of the things that has lately come home to me is that a big part of good spiritual hygiene is anger control. Have you ever noticed that when Paul wants to describe life outside of Christ, he often describes an angry life? What do you find out there, out beyond the reach of Christ? Paul says you find anger, wrath, slander, abusive talk. You find envy, quarreling, gossip, hostility, factions, and strife. You find war and rumor of war. You find split churches, split marriages, split friendships. Everybody is so angry!

That's life outside of Christ, and it's deep in American culture. It's angry politics and angry sports and vengeful movies. It's angry talk shows and music with an attitude.

Put it away, says Paul. Put it to death. Take off all those angry old clothes, and clothe yourselves with patience. Why? Because patience is a piece of clothing that *fits* people who have been raised with Christ. Patience is part of the family uniform of the people of God.

Patience means anger control. It means having a long fuse and a short memory where irritants are concerned. Patient people are hard to provoke. Their temper can absorb a lot before they lose it.

Paul's word for "patience" is *makrothymia*. If you have *makrothymia*, you have a large capacity for absorbing irritants without letting them paralyze you. Here's a way to think about it: patience is like good motor oil. It doesn't *remove* all the contaminants. It just puts them into suspension so they don't get into your motor and seize it up. Patient people have, so to speak, a large crankcase. They can put a lot of irritants into suspension. They get annoyed, but they have a place to put their annoyance.

I think it's important to add that patient Christians aren't necessarily naive, and they surely aren't stoic. They get indignant at abuse and injustice, just as they should. It's sometimes right to be angry. Holy people can get good and angry. If your child is abused, or your church slandered, or your spouse insulted, or your God blasphemed, I hope you would be indignant. If someone cheats you out of your job or your inheritance or your good reputation, you have a right to be pretty angry about it. Righteous anger, said my teacher Lew Smedes, is "the executive power of human *decency*."

But we need patience even for these big angers. Nuisances can go into suspension, and we can forget about them. But big angers must go there too for a while.

Why? The reason is that when we have been seriously offended, we have to stop and think about the right way to respond. Maybe we will have to rebuke the offender, but rebuke is delicate surgery that we can't do when our hands are shaking with rage. Rebuke needs to be patient rebuke.

The same goes for forgiveness. You may be able to forgive a person who has hurt you, but it will take time. And when the day comes that God gives you grace to forgive, what you will do is drop your anger against the offender. That's the main move in forgiveness; you drop anger you have a right to. But when you go to drop your anger, where will you find it? If you are a patient person, you will find your anger in suspension, where it belongs until God gives you the grace to drop it. Christian forgiveness is patient forgiveness.

Maybe your righteous anger will prompt you to seek justice. But justice, too, takes time, and it takes cool heads. That's why in court we have all those rules—you know, a time to stand up and a time to sit down. A time to speak and a time to keep still. A prescribed courtesy in your address to the

judge. A prescribed courtesy in asking permission to *approach* the judge. A lot of this is about anger control. The idea is that everybody's anger has to go into suspension while we wait for the wheels of justice to turn.

In the filmed version (1962) of Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Gregory Peck plays Atticus Finch, an attorney of clean hands and pure heart. There's a place toward the end of the film that often comes to my mind. Atticus Finch has just done his best for Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of rape in small-town Alabama in the 1930s. Atticus is eloquent and passionate about Tom Robinson's innocence, and he's right about it, but a racist jury convicts Tom anyway. Then, at the end, all the white people leave the main floor of the courtroom—the place reserved for them. But all the Black people in the balcony stay right where they are. Tom Robinson's friends and loved ones are all crowded together up there, and they won't leave! They won't leave before Atticus Finch does, the man who poured himself out for their loved one.

Well, the leader of the group is Tom Robinson's minister, who has shepherded Atticus Finch's children into a place in the balcony where they can watch the trial through the banister. Now it's all over, *but the Blacks won't leave!* They saw Atticus Finch lose, but they also saw him fight his heart out for Tom Robinson, and as Atticus walks out of the courtroom, all the people in the balcony silently rise to their feet in respect for a man of integrity. And the minister speaks to Atticus's daughter, who is sitting at his feet. "Stand up, Miss Jean Louise," he says. "Stand up, girl. *Your father's passin'!*"

What was it about Atticus Finch? He was just, and he was kind. But what you see in the courtroom is the strength of his patience. Do you remember the courtroom scenes? Can you picture Atticus there? He is angry. His client has been wrongfully accused, and Atticus Finch's job is to battle this injustice. And so, he does. Along the way you can read anger in his eyes. You can see it in the way he moves. You can hear it in his voice, when he leans into the jury and says, "In the name of God, do your *duty!*" He's plenty angry, but he can't let his anger get in the way. His job is to defend Tom Robinson. And that means that he's got to put his anger into suspension and do his job.

“Since you have been raised with Christ . . . clothe yourselves with patience.”

Spiritually mature people aren't doormats. They know what it is to be angry. But they also know a lot about anger control. They're as patient as Atticus Finch. Which means they are very *strong* people. Patience takes spiritual muscle.

Since you have been raised with Christ—that is, since you have been baptized into the Christian community and publicly identified with Jesus Christ; since you have put to death your old self with all its rage and malice and have let your new self arise like Jesus walking out of his tomb—*that is, since you are a Christian*, then clothe yourselves with patience. Pull it over you like a garment. Patience fits people who have been raised with Christ. Patience is part of the family uniform of the people of God.

OK, but how do you get patience?

Well, like all the virtues, patience is ultimately God's gift. It's fruit of the Spirit. But it's also our responsibility. We must cultivate it.

But how? Let me suggest four ways.

First, look at annoying people with the eye of imaginative love. Suppose you get behind a pokey driver in the left lane. What you want to do is to push on this person, to make them understand that it is *God's will* that they move over. But you have “the third eye” of imaginative love. So instead of pushing on the pokey driver, what you do is deliberately imagine this person as somebody's loved one. And, of course, we don't tailgate loved ones, do we? We give them a little room to do their errands and go about their business in peace. “Love is patient, love is kind,” says Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:4. One of the reasons love is patient is that love is *imaginative*.

Second, “set your heart on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1). That is, enlarge your perspective! God's kingdom is going to come one day, and God's will is going to get done. In that big frame, a traffic delay doesn't really matter. The same goes for snubs, and for cranky moods in children, and for the irritating habits of some of our friends. These things are like lost golf balls. In the long run they simply don't matter.

Third, apprentice yourself to patient people. There are some around. Wonderful people with huge crankcases. We can watch them, listen to them, learn some patient moves from them. If you have ever been dealt with by a truly patient person, you will never forget. This is a person who might be angry with you, but they put their anger into suspension. They look past everything about you that is irritating and peer into your heart—and they see that your heart has come from the shop of a master. And when they see something of God in you, they love what they see there. And what happens? You start to flourish. You rise toward the expectation that this wonderful person has for you. You rise to become the person that this patient person has been waiting for. I say we can apprentice ourselves to patient people. Learning patience is just like learning a musical instrument. You need a good teacher or two. And then you need to practice.

Finally, look to our Savior. What do we see when we look at Christ with patience on our mind? We see passion and death in which Jesus took in not just nuisances or single instances of injustice. Jesus Christ took in the evil of the whole world: he absorbed maximum evil without passing it back, and so he cut the loop of vengeance in which an angry world is so terribly trapped.

To look at Christ staggering along the way to Golgotha, knees buckling under the weight of the cross, is to lose interest in life's nuisances. They don't seem cross-sized. They don't seem worth dying for. And the big injustices? They *have* been died for, and so we may release some of our anger to the Christ whose hunger for justice is infinitely greater than our own, and whose judgment of the world will in the end be perfectly righteous.

“Since you have been raised with Christ . . . clothe yourselves with patience.” Patience fits people who have been raised with Christ. Patience is part of the family uniform of the people of God.

Prayer

O God, give me patience. Then inspire me to take responsibility for clothing myself with it in Jesus's name. Amen.

An earlier version of this chapter appears in Cornelius Plantinga Jr., “Trying Patience on for Size,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 43, no. 2 (February 8, 1999): 56–58, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/february8/9t2056.html>.



7

In the Interim

Reading: Luke 21:25–36 (NRSV)

Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21:28)

We live in between the first coming of Jesus Christ and his second coming, and most of us feel a lot better about the first one. Christmas is about a baby, after all, and that makes everything easier. We know about babies, and so we know how to domesticate Christmas. We set up a crèche, pin up a wreath, set out a poinsettia or two. Maybe we sing “Away in a Manger” with the alternate tune. Altogether we figure out how to manage Christmas so that the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay won’t end up scaring anybody.

But the second coming is something else. Part of our problem is that the Bible describes the return of our Lord in literature that is hard to interpret. The literature is apocalyptic—which means it’s an unveiling of the world that lies behind this world. It’s a revelation that tells about the transition from this age to the next.

But the transition is rough. It’s so full of emergency. According to the Gospel scenario, everything breaks loose at the return of Jesus Christ.

Nations go to war, and civilians run for cover. There's blood in the streets and famine in the fields. The earth shakes, and the sea roars. There are signs in the sky above, panic on the earth beneath, stars falling, people dying of fright—it's a whole drumroll of disaster.

And then, as the Gospel of Luke says, in the midst of all the confusion people will see “‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory” (21:27). He's the incoming Lord. He's the oncoming Lord. He's got power to judge and power to save, and when he comes the second time, he will be too big to miss. At the end he's “God without disguise,” as C. S. Lewis once wrote—God without disguise who comes at us so unmistakably that he will “strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature.”¹

It's the climax of the human drama: Christ coming to finish what he started. Christ coming to gather his saints and vindicate his martyrs. In this climactic event, so we Christians confess, all the hopes and fears of all the years come together one last time.

So why does the second coming make some of us squirm? What is it about this topic that makes us uneasy? One thing is that we don't know how to read the literature, and, in particular, we don't know how literally to read it.

Another thing is that the church has been expecting Jesus to return for a long time, and he hasn't done it yet. People settle into a kind of routine, and they quit scanning the horizon.

The way this plays out for most Catholics and confessional Protestants is in a kind of interim faith, a commonsense Christianity that stays fairly close to the ground. We don't *deny* the big, booming events such as the second coming, but we don't think about them very much either. We've still got church and sacraments, after all; we've got Scripture and prayer; we've still got the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments. And every week we faithfully spend some of our money and time on kingdom causes. That's ground-level Christianity, and it's just enough religion to keep us going.



Why does the second coming make us restless? We have trouble with the literature, as I said. Also, we can't figure out God's schedule. I'll propose a third reason. I think the truth is that a lot of us have been secularized

enough by now that our view of the world has flattened out, and the second advent of Jesus Christ doesn't fit into a flattened-out world very well. It's too fantastic, we think. It's too supernatural. In certain moods we think it's too embarrassing. It's an *embarrassing* advent, and so we leave it to those embarrassing Christians who have turned apocalyptic speculation into a billion-dollar industry. How distressing they are! Prophecy buffs with their computer charts and wrong predictions that are then folded back into new predictions in the kind of prophetic improvisation that Paula Fredriksen calls "apocalyptic jazz."² Prophecy buffs clicking away with their pocket calculators, and preachers telling us with great confidence exactly when Jesus is going to come again.

How alarming all this is. How alarming to read those bumper stickers that say, "Beam me up, Lord!" How distressing to see those four-color laminated placemats of the rapture, complete with wrecked cars and crashed jetliners!

Some of us are uneasy about the second coming. And I think I understand.

But let me ask: Is it better to *ignore* the Lord's return? Is it better to live with a low ceiling over our lives, and no room there for the incoming Lord?

We may be the sorts of people Jesus warns in our passage. Watch! says Jesus. Heads up! Be alert! Pray that you will have the strength to stand before the Son of Man! Jesus says this to people who have given up on the second coming and have settled into a ground-level religion. At this level their hearts get waterlogged. Their hearts get "weighed down," as verse 34 says. Here are people of God who weigh themselves down with worldly anxieties and then relieve them with worldly amusements. Jesus mentions drunkenness in particular. People worry, so they get drunk. They get drunk, so they worry. And that makes them want a drink. In the classic addictive cycle people try to relieve their distress with the same thing that caused it, and that's how they end up trapping themselves.

Watch! says Jesus. Be alert! he says. Jesus says this because his return isn't an apocalyptic fireworks display. His return is the coming of the kingdom of God. It's the coming of justice in the earth. When the signs appear, says Jesus to a temple full of listeners, don't give up! Don't freeze

up! “When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28).

“Your redemption is drawing near!” In Luke 21 Jesus is talking to people who know about redemption. These are exodus people. These are Passover people. These people have a history of being squeezed by Egypt, Babylon, and Rome. To these people, redemption is the longing of their heart. They want Rome off their back. They want Caesar out of their hair. It’s their dream. It’s their passion. The coming of God’s redemption means justice is coming, liberation is coming, the King of all the earth is coming. When biblical people want God’s redemption they cry out: O God, rescue me. Deliver me. Bend your ear toward me, O God, and in your righteousness *save me* (Ps. 71:2).

Do we know anything about such passion? I’m thinking that when life is good, our prayers for the kingdom get a little faint. As Justo González once put it, we whisper our prayers for the kingdom so that God can’t quite hear them.³ “Thy kingdom come,” we pray, and hope it won’t. “Thy kingdom come,” we pray, “but not right away.”

When our own kingdom has had a good year, we aren’t necessarily looking for God’s kingdom. When life is good, redemption doesn’t sound so good. That’s how things go. God’s redemption is good news for people whose life is *bad* news. If you are a slave in Pharaoh’s Egypt, or a slave in antebellum Mississippi, you want your redemption. If you are an Israelite exiled in Babylon, or a Nigerian paralyzed by corruption, you want your redemption. If you are a woman in modern India—and it doesn’t matter what caste you belong to—and your husband or fiancé doesn’t think your family has come up with a big enough dowry, and if he locks you in a closet for three months, or calls up his buddies and threatens to have them rape you and then kill you—you want redemption from wicked sexism, and you want it with every fiber of your being.

According to Scripture, the person who wants redemption wants the kingdom of God whether she knows it or not. And the coming of the kingdom depends on the coming of the King, the one who will return with power and with great glory. However we are to understand this apocalyptic

event, whatever form it takes, the second coming of Jesus Christ means to a Christian that God's righteousness will at last fill the earth.

People with crummy lives want it to happen now. If you are a Christian in sub-Saharan Africa today, you don't yawn when somebody mentions the return of Jesus Christ. When an epidemic has devastated whole populations, you want your redeemer. You want the one who has healing in his wings. Passionate Christians *want* the return of the Lord.

And, let me add, so do compassionate ones.

When our own life is sweet, we can look across the world to lives that aren't sweet. We can raise our heads and our hopes for those lives. We can weep with those who weep and hope with those who hope. We can look across the world, and across the room, and across the pew. It's natural to hope for ourselves, and how healthy it is to do it. But it's unnatural to hope *only* for ourselves. And how parochial it is to do it.

Be on guard, says Jesus, that you don't get weighed down with parochial anxieties and parochial amusements to relieve them. Be on guard against that fatal absorption with yourself! Take care! Stay alert! Stand up and raise your heads because the kingdom is coming.

Jesus's words are

an antidote to our sloth,

an antidote to our worldly cynicism,

an antidote even to our scorn of prophecy buffs.

Jesus's words are meant to raise our heads and raise our hopes. Could justice really come to the earth? Could husbands quit beating up their wives, and could wives quit blaming themselves? Could Arabs and Israelis look into each other's eyes and see a brother or a sister? Could some of us who struggle with addictions, or with diseases that trap us—could we be liberated by God and start to walk tall in the kingdom of God? Could Jesus Christ appear among us in some way that our poverty-stricken minds can never imagine in a scenario that would simply erase our smug confidence about where the lines of reality are drawn?

If we believe in the kingdom of God, we will pray, and we will hope for those without much hope left. And one more thing, one more tough thing. We will work in the same direction as we hope.

In a wonderful book titled *Standing on the Promises*, my teacher Lewis Smedes says that hoping for others is hard, but not the hardest. Praying for others is hard, but not the hardest. The hardest part for people who believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ is in “living the sort of life that makes people say, ‘Ah, so *that’s* how people are going to live when righteousness takes over our world.’”⁴

The hardest part is simple faithfulness in our work and in our attitudes—the kind of faithfulness that shows we are being drawn forward by the magnetic force of the kingdom of God.

According to a striking story, in 1779 the Connecticut House of Representatives was in session on a bright day in May, and the delegates were able to do their work by natural light. But then something happened that nobody expected. Right in the middle of debate, the day turned to night. Clouds obliterated the sun, and everything turned to darkness. Some legislators thought it was the second coming. So a clamor arose. People wanted to adjourn. People wanted to pray. People wanted to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

But the speaker of the house had a different idea. He was a Christian believer, and he rose to the occasion with good logic and good faith. We are all upset by the darkness, he said, and some of us are afraid. But “the Day of the Lord is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. And if the Lord *is* returning, I, for one, choose to be found doing my duty. I therefore ask that candles be brought.”⁵

And men who expected Jesus to return went back to their desks and resumed their debate.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we are watching and hoping. Meanwhile, we are working for righteousness. We are working in the same

*direction as we are hoping. Looking for you.
Amen.*

An earlier version of this chapter appears in Cornelius Plantinga Jr., “In the Interim,” *Christian Century*, December 6, 2000, 1270–72, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/interim>. Copyright © 2000 by the *Christian Century*. Reprinted by permission from the *Christian Century*.



8

God Just in Case

Reading: Exodus 32:1–8, 15–20, 30–35 (NIV)

He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf. . . . Then they said, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.” (Exodus 32:4–5)

In the Bible, idolatry is a kind of adultery because it interjects a rival into our sacred relationship with God. Now we have *two* gods. And adultery is a kind of idolatry because it, too, splits our loyalties. Now we have *two* spouses.

Let me tell you about Craig.

Craig had become an adulterer, so his life began to change. He opened a credit card account in just his name and had the statements sent to his office. He bought new underwear. He jogged in place while brushing his teeth. Craig had another woman.

It was a strange thing, too, because his wife Sharon was strong and beautiful. In fact, Craig and Sharon had love and trust and jobs and happiness. All of it was there, and for years Craig took all of it for granted.

But then one winter's night things changed. Craig went out to the twenty-fifth reunion of his high school class, and he went alone. He knew that the twenty-fifth reunion is the midterm exam of the aging process, but he wasn't worried. He had a lovely wife and two fine children. He had a devout faith and a lucrative job. Craig looked forward to all the fun and all the old memories.

And it *was* fun. There were drinks and dinner and songs and speeches. There were more drinks at other places as the partying went on deep into the night.

There was also Karen. Craig and Karen had been sweethearts once, broken up years ago in high school by some youthful misunderstanding. Now here they were again in a booth at a bar. Here they were—Craig the husband, father, Christian. And Karen, the golden girl from his past.

Craig found it fascinating. He found himself powerfully aroused by old and deep things that were now rising up out of his past. "You know," said Karen at one point, "we were close once, but we never really *did* anything about it. We never sealed it. We were such good kids."

"No, we never sealed it," said Craig. And then he heard his voice say, "But it's never too late!" He meant it as a sort of joke, or at least he thought he did, but Karen didn't, and the night ended at 2 a.m. in a room at the Marriott.

For five months the two of them scramble and sneak. And Craig agonizes over his problem. He's a divided man. Craig loves two women. He loves them both. There's Sharon, the strong and steady Sharon. He can't leave his wife. He needs Sharon. She is his anchor, his rock. And what if things wouldn't work out with Karen? Then he'd have nobody, a thought that floods him with self-pity. "No," says Craig to himself. "No, I can't leave my wife. I need Sharon, just in case."

Then one day Sharon discovers the truth. She is furious and hurt and jealous. "How!" she demands. "How could you do a thing like this? How could you do this to us, to our children, to God?"

Craig is full of confusion. "Try to understand," he says. "It just happened. It was a high school reunion, and I was feeling nostalgic. One thing led to

another, and a few hours later I got into the wrong bed. It just happened, that's all. I never thought, I never dreamed it could happen to me."

Israel's marriage to God had begun as eagerly as any other good marriage. God had broken down the walls of Egypt, and his people had spilled out of slavery, fired up with faith and gratitude. Their marriage covenant had been sealed at Sinai. The Lord had spoken his vows: "If you . . . keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession" (Exod. 19:5). And the people had responded by a vow of their own. "We will do everything the LORD has said" (19:8).

But now the wedding has been over for a time. Life together has thinned down to routine. As Exodus 32 opens, Israel is huddling in the wilderness. Moses has gone up Mount Sinai to commune with God, but as far as anybody else can see, Moses has just gone mountain climbing again. "As for this fellow Moses who brought us out of Egypt," the people grumble, "we don't know what has happened to him" (32:1).

Day after day their sense of purpose dims. People used to be so sure. There had been rescue and victory and promise. There had been all that smoke and thunder on the mountain. But now Moses has gone hiking, and the days are running on.

It makes people think. What if their errand into the wilderness has been a mistake? What if they've all been on a sentimental journey? Maybe Moses believes all this piety about pilgrimage and promise, but here we are in a desert! Stalled. Stuck. Trapped in midlife boredom. Our mediator has ascended, and we're left to ourselves.

People begin to think. If the God of Moses is a fairy tale, we had better face the facts. But we can't just *sit* here out in the middle of nowhere. Everybody needs some kind of force to believe in. There has to be *some* power we can tap into.

So the people turn to Aaron. Now, what we have to understand is that Moses may be good at revelation, but Aaron's specialty is religion. He knows the market. Aaron can offer Yahweh, of course, but then again, he can also sell you insurance from some other company. Aaron is your local *independent* agent.

People turn to Aaron. Look, they say to him, what have you got that's relevant to the twenty-first century? Frankly, we're sick of that seminary theology you and your brother have been preaching. What have you got in the way of a God who can deliver health and wealth?

Aaron considers the options. He knows faith is a necessity. He knows people have got to have a god. And his thoughts drift back to the Egyptian market. There in Egypt people had always seemed satisfied with their gods. *Their* gods had had some pretty good years.

At last Aaron says to everybody, Listen, I know you like the gold earrings you took out of Egypt. But as a matter of fact—I don't know if you know this—gold is also great for making gods, and some of your better-grade gods this year *are* coming out in gold.

“So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool” (32:3–4).

Then the people gather round for worship. They stand before their glittering critter and say, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (32:4).

Aaron watches it all with a specialist's eye. Yup, he thinks, this seems to be the right god. This one fills the niche. Aren't people funny? You can get the people out of Egypt, but you can't get Egypt out of the people.

But then in the middle of his watching and chuckling, Aaron is stabbed by a painful thought. What if I've miscalculated? What if Moses comes back? Suppose Yahweh is for real!

A worried Aaron stumbles onto a solution. He orders an altar to be built, and he calls for a church service. Tomorrow, he says, we're going to hold a more traditional service. Forget all these golden calf services we've been having. Set aside the noon hour tomorrow for a sacred commitment feast, a festival of devotion to Yahweh the Lord.

So, there is the altar to Yahweh. Behind it stands the fertility god, a cud-chewing stud. *Both items. Both gods.* A stricken Aaron wants an altar to Yahweh, but nobody bothers to throw a tarp over the golden calf.

Now freeze this frame of the movie. So much of the human dilemma peeps out at us here in between these two altars. We're caught between the

altar to Yahweh and the golden savior gleaming in the background. Your god, said Martin Luther, is whatever your heart clings to.¹

But just there's the problem. Your god is whatever your heart clings to, but our hearts are torn. We're divided people. We're like Craig. We love two gods. We love them both. And the writer of the exodus narrative means us to see the folly in the way we trap ourselves. He wants us to see that the fall from grace is an adultery that is not only wrong but also stupid.

Why? Because we're *God's* people. We have been made by God, saved by God, forgiven by God. We belong to God, and we've taken covenant vows to say so. We can't leave God! God is our anchor. God is our rock.

And yet, in other chambers of our heart there are beds open for older romances—or maybe for some new love that can brighten our days in the midlife of faith. We'd like a god that we can work with. Maybe one of the new portable gods. Maybe a god of our dreams. A golden god from our past. A god, as Karl Barth said, that lives by *our* imagination and art, a god from *our* storehouse of riches and memory,² a god for the interim, a god for the silence of God, a god for the absence of our mediator. A god that is as good as gold.

We want to create. We want to be not creatures of God but *creators* of God. Here's the titanic, Promethean, rebel sin. Human beings creating God! But there behind us is the result—this squat little piece of molten veal. The mad exchange of idolatry turns out to be not a grand sin but a dumb one—and finally a terribly destructive evil.

Striking, isn't it, that Aaron has seen this? He has seen that the golden calf isn't going to save anybody. And Aaron is nagged all along. Aaron is haunted by the thought of Yahweh and the possible return of Moses when you least expect him, the return of Moses like a thief in the night.

So, Aaron does what's left. He hedges his bet. He splits his ticket. Aaron puts up the altar to Yahweh God. Up here is the altar. Back there is the calf. The calf back there is god just in case Moses never returns. But here in the front ring is an altar to Yahweh. Yahweh, who is God just in case the mediator comes back.

God just in case. Who says you can't keep your options open? Who says you can't have it all?

The whole passage, all the Scriptures, every voice of faith down the history of the church shouts its answer. Why not God just in case? Because it's treacherous. Because it's wrong. Because we owe our loyalty to the one

who saved us. Because both Yahweh and the idol are jealous gods. They are both consuming fires that want all that we have and all that we are.

Think of your idol. You can never satisfy it. If you find the center of life in your stock portfolio, it will never be thick enough, never rich enough. When the market tanks, you think your life is over. If you want to live through your children as your final glory, they can never be smart enough, never athletic enough, never accomplished enough. If you want your religion to make you feel good, you won't feel good enough until your religion turns to orgy. Even then it won't be enough.

And so it is with the God of the covenant. He is a God offended by our straying, a God wounded by the yearning in our hearts for the flesh of Egypt. *When we go to our idols, it feels to God as if a third person has actually entered a marriage in which there is no more room!*

"He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf. . . . [Then] he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, 'Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD'" (32:4–5).

Tomorrow is the day Moses comes back. Down the mountain comes Moses. He hears the party songs and sees the orgy around the calf. He smashes the tablets and confronts his brother. And poor Aaron tries to squirm his way out. How? Moses demands. How could you do this—to me, to God, to our people!

Aaron scrambles hard. Listen, he says to Moses, I know it looks bad, but I was under a lot of pressure. The people demanded this sort of thing, and what could I do? You have to sell what people are buying! So I took all their earrings and tossed them into the smelting pot and of all things—imagine my surprise—out came this golden calf. I can't really explain it. I can't justify it. *It just happened.* I never thought it would happen to me.

God just in case Moses never returns. But here is Moses. Here is the mediator back on our soil. Because of him, because of Moses, because he is willing to die for the sins of his people, there is grace and restoration by the end of the account. The story of Israel will go on for another day and another chapter.

The point of the whole story is that divided worship ends up destroying the worshipers. The God of our story is finally willing to suffer not only rebels but fools. But a lot of the fools had to die. And Moses the mediator had to be willing to die.

The God of the covenant turns out to be a dangerous and jealous God. The God of the covenant wants Israel back. God will forgive, but the cost is huge because God is not mocked.

Ask any mediator.

Prayer

*Inspire us, good God, to love you with all our heart and to shun your rivals. Preserve us in this love, and strengthen it for Jesus's sake.
Amen.*



9

Christ Lifted Up

Reading: John 3:1–17 (NRSV)

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:14–15)

Anybody who has studied a little science knows that we live in the middle of a jungle. Tiny enemies are all around us. Bacteria and viruses and fungi fill the air. They cluster on every surface, from dining room tables to living room sofas, and they are always on the attack.

Fortunately, it's hard for them to get at us. Our skin is a tough barrier to them. Our sweat and saliva and tears and stomach acid are all natural pesticides. But these little bugs are persistent, and a fair number of them do get past our defenses. They get through. And once they do, once they enter the bloodstream and tissues, they multiply at a ferocious rate, and they start attacking our cells.

It's then that the invaders get their comeuppance. They run head-on into one of God's most spectacular creations—the human immune system. Inside the body are trillions of specialized cells, regulated by dozens of remarkable proteins. These special cells launch a full-scale battle against the intruders. It's high-pitched biological warfare. Our scavenger cells meet

the enemy and try to eat it. Our macrophage cells hook up with our T-cells, cause the T-cells to multiply into an army of killers, and also to generate an army of B-cells, which are, in effect, antibody factories. What happens is that the combined troops surround the enemy, bind themselves to him in a death lock, and finish him off.

I once read all about this in an article.

By the way, after the war is largely over, the B and T armies do one last crucial task. As they are mopping up, they form memory cells that circulate in the blood stream for years, primed to spring into action if the same invader should ever attack again. And memory cells are, of course, the key to *vaccines*.

One of the great achievements of twentieth-century medical scientists was that they learned to mass-produce bacteria and viruses, weaken or kill them, and then inject them into human bodies as vaccines. When the bacteria or viruses are injected, they cause a tiny edition of the usual biological warfare, and they mass-produce killer memory cells. When they do, bingo! The human being is immunized against typhus or yellow fever or polio or measles. Disease turns out to be the vaccine against disease!

It's a modern science exhibit of the providence of God. The general idea is that controlled evil can prevent evil, and the idea often pops up outside the field of immunology. Governments, for instance, sometimes turn for help to the underworld in apprehending a criminal—on the principle that it takes a thief to catch a thief. Of course, skeptics say the government could easily handle this assignment with in-house staff. Still, the principle's clear. Little evil can prevent big evil. You see it when a force of volunteers tries to control a raging forest fire. What they do is dig a trench around and beyond the perimeter of the blaze and then burn everything back toward the center. They fight fire with fire.

Like cures like. And we see this principle at work in one of the strangest images for Jesus Christ in all the Scriptures. The background is an episode in Numbers 21 where the Israelites are unhappy campers. The wilderness doesn't agree with them. More and more of them join the line at the complaint window to point out bread and water shortages and to demand new recipes for manna.

God's response is a plague of venomous snakes that bite people and scare the daylights out of them. So they cry out to God, and God offers an antidote. In the amazing grace of God, the cure for snakebite is another snake! A bronze snake is hoisted up on a flagpole, and the Lord says, "Everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live" (Num. 21:8). In the strange, wilderness providence of God, *the very thing that threatens life also saves it*. The best antivenom turns out to be venom itself.

And now in John 3 the high-flying snake of Numbers 21 becomes an image of the crucified Lord. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14–15).

In John's Gospel Jesus lifted up on a cross is strangely a sort of exaltation—it's, so to speak, the first four feet of the ascension into heaven. Christ is *exalted* on a cross. He's glorified on his torture instrument. How strange this is! Is it like being enthroned in an electric chair? Like getting celebrated by a firing squad? Jesus Christ is planted like a living scarecrow on top of a hill, and the Gospel finds glory here as well as shame.

As the song says, "sometimes it causes me to tremble."

You know, Christianity is the only religion that centers on the dying and degradation of its God. And glories in it! And exults in it! How peculiar this is! Nobody tells us to glory in the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Nobody says we should exult in the slaying of President Kennedy. Why would anybody glory in the cross of Christ? Why does Christ exalted on a cross become a magnet? How can the tortured Christ draw all human beings to himself, as John says in chapter 12?

Is it just morbid fascination—you know, the sort of thing that used to draw crowds to a hanging? Or is it the unspoken awareness people have when watching someone die—the almost holiday awareness of spectators at a fatal crash that it is somebody else who is dying?

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

The dying Jesus Christ is hoisted up there to struggle on his cross, and somehow the trust that clings to him there becomes a vaccine. By cleaving to him, by clinging to him, we get inoculated with just enough of his death

that a sort of vaccine is formed. A vaccine is formed with killer memory cells that circulate in the bloodstream for years. These are cells primed to spring to the attack if ever we should be threatened by spiritual failure or death.

But why should any of this work? Why would the tortured Christ become a magnet for the trust of human beings? As Frederick Buechner once asked, whoever would even *recognize* him as a natural target for our faith? He was a man without form or comeliness—at the end, just a rabbi with a split lip and a black eye. The one for whom the ages had longed, this Christ gets beaten up so badly and executed so derisively that he ends up looking less like a king and more like a joke. “King of the Jews” in three languages tacked over the head of this mangled man assures that nobody will miss the joke.¹

And yet, by fastening ourselves to Christ, by clinging to him, we are somehow immunized and saved. This venomous death becomes our antivenom.

But how can it work? What would attract us to the dying Savior? There’s nothing lovely about a cross. I know we have sometimes turned the cross into a wall decoration or a clothing accessory. But the Romans adopted the cross as a torture device that would terrorize their enemies. There’s no poise on a cross. It’s all shrieking and writhing there. The cross is a place of profanity and godlessness, a magnet for those who find it a lot more fun to *watch* suffering than to endure it.

So how can any of this *save* anybody? The Romans get hold of this homeless man. They mock him and flog him, and they nail him below a sign intended to be an anti-Semitic joke. “Jesus Christ, the King of the Jews.” In other words, he’s the Jew-king. And soon he’s going to be the dead king.

Where’s the power to give life here? As Jürgen Moltmann once put it, this was a man crucified “not between two candles on an altar, but between two thieves in the place of the skull.”² Jesus, the friend of sinners, was crucified between *his* kind of people in the sort of godforsaken place where you’d expect to find them.

How does this attract? Where's the magnet here? How can this howling wilderness event draw all people to its victim and fasten their trust to him and to his terrifying pain?

It happens by what C. S. Lewis calls "deep magic." In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lewis tells of a deep magic that arises from the beginnings of time.³ Down among the springs and roots of the universe there is some mysterious fittingness that death should disarm death, that Christ the snake should crush the head of the evil serpent. And the glory in all this suffering and crushing—the glory lies in a love so fierce that Jesus Christ lets himself be mocked and maimed and hung out there to suffer for the sins of the world.

And the deep magic does its work. Yes, the cross attracts its share of coarse persons for whom the death of God is a spectator sport—people on whom it would never dawn in a hundred years that the dying Christ is suffering for sins like theirs. But for all these centuries, people have also gazed at the dying Lord and found that they were pulled to him like a magnet. They have seen the Son of God at work, sweating and straining to overcome human evil by suffering the worst of it himself. They have seen the Son of God emptying himself and taking on the form of a serpent so that whoever looks on him may live.

And we are strangely drawn to this. The cross is a magnet not because it *explains* the evils we suffer. It's not as if in pondering the dying Lord we at last understand the death of little children, or the ravages of middle-aged cancer, or the suffering caused by terrorists all over the world. No, the cross explains very little along these lines.

We lift our eyes to the cross—where our help comes from—in order to see that God shares our lot and can therefore be *trusted*. We don't understand God. We don't want some of God's ways with us. We are sometimes astonished by what God sees fit for us. But we do understand this: God isn't aloof. God suffers with us, and somehow, in the deepest magic of the universe, God's own suffering can be tapped by faith for an antitoxin that stays in the bloodstream forever.

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Isn't this all pretty remarkable? Your faith is your vaccine! Who would ever have guessed it? Who would ever have dreamed that this is the way God saves?

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the friend of sinners, which means you are the friend of people exactly like me. This can only be called amazing grace. In your name, Amen.



10

On the Receiving End

Reading: Luke 18:9–17 (NIV)

People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” (Luke 18:15–17)

As Frederick Buechner somewhere writes, “It’s not only more *blessed* to give than to receive; it’s also a whole lot easier.”

I think we understand. It’s easier to give, because then we work from our strength. We work from the human resource center that God has opened in each of us. You offer somebody a word of encouragement, and you sense that you’ve been on holy ground. You bail out your sister, and the look in her eye tells you how much it means. Even our tears can bless a suffering person with the knowledge that they matter to us so much that their suffering makes *us* suffer.

God has seen fit to entrust us human creatures with the bounties of personhood. So we've got value to offer to others, and we've got freedom to decide how much value to offer, and when to do it, and to whom.

Of course, we make bad decisions here all the time. We give full attention to people who don't need it, and we ignore people who do. We give a lot to people who are already full, and we scrimp with people who are hungry—maybe people who hunger for no more than a simple word of praise. Or we try to give something to someone, but we go about it in a patronizing way that makes the recipient wish we hadn't bothered.

I think we all know that birthdays can be a time when gifts are chosen not so much to please the recipient as to make a statement. You give somebody a book you think they *ought* to like. You donate money in somebody's name to a cause they'd never support. You give your Scrabble opponent a Scrabble dictionary so that *your* words will start to count. Birthday tug-of-war.

We give with ulterior motives, or we mess up in some other way. Still, to *have* something to give is to be like God.

So what if you *didn't* have anything to give? What if you had to be on the receiving end all the time? You'd feel passive. You'd feel dependent. You'd feel as if your balance of trade were way out of whack. Lots of people worry about this. They think: What if I get so sick that strangers have to give me a bath? What if I get paralyzed? What if I get caught in some disastrous sin and need help just to get out of bed and face the wreckage?

One of the terrible realities you read about or see in the news from time to time is the way wartime refugees become totally dependent on others and face the humiliation of having it happen in front of their children. The locale might be anywhere. Children see parents forced out of their family house. They might see a paramilitary goon roust their mother, plant his foot in her back, and shove. That's a terrible thing for a child to see. Then comes the weary march to refugee camps. Refugees typically arrive at camps that are already jammed. In these camps everybody is thirsty and bone-tired, and everybody stinks. Part of the degradation is that under these conditions parents have nothing left to give, not even to their own sons and daughters.

Children who used to see their parents as providers have to watch their parents get in line and wait for help just like their children.

Dependency can feel like humiliation. In one of his books, Scott Hoezee points out that all the forms of dependency we hear about come with a stigma attached.¹ Who wants to be welfare dependent or codependent? Who wants to be drug dependent? How many Christians relish a chance to depend on deacons? What nation would issue a Declaration of Dependence and hope it would stir the blood of patriots?

I think we understand very well that it's more blessed to give than to receive. We understand that it's easier too. A giver has power. A giver has options. A giver may choose to dispense grace or withhold it, almost like God.

And so we find ourselves surprised that Jesus is so impressed by children. In Luke 18 Jesus blesses some babies, and then he says to his disciples, Look here. You ought to be like this. The kingdom of God belongs to people just like this. In fact, you're never going to "get it" unless you learn to receive the kingdom the way they do.

Like a child. And here, of course, is where centuries of preachers have gotten sentimental. This is the place in the sermon where we hear of all the virtues of children, including the imaginary ones. But Jesus wasn't sentimental about children. So, in Luke 18 Jesus doesn't say how sweet children are. He doesn't tell us they're special. He says nothing about the trusting look in a child's eye. All these things may be true, but Jesus is interested in something else. When Jesus Christ blesses an infant—and Luke does use the word for "infant" here—when Jesus blesses an infant, what he sees is a bundle of need. Infants are needy people. And so, in first-century Palestine they are lowly people.

They're like the tax collector in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector that comes just before in verses 9–14. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells the parable of the lofty Pharisee who got humbled and the lowly tax collector who got exalted by God, and then it's as if Jesus says, "By the way, while we're in the lowliness department, look at these babies."

Jesus was talking to first-century people. Nobody had designer children in those days. Nobody wanted a child-centered family. A child was another

mouth to feed, after all, and the trouble was that you had to feed a child for years before he got old enough to milk a goat or prune a vine.

Jesus looks at an infant and sees a person on the bottom rung of society. As Joel Green writes, first-century children were lowly because they had nothing to give.² They didn't produce anything. They didn't contribute anything to village life. *Infants* can't build a barn or dig a well. They just lie around all day. All they produce is waste.

There's just one thing infants are really good at. One thing they can do better than all the rest of us. One lesson they can teach us all. Jesus Christ points to infants because they are *perfectly wonderful receivers*! They don't produce very much, but are they ever great at receiving! Nudge an infant with a nipple or a fingertip or almost anything else, and her mouth opens, and she will suck like a whirlpool. A healthy infant knows how to take nourishment from food, and she knows how to take it from love. And it's a good thing, too, because without these gifts she will die.

I'm telling you the truth, says Jesus. You have to receive the kingdom of God like a child. Jesus says this to disciples, including all of us, who have a large problem in this area. We're not very good at receiving. The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar once wrote about this. Somebody gives us a gift, and we rebuke him. "Oh, you shouldn't have," we say. Somebody praises us for the way we played whatever it is that we play, and we run ourselves down. "Oh," we say, "I played ugly today." We don't *receive* the gift of praise. We block the gift, and then we make the giver look ignorant. In effect, we say to them, "When you praised the way I played, you didn't know what you were talking about."

We're not so good at receiving.

Once we were like wide receivers in football. You know, when a strong-armed quarterback rifles a pass out to one of his wide receivers, you will not see one of the receivers stop and say, "Hold on, here! What's *this* all about? What's his *real* reason for throwing to me? I haven't had a ball all quarter. Why am I getting one now?"

It never happens, because a good wide receiver lives off those passes. He'll take all he can get.

“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Luke 18:17).

Think this over. When we are little children, we grow into a world that has been there long before we were. We inherit a world. We don't invent our world; we discover it. We enter a world that already *has* bike racing and barn dancing; it already has Land's End and L. L. Bean. We've already had a lot of Middle East war and peace, and arguments about who's to blame. We've already got love and marriage, and it's a good thing too. In our own families all kinds of arrangements were there before we arrived, so that when we were born or adopted into a family we simply received these arrangements and lived off them.

This is how it is with the kingdom of God. It's been there since before the foundations of the earth were laid. We don't create the kingdom; we inherit it. The kingdom of God is before us and behind us; it's above us and beneath us. We can't step out of the sphere of God's loving power any more than we can step out of the universe. That's why a baptism is so eloquent. A baptism says to us that God's grace comes to us from events way back in the history of redemption. Once upon a time Israel went down into the Red Sea and came up on the other side in the first exodus because God stretched out a mighty arm. Once upon a time Jesus Christ went down into death and came up out of Joseph's tomb in a second exodus that started the movement of the Christian church. Once upon a time the Holy Spirit was poured out on disciples, and the Christian church started to sound like a league of nations.

Children of believers are born or adopted into these events. They're exodus children. They're resurrection children. They're kingdom children.

“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

Of course, in the solitude of our hearts we know that to receive the kingdom of God we have to receive its king. We must receive Jesus Christ.



This means so much more than I have wisdom to say, but let me say just one thing. Inspired by the tax collector's prayer, many Christians begin each day with what's called "the Jesus prayer." You get by yourself. You open your hands and your heart. You squelch the thought that you are a macho

hotshot or a timid underperformer, man or woman, young or old. None of that matters. What matters is that you are a child of God, a bundle of need. And you say so in the words of the Jesus prayer.

“O Lord Jesus Christ.”

“O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.”

“O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

It’s a tax collector’s prayer, and it’s a child’s prayer even when you’re many decades old. The prayer is good when you’re high, and it’s good when you’re low. It’s a prayer at the intersection of your need and God’s grace. “O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner, and grant me your peace.” Grant me the peace of a tax collector who went home justified. Grant me the peace of a child blessed by Jesus.

“People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.’”

Prayer

*O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy
on me, a sinner, and grant me your peace.
Amen.*

An earlier version of this chapter appears in Cornelius Plantinga Jr., “In the Word: On the Receiving End,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 44, no. 1 (January 10, 2000): 72–73, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/january10/31.72.html>.



11

The Mark of Cain

Reading: Genesis 4:1–16 (NRSV)

Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.” Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. (Genesis 4:13–16)

We’ve heard the story of Cain and Abel before. It’s a crime story so old and deep in human history that it’s gotten the status of a legend—a *true* legend. In the biblical story of Cain and Abel, the crime is murder, and the motive is envy. What’s striking in the story is that Cain kills his brother, but then he can’t get the murder to be over. He can’t get his dead brother to keep still! Abel’s blood keeps crying out from the ground. In fact, Abel’s blood cries to high heaven, where God hears it.

Cain kills his brother Abel, and the sound of the killing goes on and on. It's the bleat of an innocent man on the day his brother skewers him with a pitchfork.

You know, some nineteenth-century romantic writers tried to turn Cain into a hero. They pictured him as a seeker who sensed a need to find himself, express himself, assert himself. Here was a man in quest of his dignity. But how could he ever find his dignity if he had to obey God? And how could he ever keep his dignity if he had to be nice to Abel? After all, Abel was so disgustingly righteous, so conventional, so boring with all his pious little offerings and sermons. So, one day Cain took Abel out into a field and did to him what any self-respecting rebel would do.

Well, that's romantic heroism for you—and an arrogant and bloody business it is too. It's also very far from the biblical record. What's striking in the biblical record is not only Cain's envy—which is, by the way, a truly *unheroic* emotion—or his homicidal rage. What's also striking is a kind of pathos in Cain—the pathos of one who has just discovered that sin does have its consequences.

Did you catch it when you read Genesis 4? God banishes Cain to the land of Nod, and Cain protests. He doesn't want to go there because *God* isn't there. Cain doesn't want to obey God, but neither does he want to lose God. Cain can't live with God, but he can't live without God either. Cain is a divided man. And so, he protests: "My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face" (4:13–14).

"I shall be hidden from your face." I think there's grief here as well as protest. That's part of the pathos. I once read of a fourteen-year-old boy who in a terrible, insane moment picked up a rifle and shot his father dead. After the boy had been arrested and jailed, his minister went to see him and found the boy curled up in his cell. He was sobbing and saying over and over, "I want my dad! I want my dad!"

*Cain doesn't want to go to the land of Nod, because God isn't there. Cain knows that if he leaves the land of God and enters the land of Nod, he won't be the only man with a pitchfork. Cain the murderer fears murder. Cain *did* a murder, but now he wants murder to stop. And the remarkable thing is that God does too. God wants murder to stop too.*

And so the Lord puts a mark on Cain. The Lord marks Cain so that no one who comes upon him will kill him.

We don't know what this mark was that saved Cain's life in a land of killers. We just don't know. It's one of the many questions that the biblical narrator hasn't the slightest interest in answering, including the question of where all the people from the land of Nod came from. But we do know this: right at the beginning of our history, God marks a killer not only with shame but also with grace.

It is a mark of shame. Of course it is. Cain is singled out. Cain is a marked man, because he has done a wicked deed.

But the mark on Cain also shows the grace of a God who is always out to save. God saves the life of a man who had forfeited his right to life. God protects the life of a man who did not protect the life of his own brother. With this mark of grace, God cuts the loop of revenge that violence always brings.

Isn't this remarkable? Cain thinks that the land of Nod will be empty of God because God never gets out there. But that's not so. The mark of Cain is the mark of God, and the mark of God will go with Cain even if Cain descends into hell.

On Ash Wednesday, Christians all over the world kneel for the imposition of ash on their foreheads. You receive the mark of the cross on your forehead, the cross in ashes on your brow. It's a sign of shame and a sign of grace: our shame, God's grace; our sin, God's forgiveness; our violence, God's peace made by the blood of the cross.

The truth is that wherever we go, and even if we wander off into the land of Nod, we bear on our bodies the sign of the cross. We also bear on our

bodies the sign of the empty tomb—every baptized one of us, because our baptism marks us as having died and risen with Jesus Christ.

The result is that the drama of Cain and Abel is our drama too. I mean that Cain and Abel were both represented in Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus stood under the terrible guilt of Cain, and Jesus stood in for the innocent faith of Abel, so that on Easter morning, when God raised Jesus from the dead, the struggle between the brothers was over. The battle was over. In Jesus Christ, God raised from the dead all of us who are as guilty as Cain, and all of us who by faith are as innocent as Abel.

Abel's blood doesn't cry out from the ground anymore. The book of Hebrews says that it's now his faith that cries out (Heb. 11:4). And not only his, but also the faith of Abraham and Sarah and David and Ruth and Peter and Paul. Their faith cries out to us across the centuries, that God is always out to save, that God's grace is for them, and for you, and for me. All because of Christ, who was so terribly hurt and so gloriously vindicated. All because of Jesus Christ.

Prayer

*Mark us, good God, with your marvelous
grace, and let the mark of your grace become
our passport. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

An earlier version of this chapter appears in Cornelius Plantinga Jr., "Murder, Envy, and the Harvest Princess," *Christianity Today*, vol. 35, no. 14 (November 25, 1991): 26–28, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1991/november-25/murder-envy-and-harvest-princess-what-really-poisoned.html>.



12

Self-Deception

Reading: 1 John 1:5–2:2 (NRSV)

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8–9)

During the 1930s England was filled with government officials who trusted Adolf Hitler. Hitler was making lots of noise and building lots of autobahns in Germany, and ranking members of parliament in England thought he was terrific. When Winston Churchill tried to warn them that Hitler couldn't be trusted to keep peace, that he was in fact rearming Germany despite the requirements of the Treaty of Versailles, these government officials just smiled. They knew better. They knew Churchill was "utterly unreliable," an outcast, a troublemaker. And they knew how much Hitler loved peace.

So, they ignored Churchill. They said he was alarmist. They said he was hysterical. They said he was spoiling their attempt to *please* Hitler. For years before Germany started World War II, Winston Churchill kept hammering away at his own leaders, trying to dent their self-deception about what was going on in Germany. And the leaders kept telling Churchill

that he had run right off his trolley. Hitler would never attack Western Europe, they said. He just wouldn't. After all, he loves peace so much.

Besides, if England believed the threat and prepared for war, the costly preparation would "inflict grave damage on the nation's economic health."

You can read all about it in the biographies of Churchill, especially the second volume of William Manchester's magisterial *The Last Lion: William Spencer Churchill*.¹

Part of the problem in England was that people in government simply could not get themselves to believe that the great nation of Germany had fallen into the hands of criminals. They couldn't believe it. They couldn't believe it because then they would have to think of going to war. And in the 1930s nobody in England wanted to think of going to war because they still had blood on them from World War I.

And so, the leaders of England resisted the truth and took to their hearts one reassuring lie after another. Hitler's demands would cease, they said. Does Churchill speak as if Germany wants "all of Europe? Absurd! If they had it, whatever would they do with it?" All Hitler wanted was to repulse the Bolsheviks. And Nazis savaging Jews? Nonsense! Why, "if the persecutions were as widespread as Winston claimed, Hitler would get wind of them and jail those responsible!"²

And that was that. England's leaders ignored Churchill's warnings and retreated into the comfortable, cave-like darkness of total self-deception.

All these years later we know some of that trouble and part of that darkness. We know a little about self-deception. We know what it is to live in between the light of the gospel and the outer darkness. I mean that a lot of contemporary society is a twilight zone where people make up the truth as they go along. A twilight zone where the shortest distance between two points is a labyrinth.

John writes to the Asian churches about these things, about God's light and our twilight. The heart of the epistle of 1 John is one sentence: "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" (1:5). And John says what

follows from this: If God is light, then God's people must be children of the light. We have to move out of the darkness of self-deception and unconfessed sin.

"If we say that we have no sin," says John, "we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1:8).

"We deceive ourselves." What is this mysterious thing John warns against?

Self-deception is a shadowy phenomenon in which we put a move on ourselves. We pull the wool over our own mind. We become our own dupes. Down deep we might know the truth. We might know. But closer to the surface where we have to live with ourselves every day, we don't know the truth because we can't bear to know it.

Of course, we know there *is* such a thing as self-deception. We know there is such a thing because we can see it in other people. And once in a while, in our clear moments, in our godly moments, we can spot the lies in our own hearts. Sometimes they're sad. Sometimes they're funny. And often they are alarming.

"We deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." John is talking about the knowledge of our own sin. He's talking about the lies that corrupt human lives and human households and human relationships. John is talking about lies at the heart of our relationship to God.

The lies that corrupt human life. Think this over with me. If you read the history of the mafia in America, there is one set of figures you always wonder about. You wonder about mafia wives. They have traditionally been virtuosos in self-deception. The Godfather's wife doesn't know where his money comes from and seemingly never asks. She doesn't know why some of her husband's business associates turn up dead from time to time, or why her husband's chauffeur looks like a piece of heavy farm machinery with sunglasses. She doesn't ask why—out of all the houses in the neighborhood—it's always *their* house that gets staked out by the FBI.

Self-deception. Think it over. Why do alcoholics and other drug abusers typically go through years of denial? Why do some spouses miss all the signs of infidelity in their partner? How do their unfaithful partners manage to sleep nights? How do the men who beat up women get themselves to

believe that the women had it coming? Why do some of those women believe it too?

People can't face the truth. It hurts too much. It scares us too much. The truth tells us too much about the terrifying fact that in some part of our lives we need to be born again by the Spirit of God. We can't face that. And so, we take to our hearts one reassuring lie after another.

We tell ourselves that our bad temper is righteous indignation. Our gossip is an information service. We convince ourselves that it is others who are privileged, and we who are deprived. When we are young, we think we have nothing to learn from the old, and when we are old, we think we have nothing to learn from the young. In midlife we tell ourselves that our high stress levels are the simple result of zeal and skill. And all through our lives, wherever we are, we think we can wall our lives off from God and still have joy.

When you come to think about it, the really frightening thing about self-deception is not just that it warps our thinking and puts the best face on our sins and miseries. The really scary thing about self-deception is that it can insulate us against Jesus Christ. When our achievements secure us, when our reputation precedes us, when our pride defends us and pumps us up whenever we lose pressure—that is, when we become our own creators, our own lawgivers, our own centers of meaning and power—then the thought that we need a Savior starts to sound quaint. It sounds uninteresting. It sounds like the babble of fundamentalists—those embarrassing Christians whose idea of the faith includes the belief that we need Jesus.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the Christ is not in us.

And so, the call to self-examination. We examine ourselves, feeling for lumps in our heart, testing for mixed motives and double-mindedness. What's the real reason my life hasn't turned out as I had hoped? What's the real reason people don't always trust me? Why do I so often feel spiritually

depressed? Do I neglect my prayers because God seems unreal to me? Or does God seem unreal to me because I neglect my prayers?

Why do I withhold the word of praise from loved ones who hunger for it? Why am I bored or irritated by calls for social justice? Why is my humor so often hardened by scorn, and why is my scorn so seldom softened by mercy? Most of all, why does the gospel often seem alien to me, and why is Jesus Christ a stranger?

None of us knows the whole truth in these matters. Surely none of us knows the heart of another. We don't even know the maze in our own hearts. But we do know this: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

And so, once more, the call to regular self-examination. Regular self-examination, not constant self-examination. We shouldn't try to do it all the time. Constant self-examination is neurotic. Some Christians get obsessed with their spiritual feelings, and how they feel about their feelings—spiritually speaking. I know that. I know that people who constantly take their pulse are sick. I know that the center of the gospel is not our sin but our Savior.

But our Savior isn't going to mean anything to us if we have no idea what we need saving *from*. And so, regularly, periodically, we find our sins, and then we confess them. We do this at prayer. We do it by reading the lives of saints and comparing ourselves to them. We do it with trusted spouses and friends. We examine ourselves before Holy Communion. With honesty and openness to the Lord, who searches and knows us, we must do it. And honestly, we will say things like this: "O God, sometimes I finesse the truth because I want to seem more competent than I am."

And then we see that this prayer isn't honest, so we try it again. "O God, I just lied to Jim in order to shore up my pride." "O Lord, I neglect unhappy persons because I love comfort more than compassion." "O God, I'm a weak and self-protective person whose main desire is to be spared trouble."

Painful truth. Painful truth that is squeezed out of confession.

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Honest confession of sin is one antidote to self-deception because eyes that can spot self-deception are usually those that have been cleansed by tears.

“If we confess our sins . . .” But how do we know we’ve nailed them all? How do we know we aren’t deceiving ourselves all over again? How do we know our shifty psyche isn’t printing out the short list? Suppose we’ve been honest about something. How do we know this little spasm of honesty hasn’t been prompted by some *dishonesty*?

We don’t know that. We can’t penetrate the depths. Our capacity for self-deception is fathomless. We know how to hide the very sins we are looking for. But every veteran Christian knows a few of the signs that our divided heart has begun to pump whitewash again. We come to recognize the little twists of thought and expression that keep honesty away.

I’m thinking of ones like these:

- I’m only human.
- Everybody does it.
- I was drunk at the time.
- You have to sell what people are buying.
- I did what I had to do.
- Nobody warned me.
- If I don’t do it, somebody else will.
- Nobody is hurt by what I do.
- I was only following orders.
- Nobody’s perfect.
- It was the only time I did it.

These expressions are small alarms going off. They tell us it’s later than we think. They tell us it’s probably time for confession of our sins.



One of the strange facts of the universe is that God will never tolerate sin, but God will forgive it. And when we are forgiven, when God forgives and cleanses, we are renewed in ways that are full of pain and full of wonder.

Pain because our old self has to die. Wonder because our new self comes marvelously alive.

In a parable that he borrowed from George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis says this:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing, and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.³

Prayer

*O God of truth, I want honesty within. I want
to be straight and true, for Jesus's sake.
Amen.*



13

Splendor in the Grass

Reading: Psalm 103 (NRSV)

As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments. (Psalm 103:15–18)

It would have to be a limp Christian who could hear or read this wondrous hymn without feeling at least a small shiver along the spine. Here is one of the high moments in the Hebrew Scriptures—a psalm that rises from the deep places of the poet's own soul and then moves out to embrace the people of God as a father embraces his children. From there the psalm stretches out still further to consider all of humankind with our short days and fragile lives. Moving on, further and higher and wider, the psalm at its longest reach climaxes with a vision of the universal kingdom of the Lord, where the Lord is surrounded by angels, by powerful servants:

Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding! (Ps. 103:20)

At last, the psalmist settles back from searching the ways of God and humanity. Now quietly and with utter awe he ends as he began: “Bless the LORD, O my soul” (103:22).

It’s a hymn of exquisite beauty, exploring to its furthest reaches the greatness of God. Deep in its middle, we are given some thoughtful lines that often find their way into the readings at a funeral—and with good reason. The words are simple and haunting. They tell us that human life is brief and that one day we shall be forgotten:

As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more. (103:15–16)

The life that begins in a mother’s womb and moves on through birth and school and adolescence, on through the years of strength and usefulness, till we become old and weak—that life seen from near its end can seem so short.

Any pastor who spends time among old Christians will receive, almost without exception, the same answer to a question about it. You ask an aged Christian woman a question about her life: “Did it go fast?” The question touches a sensitive place: “I cannot *believe*,” says the woman, “that my life is nearly over. I remember perfectly what my third-grade teacher said to me one day when I handed in my poster. I remember Christmases at home with my family as if they happened three Decembers ago. But now I’m old and little and nearly done.”

Our lives are like grass! says the psalmist. A blade of grass sprouts and pushes its way up among the crowd of young blades. It stands tall with the rest of the crowd. Then, one day, a good sharp wind lays it low, and it’s gone. Like grass!

Or like a flower! Once, in this place, under these skies, among these trees, along these lakes and flats, human persons flourished. Persons with

roots, growth, color, complexity, and a unique sort of beauty. But now, years later, nobody remembers them. Their place knows them no more.

People are born. They grow—some straight, some crooked, some wild. Generations of people. You do not have to be a romantic or a French existentialist pacing some smoke-filled room to wonder over the meaning of all this parading and passing of the generations. The wise writers of the Old Testament already had their wonder about it. You know those places in Psalm 90 and Isaiah 40, in Job and Ecclesiastes—those matchless places where the theme recurs. Job 14:1–2 says,

A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble,
comes up like a flower and withers,
flees like a shadow and does not last

Or like a *dream*, says Psalm 90:5: “You sweep them away; they are like a dream.”

The Old Testament people of God knew what every thoughtful human being knows. The years move past, taking from us certain treasures and opportunities and times of innocence. These things seemingly will not come again. And once past thirty or thirty-five—once the sense of transience awakens in us—those years seem to move faster and faster.

At times it comes home to you. You try to play basketball with your teenaged sons and discover you have lost your quickness. All you have left to offer is bulk. Not unkindly, they say, “Dad, you may be old, but you sure are slow.”

You visit people you haven’t seen for a time, and their children have grown beyond all recognition. You attend your twenty-fifth high school reunion and can barely remember people you once went to school with every day. Life is half over, and there is still so much to do.

Carl Jung’s theory was that a person from birth till about age thirty-five or forty is discovering the world and in some small way conquering it. Anything is still possible. But in middle age there is some year when you reach the horizon and see down the other side. You see down the other side, and you know that you will die.

Of course, poets and philosophers have tried to say something about this fleetingness, and the pathos of it, and about the profound conflicts that the passage of time arouses in us. But one of my friends once said it in a way I've never forgotten. We want our children to grow, he said, but we ache when they do. We ourselves would like seniority without senility. Status without stiffness in the joints! Wisdom without wrinkles!

But it cannot be. So, what does one say about the passing of the years? What does it all mean?

Consider two answers. One answer measures our lives and turns away in despair: "Our lives flee like a shadow." Or like an hour upon the stage:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: It is a tale told
by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

That is Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (act 5, scene 5). A tale told by an idiot—signifying nothing. That is the hopeless, godless possibility.

The other answer begins the same way: "As for mortals, their days are like grass; . . . the wind passes over it, and it is gone . . ." But then, unlike *Macbeth*, this second answer turns a corner:

As for mortals, their days are like grass. . . .
But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him,
. . . who keep his covenant.

Here, life is the story of a people, a drama of a living, moving body of people—a body with many parts, in a drama with many parts to *play*—a drama into which each of us must fit. This is a tale told by God and signifying everything of final importance in this life and in the life to come. It's the drama of the tragic fall of human children and of how a resourceful God has come among us to lift people who have fallen—and to do it for no more final reason than his own loving-kindness.

The only meaning our lives have is conferred by this everlasting love of God. This is the love that has planted the generations, cultivated and

delighted in us, worried over us and worked among us when we were laid low, and that one day comes for us not as a grim reaper to cut us down but as a faithful husbandman who wants to transplant his trees to a place where their leaves shall never wither, a place, as Revelation says, where their leaves can be for “the healing of the nations” (22:2). These are lives that gain whatever meaning they have in being treasured by God and then in being spent to increase the divine pleasure. Lives that actually bless God himself. “Bless the LORD, O my soul” (Ps. 103:1).

So many God-fearing folk before us have known this. A friend told of visiting one of those wonderful old New England cemeteries where you find all the Yankee names and the whimsical epitaphs. Etched into the headstones you find sayings like this: “I told you I was sick.” Or like this: “Here lies John Macdonald. My surgeon was Dr. Anthony Wendell.”

In one of these graveyards are a couple of tombstones placed many years ago over the bodies of Christians who tried to live strongly out of the love of God. In the granite of one tombstone is carved this: “Hosea MacKinnister. He made grand the name of God.” On another stone, this: “Murdo Hamilton lies here. In his life he blessed God.”

Who were these people? Small farmers or grape growers or tradespeople? What were they like? What were their questions? What did they fear most? How were they surprised by joy?

Nobody knows now. Their place knows them no more. But Hosea MacKinnister made grand the name of God, and Murdo Hamilton blessed God in his life. And now only the Lord knows who these men were—and who they *are* forever. That’s because the love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear the Lord. And God-fearing men and women—people who face God with mixed awe and love—come to see both things our text speaks of, both the brevity of human life and the everlastingness of God’s love.

“As for mortals, their days are like grass . . . of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.”

The fact is that twenty-four hours a day, we are headed toward death. We shall be gone. And the brevity of our lives is a teacher, telling us in our regret of it that we were made for something more, that we have something eternal in us. The fact is that we were made for God. The fact is that we are loved by God—so deeply, so searchingly, so securely that we are held and treasured even when we have made some outstanding mess of our lives. The eternal thing in us is the loving-kindness of God.

Our days are as the grass of the field. But that grass glistens with the everlasting love of God. God is the one in whom we find a still point of rest as the shadows lengthen and the wind rises. This is the God whose Son has done magnificent work among us, the Son who walked the way of sorrows with us, and who at last made death die. This is therefore the God toward whom we grow, and who holds us through all the difficult years, who embraces us when we are battered and bent. This is the God who one day comes for harvest.

Someday, nobody in these parts will know who we were or what we wanted or why we did anything. But God will know. From everlasting to everlasting, God will know.

Prayer

*O God, if there is anything worthy in me,
anything remarkable, anything noble, it is
your love, your everlasting love through your
Son Jesus Christ. In his name, Amen.*



Afraid of Easter

Reading: Matthew 28:1–10 (NRSV)

So [the two women] left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. (Matthew 28:8)

In a wonderful piece for the Christian journal *Books & Culture*, Susan Wise Bauer tells us what every parent already knows. She tells us that children are born with the knowledge of evil. Nobody has to introduce them to it. Nobody has to tell them about it. Children know there is evil in the world. You can tell from their dreams. You can tell from the clouds that pass over the face of a dreaming child. “Not even the most gently reared child escapes nightmares,” and they start up early.¹ Nightmares of the Thing under the Bed, or of Mr. Cockaboo, or of the Shadow Who Lives behind the Stairs.

What this means is that children are like Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. They don’t invent evil. They discover it. And they are afraid of it.

That’s why children want a ritual when they go to bed. Children want a bedtime ritual that will drive back some of their fears. Many parents know all about this. That’s why there’s a hug, a kiss, a story, a recitation of “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep.” What a child wants is a sequence of gentle things to drive back the wild things. And, of course, a good parent

understands this and doesn't try to rush the ritual. Children need their bedtime routine, and they need to have some time for it.

Part of this time, as I said, is usually kept for a bedtime story. For centuries, parents have read bedtime stories to their children so that the day could be put away and the night could come. Remarkably, parents have often chosen stories that contain real evil, which doesn't sound like such a good idea. But, of course, in these stories the evil gets soundly defeated, which *is* a good idea. Children *like* a story with a witch in it, or a jealous stepsister, or a wolf that wants to get at the lambs. A child likes some evil in her story—just so long as the evil gets defeated before the child has to close her eyes.

Real evil that gets really destroyed. That's what the recipe calls for. And so, as Bauer writes, children want their stories in the old versions with the old, politically incorrect endings—you know, “*thereal* story of Hansel and Gretel, the one where the wicked witch ends up getting baked in her own oven!”

Now everybody can go to sleep.



We are all children, says Bauer. We all like stories in which real evil gets really destroyed.

Stories help us manage our fear by stirring up our fear, and then resolving it. It's like singing the blues to cure the blues. And we do need help with our fears. We fear failure and the loss of our future. We fear the loss of friends, or the loss of stability at home. Some of us fear insomnia, which only makes it worse. Maybe some of us are afraid that we may end up disgracing ourselves because of some secret addiction that is growing out of control.

We are afraid of evil, and why not?

Evil hurts us.

Evil threatens us.

Evil threatens to undo us.

Fear of evil is therefore the first alarm in our self-defense system.

And this is so even though we are in the hands of God, where we are ultimately safe. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord. Still, a certain amount of fear, controlled by our faith, is instinctive. It's normal. In any case, it's inevitable.

We fear evil, and we all know why.

But what if somebody feared what was good? What if somebody felt that she had to defend herself against goodness? Suppose a child heard a fairy tale and got scared at the wrong point? Suppose a child got scared, not when Sleeping Beauty falls into a coma, but when the handsome prince awakens her with a kiss? Suppose a child hears of an ugly duckling turning into a glorious white swan, and the child begins to tremble?

Does it make any sense for us to fear what's good?

Now read God's Word:

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." (Matt. 28:1–10)

This is Matthew's Easter, and it is full of turns and angles. None of the other Gospels shows us the resurrection itself, and Matthew doesn't either. I suppose that the resurrection of Jesus Christ, his body standing up and moving forward while the moss of death is still clinging to it—I suppose that this event is unspeakable even for an inspired writer.

Matthew doesn't show us the resurrection. What he shows is how people *respond* to the resurrection. You notice that the resurrection has already

happened by the time the angel rolls back the stone. The angel rolls the stone back not to let Jesus out but to show that he's *already* out.

The angel rolls back the stone and sits on it. Such a saucy angel! The earth quakes, and the guards quake right along with it. Then they faint. And Matthew wants us to get the joke here: the dead man in the tomb is alive; it's the men outside the tomb who drop like flies.

And that is that. So much for Pilate and the chief priests. So much for the local security system. Pilate and the chief priests had set a stone and a watch and a guard, trying everything they could think of to stop an outbreak of the Son of God. And it's hopeless. It would be "like trying to stop the wind with a machine gun," as Frederick Buechner once put it.²

"He is not here; for he has been raised" (Matt. 28:6). Here is the colossal event of the New Testament. Here is the central message of the gospel, a message with power to straighten the spine of every believer. It's simply this: "The Lord is risen." "He is risen indeed!" Preaching, sacraments, evangelism, Christian social action—even worship on Sunday instead of on Saturday—all center on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. To the desperate and bewildered, Christians say, "The Lord is risen." To doubters, Christians say, "The Lord is risen." To martyrs who sing to God while their enemies set them on fire, "The Lord is risen." To poor people all over the world who suffer the indignity of their poverty, and then the desolation of being blown out of their houses by hurricanes or washed out by flood, Christians say, "The Lord is risen."

The first people to hear it in Matthew's report are two women—Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph. They had been at the crucifixion, they had been at the burial, and now here they are again.

The first human witnesses of the gospel are two women in a land where women had no legal standing as witnesses. You know, a made-up resurrection story would have put these women at home. A fictional resurrection would have had these women weeping at home while men took care of business at the tomb. But that's not what happened. So that's not

what's in Matthew's Gospel. What actually happened was a first-century embarrassment. What happened was that two illegal witnesses, two impossible witnesses, two incredible witnesses showed up on Easter morning for history's biggest event.

And they are afraid of it. I want to say, *naturally* they are afraid of it.

They are afraid of the supernatural because it is so eerie.

They are afraid of the angel because he is so full of light.

They are afraid of the angel's message because it's too good to be true.

"He is not here," says the angel, "for he has been raised, as he said" (Matt. 28:6). And the women look at each other. Are they both dreaming? Are they deluded? Maybe the angel in front of them isn't as good as he looks. Who knows? If angels are possible, maybe crooked angels are possible, or cruel angels.

Afraid of Easter! The news is so good that even faithful human beings can hardly believe it. We hardly *dare* believe it. We've been fooled too often before. And it's a terrible thing to be fooled by good news. A terrible thing. Somebody says they love you, and your hopes rise. But if they turn out to be a liar, your hopes will fall lower than they started. Good news is wonderful, but it's got to be true, or it hurts us more than no news at all.

I think every honest preacher has wondered about Easter along this line. In some late night of the soul a preacher fears that we Christians are stuck with a dead Savior and that the only way to keep the movement going is by shouting louder on Easter in order to keep death from looking like death or smelling like death.

Such a human fear this is. That's why the Marys and the Thomases of the Gospel want to look the good news over before they buy it. They hardly dare to believe it.

That's half the truth. Half the Easter truth is fear, and we don't admit it often enough.

But the other half is great joy. The women leave the tomb with both fear and great joy. Fear and joy combined. Joyful fear. Fearful joy. And these two emotions tug against each other. You might say they tug on opposite ends of the resurrection.

Fear says, NO.

Joy says, YES.

Fear says, WATCH IT.

Joy says, TRUST IT.

Fear says, GUARD YOURSELF.

Joy says, GIVE YOURSELF.

Remember that Matthew doesn't show us the resurrection. He shows us how people *respond* to the resurrection. And his heroes are two very human and very godly women who run from Joseph's tomb with fear and great joy until they run right into the risen Lord himself.

Fearful joy. Joyful fear. Now, let me ask you: Isn't this the authentic human response to life's big beginnings? Think about childbirth. Fear and great joy. Think about finishing your schooling and starting your career. Fear and great joy. Think about getting married. Why do so many good people weep at weddings? What is it about a *wedding* that would make somebody weep?

Fear and great joy. Fearful joy is the authentic human response to big beginnings, and we have all felt it.

But the gospel takes us one step further. That's because in the gospel fear and joy are not equals. No, fear is fear, but joy is *great* joy, and in the struggle between them, joy must finally triumph. You might say that joy must triumph just to keep up with the risen Christ, who has gone ahead of us into Galilee.

Yes, we've got some of the fear—no question about it. But we've got the joy too. And our joy needs to be bigger than our fear. Joy needs to rise

above our fear. Gospel joy needs to Easter up in us and *override* our fear.

The only way this can happen is if we stay very close to Jesus Christ. Two Marys show up for the crucifixion, then they show up for the burial, and then one morning they show up to keep vigil at the tomb of Jesus. Ninety percent of faithfulness is just showing up. Ninety percent of faithfulness is just soldiering on.

The disciples missed it. They were moping at home. But two Marys showed up on Easter morning to keep vigil.

And the news they received is the reason we are Christians, and why two billion of us Christians across the world celebrate Easter. Christ our Lord is risen from the dead. He's out. In Jesus Christ, God is on the loose. We will never be safe again because the resurrected Lord wants not just our faith. He wants everything we have and everything we are.

And that, Christian friends, should fill us with fear. And with great joy.

Prayer

*Lord Jesus Christ, Alleluia! You are risen.
Alleluia! Amen.*



Neighbor Love

Reading: Leviticus 19:9–18; Matthew 22:34–40 (NRSV)

[Jesus] said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:37–40)

On National Public Radio, Mary Kay Magistad once told an extraordinary story of an artist who survived one of the most brutal prisons in the world. In the late 1970s a group of butchers called the Khmer Rouge ran Cambodia, terrorizing everybody who got in their way. One day some of their soldiers came to get the artist. They dragged him from his home, beat him up, and dumped him in a prison called Tuol Sleng, a place where the Khmer Rouge practiced their horrors.

So there sat the artist in prison, starving, shaking, waiting. He was waiting for the day when the guards would come in, torture him for a while, and then finish him off.

Meanwhile, all around him people pleaded as the guards tore children from their mothers and shackled old men together so as to make life easier

for the execution squads.

Well, the artist's name is Vann Nath, and he's written a book about his experience titled *A Cambodian Prison Portrait*. The reason he lived to write it is that his captors realized that he could paint, and it dawned on them that maybe he could paint a portrait of Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge. So, one day a guard handed Vann Nath a photo of a man he had never seen, a photo of Pol Pot—a photo of the man who wanted to strip the land of its last shrub of decency. “Paint this man,” the guard said. “Paint him well, and we will let you live.”¹

So, the artist sat in his cell, painting the face of the man whose victims were screaming through the prison. Vann Nath survived the deadliest years of the Khmer Rouge by painting the face of his enemy, and we can imagine what courage it took for him to paint a human face when he painted Pol Pot.

After Vann Nath's release, he took up his brushes again, but this time to paint the faces of his neighbors in prison. The artist had seen torture, and he had seen death, and when he was released, he poured out the agony of his memory in one painting after another.

Today Tuol Sleng prison has been converted into a museum. On its walls hang photos of fourteen thousand prisoners—all of whom were killed but seven. Seven survived, including Vann Nath, whose paintings also hang in the museum. Some years ago, he was in the museum one day and was startled to see a visitor come through, a man who looked familiar. The visitor turned out to be a prison guard from the old days. This guard was a killer by the name of Hoy, one of the most accomplished killers the prison had ever known.

At first Vann Nath didn't dare to approach him, but then he took his courage in his hands, walked over to where Hoy was standing, and asked him a question. “Have you seen the pictures I painted?” “Yes,” said Hoy. “Did I exaggerate?” “No,” said Hoy, “the reality was even worse.”

Then Vann Nath looked at Hoy and said these words: “I don't want revenge. I just want you to know that all those people you killed—they wanted to live, just as you want to live. I speak for them.”

“They wanted to live, just as you want to live.” Do we understand what Vann Nath was saying to Hoy? He was saying, the people you killed were

like you. They were creatures of your kind, and all they needed was a little kindness. They were human creatures, and all they needed was a little humanity. They came into your bailiwick, and what they needed there was justice. In other words, they were your neighbors, and you should have loved them as you love yourself.

I think there's a word for us here. Many of us are regular Sunday worshipers. We go to church not just out of habit and not just to launch a new week. We come together each Sunday to get serious about love. As a response to God's grace, we want to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. And we want to love our neighbor as ourselves.

We love our neighbors because they belong to God and are protected by God's righteousness. God's righteousness isn't merely a heavenly standard by which God can tell a sheep from a goat. No, God's righteousness is a fierce hatred of prison cruelty. God's righteousness is a fierce love that wants to make things right, to put things right, to rectify everything in Phnom Penh and in all Southeast Asia; to rectify everything in the United States and in its government; to rectify everything within our own cities and states; and, not least, to rectify everything within the government of our own hearts. You can't love God without wanting passionately for God to put things right.

So "which commandment in the law is the greatest?" asks the legal expert in Matthew's Gospel (22:36). (I think we understand, by the way, that he doesn't want to know; he just wants to ask.) What is the greatest commandment? And Jesus tells him with words adapted from Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37).

With all your mind. Jesus calls us to mindful love of God.

But then Jesus adds a command that nobody had asked for. Jesus adds a command that nobody was looking for, a command that is just as hard to obey as the first one. Jesus tells us to love those whom God loves. He tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Reaching back into Leviticus 19, a passage you have just read, Jesus speaks for our neighbor. The Lord of life brings a counsel of life.

Such a remarkable passage this is. What does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself?

It means things like this: Don't put a stumbling block in front of a blind man. Don't curse the deaf. When you harvest, do leave the ends of the rows for the poor and the alien. Don't lie to anybody. Do pay workers as soon as they've finished. Don't slander anyone. In short, love your neighbor as yourself.

There is justice built into these commands, but there is more than justice. There is also love. Love always includes justice and goes beyond it. So here we find a lovely concern for people with disabilities: Don't curse the deaf, says the text. As some of the rabbis put it, don't curse *even* the deaf. Don't curse *even* a person who can't hear you. Cursing demeans you both. It's demeaning; it's diminishing; it's perverse. Cursing another human being is anti-life.

The idea in loving your neighbor is to enhance their life. So, for example, when you harvest leave the ends of the rows for the poor and the alien.

What a perfectly thoughtful command this is! If you leave the ends of the rows full of grain, you make provision for people who are too poor to own a field, and you also make provision for somebody who is an alien in your bailiwick, somebody who is "foreign," somebody like the biblical Ruth who doesn't know her way around. If you make provision in this way, you turn an alien into kin by giving her a stake in your field. The idea in love, said Paul Ramsey, is not so much to recognize stakeholders as to create them.

Rabbis have noticed one more thing about this harvest command: If you leave the ends unharvested, aliens know where to look for food. It's clear what's for them. They don't have to search. They don't have to worry. They don't have to beg. They don't even have to ask. They don't have to wonder whether there *is* anything for them. They can follow the progress of the

harvest right along. Provide something for others, says God, and do it in a way that protects their dignity. Do this, God keeps saying. Do this. *I am the Lord.*

Love your neighbor as yourself. Make provision for your neighbor, and especially if he or she comes to you from another land. We have to reach out toward them, give them a stake in our lives, ask them some questions so we can learn something. Even ignorant questions are OK at first. An ignorant question is like an off-center kiss: it's the thought that counts, and the thoughts get better.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

You wouldn't slander yourself; don't slander your neighbor either.

You shouldn't lie to yourself; don't lie to your neighbor either.

You wouldn't fail to feed yourself; feed your hungry neighbor too.

This is a way for us to grow, and I think we can see why. So much of good growth depends on simply taking an interest in the lives of others—figuring out what they want, how they think, what moves them or fails to move them.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Love brings life. When you or I reach out to our neighbor with a word of encouragement, or with a question that is clearly thoughtful; when we rejoice with one who is rejoicing and weep with one who is weeping (Rom. 12:15), *we are like God*. God is always breathing life into everybody, so much life that all the stars feel like singing together, and all the children of God feel like shouting for joy. God knows how to vivify, and our calling is to act like God.

When we reach out to our neighbors, they come to life. It occurs to them that they are not alone. It's not good for people to be alone all the time; they need others to seek them, nourish them, ask about them. That's why we go to those who have lost a loved one and try somehow to share their grief with them. There is little we can do for the person who has died. Only God can raise the dead. But there is something we can do for the persons who are left behind. We can help to raise *them* back to life.

Love your neighbor as yourself. If you are worried about this program, let me add that there is no need to get sentimental about our neighbor, or unrealistic. No need to like all our neighbors equally. No need to think we can vivify everybody in the city. We are not God; we are only like God, and we have small lungs when it comes to blowing life into people.

But if God the Holy Spirit has breathed on us, we can pass life along to at least some of our neighbors. We can take an interest in them; ask about them; learn to pronounce their names right. We can make ourselves vulnerable before them by sometimes asking a question we know will reveal our ignorance. We can spend some of our daydream time in dreaming of things that would make our neighbor's heart glad. And we can lift neighbors to God with the prayerful urgency of a lover. In short, we can love our neighbors as ourselves by sharing God's enthusiasm for them.

Beyond this, will we be called someday to act heroically for our neighbors, spending our lives for them in ways that look like the ways of Jesus Christ? Maybe.

But we can't do calculus without knowing arithmetic, and before we ever get to be heroes, we have to be ordinary lovers who give each other ordinary courtesy, ordinary respect, a little basic consideration.

The truth is that our neighbor wants to live, just as we do. And nobody in Phnom Penh or in New York or in any place in the world can live without love.

Remember that the one who wants the ends of the rows left for the poor and the alien, the one who wants people with disabilities treated with respect—this is the God of the universe who puts weight into the counsel to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Prayer

*Our neighbors belong to you, compassionate
God. They are yours, and so we want to love
them. Help us do it for Jesus's sake. Amen.*



16

Spiritual Momentum

Reading: Mark 4:21–25 (NRSV)

For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. (Mark 4:25)

You read every so often about some unemployed worker who has won the state lottery. Since he was fired by his boss, he's been drawing unemployment compensation, and it's almost run out. But then by a sudden stroke of luck, so it seems, he wins \$105 million. He can pay off all his debts, show up on local TV news, buy a couple of luxury sedans, drop by the plant to tell his old boss to take a long walk, and retire splendidly to Hawaii at age thirty-eight.

Now the fun starts, but also some trouble. A great deal of money all at once can be too much for some folks to handle. A forty-year holiday that begins in the prime of life isn't necessarily a recipe for happiness. (I understand there've been some studies of lottery winners that tend to show this. Along with the winner's new wealth come new problems, new taxes, a fair number of new relatives.)

But even more to the point, it's worth noticing that lottery winners, sweepstakes winners, surprised heirs of fortunes aren't always poor and

thrifty. The odd thing is that the winners are sometimes already prosperous businesspersons or comfortably fixed retirees. Occasionally, a lottery winner is a *previous* lottery winner. And then, when people read about who won, they shake their heads. “Ho boy!” they say. “To those who have, more will be given.”

How odd to notice that they are quoting Jesus. This hard saying comes from our Lord, of all people. And the saying gets harder when you quote it completely: “For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Mark 4:25).

On first hearing, it certainly doesn’t sound very fair. In fact, it sounds outrageous. Does our Lord suppose that we ought to send care packages to the best apartments in Manhattan, while cutting off food to dependent children? Should we sponsor big tax breaks for the wealthiest baseball players and rip up the bleacher tickets of their poorest spectators? Subsidize Las Vegas casinos while foreclosing on struggling widows? What kind of a saying is this anyway? Everybody knows the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, but it’s the kind of thing most decent people regret, not the kind of thing we expect our Lord to bless.

“For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

It seems that this saying is a kind of Jewish proverb that Jesus simply makes use of. This is a proverb coined by some shrewd observer of the human scene who noted with a steady eye one of the perennial facts of life—namely, that a wealthy moneylender (we would today call him a loan shark) could amass a fortune with comparatively little risk or effort. Meanwhile some poor peasant who gets cursed by bad weather and poor harvests would sink deeper and deeper into poverty but still have to pay the moneylender back his last penny.

Yes, wealth begets wealth; it takes money to make money, and so on.

It’s all true, and we know it’s true, and of course Jesus knew it was true. But it so happens that he is not talking about that at all.

Jesus uses this proverb about money to make another point altogether. The setting for this saying is a discussion of the right hearing of Jesus's teaching in parables, and the point is that either we make good use of God's revelation or else it may slip away. Either we use the revelation or else, like an unexercised muscle, it will start to atrophy. Or it will be like a neglected friendship. Or it will be like the ability to play the piano. Once upon a time when you were taking lessons you could play the "March of the Candy Soldiers." But you don't practice anymore, so now some of those soldiers have lost their way.

On the other hand, it's also possible to strengthen our gifts. That's why athletes train. That's why musicians practice. That's why caring friends *invest* themselves in friendships and intelligent spouses *invest* themselves in their marriage.

So it is with our Christian faith. It's all about momentum. Our faith ought to *move* from grace to grace, becoming stronger all the time, stronger in its magnet power as we attach to Jesus Christ; stronger in magnet power as we draw others toward Christ; stronger in those dark times when sheer faith has to carry us because it looks as if nothing means anything anymore.

There is, in other words, in our Christian faith what there is in all of life—*bad momentum and good momentum*, a vicious circle and a virtuous one. "For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

So we have to pay attention to what we hear about Jesus. Either you and I grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord, or else our knowledge dims, our vision of God clouds over, and our love grows cold.

I think we know how this process goes. Good momentum begins with really hearing a word from God. You hear and begin to think there may be something to it after all. You hear a good word from Scripture. Something in you lifts and straightens. The gospel seems alive to you. You make your first adult attempt to pray—maybe with all the awkwardness of a beginning dancer. But then one day you lose yourself in prayer because you are really speaking with God, not just thinking about speaking with God.

Your momentum builds. You feel stronger ties to the community of Christians and, maybe for the first time, you begin to care what the church

is doing. You become much more alert to the basic assumptions—right or wrong—of the things you read and see on TV, including some of the political things. You notice how easily people running for office claim to know the motives of their opponent and how seldom they put the best face on them. And it troubles you.

Good spiritual momentum. You start to care about the injustices of society and feel restless and unhappy about them. You no longer sneer at do-gooders as the world does.

You find, in general, that your Christian faith means more and more to you, that it is alive and growing. God seems very real. The Christ who walked among us seems to walk with you. The world seems full of windows open to that unimaginably splendid reality that lies behind this life. You begin to see that the most important thing about human life for you and those you love is not how intelligent you are, how much income you have, or how many well-placed friends you have, or even, in any ordinary sense, how happy you are. You begin to see that what matters first is how deep is your union with Jesus Christ.

The momentum builds. You discover that you can draw joy from small occasions and simple things because at last you have become grateful all the way downtown in your heart. And you discover that gratitude is a powerful engine of joy.

Of course, you have headaches at home and at work and in the church. There are obstacles to get over and difficult people to deal with. There are personal humiliations to struggle with and perhaps a real twinge of fear now and then about your career or your health. All of it true. For some of you, there is serious trouble to manage. I know that.

Still, it has to be said, deeply and centrally, your life has been *secured*—hidden deep with Christ in God. And from that center you can work and play and conduct your relationships always aware that, whatever comes, no matter how your foundations may shake, you are loved so much and held so firmly by everlasting God that nothing can ever rip you out of God's grasp.

“For to those who have, more will be given.”

Sorry to say, bad momentum is a fact of human spiritual life too. There are millions of people who have been baptized into Christian families and

introduced to Jesus Christ but who have somehow slipped away from their faith. Many of us recall times when we ourselves were slipping.

You know how it goes. Prayer begins to mean less and less to you. It feels like a chore. You wonder why, if God is there, he is so emphatically silent. God doesn't seem very real, so you pray less. And, of course, the less you pray the less real God seems to you.

The Bible starts to look dull to you. Either dull or else the product of fantasy.

You look at the Christian church and you see hypocrites. Church people do know how to talk, but they also know how to sin, and they seem to do it with the same zest as everybody else. Church! Preachers in church answer questions nobody is asking. Hocus pocus sacraments, sermons with great sedative power, people squabbling about music and worship style—all of it seems dreary. You notice Christians glaring at each other over how best to adore God. You can't wait to get out.

Bad momentum. You find yourself believing secular propaganda. You open up shallow, self-seeking friendships with other shallow, self-seeking people. You find yourself thinking that honesty is for losers. Promise keeping is for fogies. The pursuit of goodness strikes you as a quaint hobby like, maybe, stagecoach repair.

Bad momentum is building. You push all ultimate questions out of your mind, and you drift. You betray somebody close to you and defend yourself by saying, "Hey, I'm only human." You hunker down with your creature comforts, and you go through the motions at work, and then one day the thought comes to you: "Is this all there is to it?" I work and eat and watch TV and sleep; then I work and eat and watch TV and sleep. I do this for decades till one day my heart explodes or my kidneys quit—and that's *it*? That's my *life*?

Your family seems to live in their own world as you do in yours. Who can understand kids nowadays, anyhow? The insolent little critters! They seem like strangers. And your spouse. You are married. How in the folly of passion did you ever get hooked into *this*? You lurch through midlife crisis. You discover that you can be young only once, but you can be immature indefinitely.

You begin to wonder, really, what good human living is. Increasingly, you are aware that whatever comes—money, position, an easy retirement, the envy of your friends—most of it is pretty shaky. A dreaded diagnosis

comes back from a pathology lab some Tuesday, and it's all called into question. But none of it really seemed to matter anyhow. None of it ever really satisfied you. Not all the way down. And you learn what people mean by *despair*. You learn why the medieval poets pictured hell as a place whose outdoor sign says, "Abandon all hope, you who enter here!"

All because "to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away"—both in this life and in the life to come.

Now, the word of our Lord to us in this passage expects its own response from each of us. Of course, good momentum depends on the grace of God. We do not engineer it. God regenerates our hard hearts and leads us along holy paths.

But there is still something we are summoned to do. You know the word. It is as old as the time we human beings slipped from the embrace of God and tried to find happiness on our own.

The word is this: turn, repent, come back, believe the gospel, remember *who you are* and who made you and who loves you and who has fingerprints over every vital part of your being.

Christian friends: many of us know what it's like to speak the name of Jesus Christ a dozen times a day and yet to lose, for a time, all the freshness, all the aliveness, all the wonder, urgency, and beauty of the gospel. How quickly one becomes just a *professional* Christian. How quick it is, and how deadly.

The strange thing is that when we come back, we discover that it is not God who has been off duty. We ourselves have been wandering in some far country where there is nothing to slake our thirst and no one to bring rest to our terrible restlessness.

Always we are on the move—from pride to restlessness to the shipwreck of our hope. Or else from strength to strength and from grace to grace, sometimes in ways we don't see till years later. Grace is amazing in part because it's so mysterious.

At the end of C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*, the converted Christian has withstood demonic temptations and has entered glory. Angels welcome him. And when he sees them, he understands that he has always known

them, and he realizes what part each of them has played at hours in his life when he thought he was alone. They intervened for him. So now he can say to these angels of grace not “Who are you?” but “So it was *you* all along.”

“For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.

Prayer

*Establish us, faithful God, in your word and
in your purposes. Plant and cultivate and
tend in us the fruit of the Spirit, letting us
grow and blossom for Jesus Christ's sake.
Amen.*



Clothe Yourself with Humility

Reading: Colossians 3:1–4, 12–14 (NIV)

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ . . . clothe yourselves with . . . humility. (Colossians 3:1, 12)

I once heard a minister begin a speech by talking about himself for quite a while, and especially about his achievements. He said he was privileged to counsel senators and corporate CEOs. He said he was privileged to preach on five continents and to write books that were translated into ten languages. He was privileged to perform the weddings and funerals of some of the most powerful people in the land. Everywhere he went, he was privileged to touch thousands of people with words that were so . . . well, touching to them. In fact, all these privileges had touched him too. He said, “When I think of how God has seen fit to call me to so many amazing ministries, I just feel so humble.”

We play tricks with humility, don’t we? Paul knew all about them. Chapter 3 of Colossians follows chapter 2 (and the day I first noticed this

fact it just made me feel so humble), and in chapter 2 Paul twice warns against what he calls “false humility” (vv. 18 and 23).

False humility is part of the old life and part of the old self. False humility is a mask we wear in public, while we do our real thinking *behind* the mask. False humility. People sometimes use it to fish for praise. We’ve all met people who run themselves down. “Oh, they say, I’m so fat. I’m so stupid. I’m so ugly.” People say these things, and then they wait. They wait for you to contradict them, reassure them, shore them up with a mighty word. “I’m so ugly,” they say. And so, you say, “No. No, you’re not *that* ugly. I know a guy who’s way uglier than you.”

We play tricks with humility, and false humility is one of them.

Another confusion comes to mind. Humility has gotten a bad name because people have gotten it all mixed up with humiliation. We’ve had this problem for centuries. Whites preach humility to Blacks, men preach humility to women, the strong preach humility to the weak, and the message gets garbled on the way. It sounds like humility, but it feels like humiliation.

That’s why Jesus went after the Pharisees on this point. They were really good at preaching humility, but they always preached it to other people.

So let me add a caution. To have the mind of Christ is to have the mind of a servant. But this does not mean that we owe submission to tyrants—people who want us to kiss their boots in the name of Jesus. Never. That’s not humility; that’s humiliation. We don’t help people if we just reinforce their arrogance. We don’t serve people well if we give them submission when what they really need from us is resistance. Jesus Christ took on the form of a servant, not the form of a doormat, and we who want the mind of Christ ought to know the difference.

Jonathan Edwards, America’s greatest theologian, used to say that virtues like humility are valuable. That’s why they are counterfeited. And there are lots of counterfeit virtues around. So, when we reach for humility, we ought to take a look at it and make sure it’s the real thing.

And what *is* real humility? The first thing to say is that humility in Scripture is a species of wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to know God’s

world and then to fit ourselves into it. The humble person has a kind of healthy respect for sheer reality along with a knack for living inside it.

Think of it like this: the word “humility” comes from the same root as the Latin *humus*, which means “earth.” Humility is a kind of down-to-earthness. A humble person has his *feet* on the ground. He can see reality at ground level—and he can see his own place within it. Humble people don’t pretend to be more than they are. They don’t put on airs. They don’t think of God as their junior partner. Humble people look at reality straight. Then they open themselves to it and grasp it. They delight in what’s good and grieve over what’s evil.

Humble people are *realistic* about things, and about people, and about themselves. They have their radar turned on for things and persons outside themselves. They think there are real things outside their own imagination, real people out there, real values to grasp, and real beauty to admire. Humility is a kind of wisdom that lets us deal with reality, not fantasy. The humble person knows God is her superior, and she lets God be God. The humble person is glad and ready to acknowledge other human beings as her equals, her colleagues, her fellow travelers, and she takes a hearty interest in them and in their lives.

By contrast, the proud person traps himself in some combination of conceit and narcissism. The proud person is conceited, so he thinks more highly of himself than he ought to think. He’s out of touch with reality because his view of himself is out of whack, out of line, out to lunch. It’s unrealistic. His view of himself is usually narcissistic to some degree as well—that is, it’s self-centered, self-absorbed, self-fascinated. Here’s a person who leaves a meeting less interested in what he heard than in what he said. Here’s a person who talks and talks about himself, and then turns to you and says, “Look, I’ve been rattling on about myself long enough. What do *you* think of me?”

All this is foolish in excelsis.

The proud person gets trapped in a childish need to toot his own horn, and he’ll find a way to do it too. Anne Lamott says in one of her books that people who want to brag will find a way to wedge it into a conversation. They’ll say, “Boy, you think it’s raining hard today? I remember one day—I think it was the year I got the Guggenheim—it *really* rained hard.”¹

“Since you have been raised with Christ, clothe yourself with humility.” The humble person accepts reality and doesn’t try to reinvent it to suit himself. The humble person accepts other people as equals and doesn’t try to reinvent *them* to suit himself. The humble person accepts the superlative majesty of God and doesn’t try to reinvent God so that God ends up looking like us.

These acceptances play out in certain characteristic habits of a humble person, and I want to name seven of them. Call them “Seven Habits of the Highly Humble Person.”

1. The humble person accepts ordinary human deficiencies with goodwill and good humor. She isn’t ashamed of her uncouth relatives, and she is perfectly happy to be seen with them. If her husband isn’t as learned as she is, she doesn’t apologize to anybody about that. The humble person understands that we all have strengths and weaknesses; she doesn’t think other people’s strengths threaten her own, and she doesn’t think other people’s weaknesses make her look bad. In short, she doesn’t assume that everything out there is a reflection on her.
2. Humble people ask questions because this is the way of wisdom. Wise people get interested in things and interested in people and ask about them. “How did you do that?” they will ask. “Who taught you?” “Why do it *that* way?” “When do you know you’ve got it right?” “Where did you get your faith?” The wise person doesn’t mind asking a question that reveals his ignorance. He would rather lose his ignorance by asking a question than keep his ignorance by keeping still. If he ought to know the name of the person he’s talking to, but doesn’t, he’ll ask for it.
3. Humble persons wait for an invitation to talk about themselves. They don’t just assume that their lives are fascinating to others.
4. A humble person is a good receiver. She receives good things from God and good things from other people with an open, grateful heart. She doesn’t think she has to be independent of others and of God. She is willing to be grateful and willing to feel indebted. When a gift comes, she receives it like a good young child. She doesn’t compare or complain. She doesn’t get cynical every time and ask, “OK, what’s really going on here?” No, a humble person receives gifts the way a child receives the kingdom of God, just as Jesus said.

5. A humble person doesn't try to make his children over in his own image. He doesn't think of children as his project or his invention. He thinks of them as God's gift and God's project. And so, he lets God have some of the responsibility for them. A wise parent wants his children to grow away from him enough to become the person *God* meant them to be. And I'll say right now that this is hard. The reason is that while we want our children to grow, we ache when they do.
6. A humble person is full of humor and irony, especially about himself and his own humility. There's an old Mac Davis ballad that has the spirit of it precisely. It goes like this:

O Lord it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way;
I can't wait to look in the mirror—I get better lookin' each day.

The antidote for stuffiness is laughter, and the person who can laugh at himself is the kind of person we all want to be with.

7. Humble people own up to their sins. They laugh at what's foolish in their lives, but they grieve over their sins. And then they trust the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. They trust the Lamb of God to take away their sins too.

I think it's rare enough for us really to grieve over our sins that when we see it happen, we feel like we have stepped onto holy ground. I know the story of a ten-year-old boy, whom I'll call Ken. Ken attends a Christian school but has trouble in class because he's so hyperactive, so hot-wired. He can't sit still, can't speak quietly, can't open himself up to absorb knowledge. He's smart, and he loves God. He does love God, but it's hard for him to listen in class because the storms in his soul are making so much noise.

Well, after trying one thing and another, Ken's teacher developed a plan. When Ken got too stormy to do well in class, she would signal to him, and he would leave the class and walk briskly to the gymnasium and back three times. After the first loop, he'd gesture "once" at the classroom door, and after the second loop, he'd gesture "twice," and so on. Doing the loops helped Ken. He would do them, and it would break the cycle and calm him down for a while till it was time to do a few more loops.

One day Ken got unusually agitated. He was really wound up, and so his teacher signaled to him. Out the door he went and started his loops. And he announced each one in the regular way by gesturing with one finger, then with two, and finally with three. But the trouble was that on this particular day Ken hadn't really done his loops. At noon the teacher discovered from reliable witnesses that Ken had just walked around the corner, sat down, and then estimated how long a loop would take. He did this three times, gesturing each time.

Well, the teacher confronted Ken about it. "Ken," she said, "you didn't tell me the truth. You said you had done your loops, but you hadn't. And that was dishonest. I'd like you to think about this, and then speak to me tomorrow."

After school the teacher was in her room, and a colleague walked in. The colleague said she had found Ken sitting outside the back door of the school. His head was in his hands, and he was crying. When the colleague asked what was wrong, Ken looked up at her and cried out the words, "I'm dishonest." And he said those two words with such alarm in his voice that the colleague sat down with him and offered him some of the compassion and assurance that comes from a person who lives next to God.

"I'm dishonest." I believe the Holy Spirit inspired those words. I believe that some dying and rising happened by the back door that day. And I think it was dying and rising with Jesus Christ. When we put ourselves in his hands, the grace that calmed a storm at sea can enter us and calm the storms in our souls. It's painful to die with Christ by owning up to what's wrong with us. But when we do it, we receive God's grace, the kind that lifts us and stretches us toward God. We rise to our feet, we rise to the full stature of the sons and daughters of God, and we walk out into the world like Jesus walking out of his tomb.

"Since you have been raised with Christ, clothe yourselves with humility." Humility fits people who have been raised with Christ. Humility is part of the family uniform of the people of God.

Prayer

*O Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. O
Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a
sinner. O Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on
me, a sinner, and grant me your peace.
Amen.*



For All Who Are Far Away

Reading: Acts 2:1–4, 14–24, 36–42 (NRSV)

The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him. (Acts 2:39)

In a book called *Lorenzo the Magnificent*, a writer by the name of David Loth tells us about Lorenzo de' Medici, a man who spent his life making a splash. He always had his reasons for making a splash, because Lorenzo was a man of many intrigues, and most of them were political. He belonged to the famous Medici banking family, which dominated the life of Florence during the Italian Renaissance, but Lorenzo didn't spend a lot of time on banking. Too quiet for him. Too orderly. What Lorenzo liked was diplomacy and politics, and to succeed politically he put on spectacles that would draw crowds and make them roar. He put on festivals; he put on pageants. He produced one eye-popping spectacle after another. These events were full of art and full of religion, but they were especially full of Lorenzo. Lorenzo de' Medici. Lorenzo the Magnificent!

According to the story, on one occasion he outdid himself in producing a pageant of Pentecost. What he did was to arrange for actual flames to descend from the upper rigging to settle on the heads of the apostles. The problem was that the flaming materials got into the stage sets and hangings

and trimmings, and so pretty soon the stage was ablaze, and then the whole church burned down.

Lorenzo the Magnificent.

You know, said Halford Luccock, Lorenzo's mishap reminds us that Pentecost can be dangerous.¹ If we had a real outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we'd have to count the cost as well as the benefits. That's because the Holy Spirit is unpredictable. The Spirit blows where it wills. The Spirit starts fires, and fires are hard to control. The Holy Spirit changes people's lives in ways they never saw coming, and some of the changes cause pain.

On Pentecost Sundays, those of us who are confessionally Reformed do what we always do on this day. We contain the celebration. We control the fire. Let Pentecost feel more like a day at the bank. You know, we look around town at our charismatic brothers and sisters, and we get a little nervous. We've heard of some of the things they do right in church, and it makes us twitch. We think, hey, I guess the different gifts of the Spirit go to different Christians. They've got the gifts of healing and tongues and interpretation of tongues. We've got the gift of church order. They've got ardor; we've got order. The same Spirit, different gifts.

But none of this takes us to the center of Pentecost. None of it takes us to the main event.



A few minutes ago, we read God's Word from Acts 2. The book we read from is called the Acts of the Apostles, but the title fits only loosely, because what we have here is twenty-eight chapters of the acts of *God*—the mighty acts of God done through human deputies. Paul's missionary journeys are *God's* mission to the world. When Peter heals a crippled beggar, it's a *divine* healing. When the apostles go on trial, it's *God* in the dock.

And so it goes throughout the book of Acts. The acts of the apostles are the acts of God, and that's true of the mightiest act of all.

We read Acts 2, and what gets our attention is the wind and the fire and the speaking in tongues. One day there is a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, a tornado sound, a freight train sound. And then God lights a fire on the disciples. In our mind's eye we see the tongues of fire the way artists see them—almond-shaped flares just above the disciples' heads. But Luke

doesn't tell us where the fire was. Maybe the fire was over their hearts. Maybe they had fire in the belly. Maybe the fire was on their tongues, as Luke's wordplay suggests. A tongue of fire on disciples who speak in tongues. A Lukan pun for God's fun with the human tongue.

We read about Pentecost, and it's the wind we hear and the fire we see. These elemental forces have always attracted us human beings. But fire and wind and tongues aren't the main event at Pentecost. These things are only attention-getters. They signal that the Holy Spirit is stirring again. They tell us God is about to do something big—something like creation, or exodus, or resurrection of the dead.

And what is this big thing that God does? What happens on Pentecost day is that Peter, himself a Jew, preaches Jesus Christ to fellow Jews, *and they are cut to the heart*. Peter says, "You crucified and killed [Jesus] by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up" (Acts 2:23–24). That's Peter's message, and the miracle is that they don't kill the messenger. The miracle is that they are thunderstruck by their own guilt.

Jews from east and west, north and south are in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks. Peter says to them, "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (2:32). In other words, you killed Jesus, but God raised him. King David is dead, but the Lord Jesus is alive. You did a terrible thing, but God has done a wonderful thing.

And his listeners believe him!

Think about this! When somebody accuses us, what do we do? We defend ourselves; we excuse ourselves; we say we don't understand why we're singled out. Look who's talking, we say. Who are you to judge me?

That's what we say, but that's not what the crowd says. When they hear about Jesus they are cut to the heart. They accept that they are sinners, and they cry out with the sound of someone who has just been stabbed. The cry of remorse, of sorrow, of consternation at our own guilt—this cry is as old as the history of regeneration. What must we do, they say? What must we do to be saved?

And Peter says the straight old things: Repent. Get baptized. Receive the forgiveness of sins. Receive the Holy Spirit of God. In other words, receive what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what the human heart could never have conceived.

Peter preached Christ to Jews who were wearing the heavy armor of a corrupt generation, and the Spirit of God cut through that armor, got them

in the heart, and saved them.

You know, we sentimentalize the mighty acts of God. Incarnation, atonement, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost. We hear of these things, and we think God wants to relate to us. God wants to identify with us. In the incarnation God wants to honor us by taking on our flesh. Maybe so, but that's not the first thing. That's not the main thing. No, when the Spirit starts to stir and God goes to work, what happens is astonishing. At Pentecost God saves sinners in a miracle no less spectacular than creation itself, or the resurrection of the dead. The Pentecost miracle, the Holy Ghost miracle, the God Almighty miracle of Acts 2 is the regeneration of the human heart, so that people confess their sins, receive God's grace, and join the church of Jesus Christ that is on its way across the world.

This is the promise that the prophet Joel had written about. What will happen when the Spirit of God is poured out? Yes, all the lovely things—dreaming dreams and seeing visions. Yes, the attention-getters—portents in heaven and signs on earth. Yes, but the main thing, the big thing to happen when the Holy Spirit of God is poured out like rivers of mercy—the main thing, says Joel, is that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21; see Joel 2:32).

That's the promise. That's the gift of the Holy Spirit. And for whom is this promise? In a verse of unimaginable beauty, Peter says, “The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:39). God is always calling people. Come to me, says the Lord. Come back to me. There's still time now. There's still room. There's still room for you. The promise starts in Jerusalem, and spreads to Judea and Samaria, and then to the outer parts of the earth. In other words, it's for you, for your children, for all who are far away.

And let's notice a remarkable thing that my friend Tom Long pointed out to me one day. The promise is for people who are far away, and Luke means this in a double sense. It's not just Jews from Rome—far away to the northwest. It's not just Gentiles from all over the Mediterranean basin, so far off that they had to sail for days to get to Jerusalem. When we hear of

people far off, Luke wants us also to think of those who are far away from God!

“Far away.” Luke uses the word *makran*, and he’s used words from that family before. Who is far away in the Gospel of Luke? Think of the prodigal son in Luke 15. He’s on the way home, and while he was still *makran*, his father saw him and had compassion on him (15:20). While he was still far away. And in Luke 18, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. That tax collector did a dirty job for the Romans, and he knew it. Jesus tells us that the tax collector stood far away and would not even look up to heaven (18:13). The prodigal and the tax collector are far away.

Who else? Peter himself had lost his nerve when Jesus was arrested. In chapter 22 Luke tells us that Peter followed Jesus at a distance (22:54). Peter followed his Lord from *far away*.

Prodigals, tax collectors, and even apostles. When God goes out to save, for whom is the promise? Of all people, Peter knows. He had denied his Lord, so he knows. And so, on Pentecost day Peter stands up to say, “The promise is for you, for your children, for all who are far away.” Peter says the promise is even for people like himself.

Do we hear the gospel here? God’s regenerating grace is for you and me. How we need it! The grace is for our children. Oh, how they need it. The promise is for all who are far away—and some of those people *belong* to us. Our children, our parents, our sisters and brothers, friends, loved ones far away from God, but close to our hearts.

How are we to think of them? How are we to think of our loved ones who are far away from God? We are to think of them with a Pentecostal spirit. So much Holy Spirit has been poured out that the mercy is for them! Pentecost is their day too, even if they don’t know it. We’re talking about who *God* is, and Peter tells us that God has a very long arm and likes to reach for those who are far away.

Pentecost! Yes, it’s about the wind and the fire and the tongues. They get our attention. Pentecost is about the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. But above all Pentecost is about the mighty acts of God our Savior, who aims his grace at lost sinners in order to turn them toward home.

John Newton, who authored the hymn “Amazing Grace,” had ambition like a Caesar, he says.² He was a hard man, a profane man; he traded British manufactured goods for African slaves, and he packed those slaves like sardines in the hold of his ship. Newton’s journal tells us that he treated

slaves as his enemies. But one night in a storm at sea, the Holy Spirit began to blow and got John Newton's attention. One night the Holy Spirit got into John Newton's heart and did Pentecost there, so that Newton began to speak in a new tongue. What came out of his mouth were the words, "Lord, have mercy." "Lord, have mercy on us."

"Lord, have mercy." A man who showed no mercy to slaves begged the Lord to show mercy to *him*. Newton was calling on the name of the Lord, and he got saved. The promise is for all who are far away, and so the Lord poured mercy into John Newton, so much mercy into that man's hard heart that some of it flowed back out into the best-loved hymn in the English language, "Amazing Grace." Newton knew that what's amazing about God's grace is not just that it flows to the undeserving; not just that it's so lavish and abundant. What's amazing about God's grace is that it can get through our armor and pierce our heart.

Jessye Norman, the great African American soprano, speculates that the first tune Newton used for his words was a tune he had heard from his slaves.³ In God's amazing grace, a slave song became a freedom song. With this song, John Newton proclaimed Pentecost to the whole world. I once was lost, but now I'm found. Blind, but now I see.

And why? Because of the promise, of course. Because the promise of grace is for you, and your children, and for all who are far away. How wonderful of God. How typical of God. The promise is for all who are far away, and that means it's for some of us. Some of us whose bodies go to church but whose hearts are far away. The promise is for us.

Prayer

*God of amazing grace, pierce my hard heart
and save me. Then keep on saving me for the
rest of my days for Jesus's sake. Amen.*



19

Practice Hospitality

Reading: Romans 12:9–13 (NIV)

Practice hospitality. (Romans 12:13)

Some time ago I started reading etiquette books, and in particular the writing of Judith Martin, a.k.a. Miss Manners. What I learned from her is that most of etiquette is good manners. And most of good manners is good morals.

Of course, she tells us how to eat, and what to wear, and when to send out a wedding invitation. Of course, she tells us such things, but beneath them what she's really talking about is justice or love.

Occasionally, Miss Manners gets very basic. For instance, she says that every couple needs a certain social device that may be called “The Look.” It’s a facial expression, something you do with your eyes and mouth that is unmistakable to your partner but indecipherable to others. When you adopt The Look in a social setting, you are saying to your partner: “Watch out! Something here is very, very wrong.”¹

Like what? You might be saying, “Watch out! The man you are complaining about is the brother-in-law of the woman you are talking to.” Or “Watch out! The man you are telling that story to is the man who told it to you.” Or “Look out, dear. The reason nobody is following what you are saying is that you have food on your chin.”²

The Look isn't mere politeness, you understand. It's a survival tool. And working with it is therefore an act of love.

Good manners are mostly good morals. One hookup between good manners and good morals is that the good people who have these things are thoughtful—and in both senses of the word. I mean they are kind to others, and they are also reflective about them. Often, they are kind *because* they are reflective. They think about other people and how to treat them well. And then they treat them that way. For example, when they leave their telephone number in your voicemail, they leave it slowly enough so that you can easily write it down. When you meet them, they make an obvious attempt to learn your name. Afterward, they remember it.

Having good manners is all about being thoughtful. A thoughtful person *makes room for others and helps them flourish there*.

In other words, a thoughtful person acts hospitably. And in doing this, she or he fits right into the company of those who have died and risen with Christ.

For chapter after chapter of Romans Paul speaks of human sin and of divine salvation. Near the end he says things that fit those who have come alive under the sunshine of God's love. "Love must be sincere," he says. "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. . . . Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality" (Rom. 12:9, 13).

When we are hospitable, we clear some space for others and welcome them into this space. We make room for people, and then we welcome them into the room we have made.

I suppose we naturally think of hospitality first in terms of hosting people for a meal, and why not? Handing food to a guest is momentous. It binds you to that person. The reason is that what you are saying when you pass a

dish of food to another person is that you want that person to live or even to thrive. Handing food to a guest is a *sacramental* act.

And it's an act that registers in heaven. Such a little thing—to hand somebody food—but it registers on the Richter scale in heaven.

It never fails to surprise me in the most vivid portrait of final judgment in all the Gospels—namely, in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25—what Jesus Christ points to first. What's the standard for dividing the nations? How do you tell whether somebody is fit for heaven?

You look for hospitality. “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in” (Matt. 25:35).

The readiness to welcome a stranger. The readiness to hand somebody the food they need. Who would ever have thought that a person's destiny could hang on this seemingly modest virtue?

But before we get anywhere near our destiny, we have to do our ABC's. Hospitality gets built and expressed by lots of *little* acts and habits in which we make room for others. Miss Manners gave me two of them, and then I added some more.

So here are nine little habits of highly hospitable people.

1. In the aisle of a supermarket, hospitable people basically keep to the right with their shopping carts and park them along the display cases, not in the middle of the road. If they do park in the middle of the aisle, it's OK for you to drop a few small, expensive, and vaguely embarrassing items in their cart.
2. When they are out driving, hospitable people do not punish pokey drivers by tailgating them. They make a little room for them instead.
3. When hospitable people pour the last cup of coffee from a common coffee pot, they make some more.
4. In conversations, hospitable people do not interrupt. They let others finish their sentences. They give people a little space to speak in.
5. On airplanes, hospitable people leave room in the overhead storage compartments for other people's carry-ons.
6. In conversations, hospitable people do not say things that paint others into corners. For example, they don't say, “You're probably getting bored with me now, aren't you?” Or “You're just saying that to be

nice.” Or “I’ll bet you sometimes wish you married somebody else.” Statements like these give other people no room to move.³

7. In church, hospitable people make room for seekers, including the seekers within Christian families, including the seekers that we all are at heart.
8. Hospitable people leave room for the mistakes of others. They don’t try to fix everything. Of course, at Calvin University, where I work, a certain amount of vigorous fixing is just what the tuition pays for. Getting corrected is one way of getting educated. But even then, a lot depends on how you do it. Skillful teachers (as we all know, who’ve had them) manage to correct you and encourage you at the same time. Even if the correcting is painful—and sometimes it will be—you still feel as if you are in good hands.
9. Hospitable people help you with remembering their names. God bless people who come up to you and say their name right away, so nobody has to play any of those phony guessing games that end up in hurt feelings. Tell people your name a lot. It gives them some room and helps them to flourish in the room you give them. And if they don’t give you *their* name, adopt a conspiratorial look and whisper to them: “Excuse me, you don’t happen to remember your name, do you?”⁴

All this is to say what Paul says. “Love must be sincere. . . . Share with the Lord’s people. . . . Practice hospitality.”



It’s fine to start small. It’s fine to start with some of the driving and shopping habits I mentioned. But remember that *little acts form a practice, a practice becomes a habit, a habit works its way into your character, and your character becomes part of your destiny*. That’s the way life goes. And when it goes this way with the virtue of hospitality, what you get is a community that is worth living in. This is a community where people make space for others and especially for strangers. In this good community people build shelters for the homeless and homes for the under-housed. In this good community people harbor refugees and welcome immigrants and support international students.

These are people who think that if the country starts to look like heaven with every tribe and tongue and nation coming to it, why, that's not a bad thing. Of course, we have to have immigration rules, but I'm still talking about hospitality for human beings. When you go to the ATM at your bank and it asks you whether you want English or Spanish, what's your reaction? How much room are you willing to make for people with another language? "English or Español?" asks the screen, and now you face a spiritual challenge. Do you react with irritation? Or do you do your transaction in Spanish just to brush up?

"Love must be sincere. . . ." There are heroes of hospitality, you know. Forget about the people popular society fusses over. Forget about rock stars. These people are not heroes but mere celebrities. The real heroes are the generous people who welcome strangers. Here are people with a sense of adventure and a sense of humor. They don't think of self-fulfillment as their goal, but if they did, they would say that doing a good job of making space for others *is* self-fulfillment. That's what we were designed to do!

We grow by helping others grow. We thrive only when we help others to thrive. And the reason is that we have been created in the image of God. Even inside God, life hums with the glad give-and-take of hospitality. John's Gospel tells us that the Father is in the Son and that the Son is in the Father, and that each loves and glorifies the other. In a constant movement of overture and acceptance, each divine person harbors the others at the center of their being. Hospitality begins within the triune life of God and then spreads wonderfully to creatures.

The act of creation itself fits the pattern. In creation, God makes room for human creatures, who are living images of God. At the first Christmas the fierce and blessed Virgin Mary makes room in her heart and makes room in her womb for the God who came to her as a stranger.

God makes room for us and wants us to make room for others. The gospel is full of hospitality. Make room for strangers, it says. Make room for sojourners. Make room for sick people and sinful people and people with disabilities. And when we do it—when we make room for strangers, when we spend ourselves to welcome them, when we practice hospitality—then *we are like God*.

But now a caution. Nobody can do it all where hospitality is concerned, and nobody should even try. We are finite creatures. We can't host everybody. Our space isn't big enough. We are not God. We are only *like* God. God has room for the whole human race in the new heaven and earth. That's what all those galaxies are for. But we human beings are finite, and our capacity for receiving others can pretty easily fill up.

And so even among the desert Bedouins, some of the most hospitable people in the world, there are limits. Guests are expected to stay only about three days, and the Bedouins say so with proverbs: "When a stranger arrives, feed him for two days. On the third day, hand him a tool."

Our capacity is limited. But even so we can probably open ourselves more than we think. So much depends on our attitude. A person with a hospitable attitude can make some room and some time for others without breaking a sweat because they think of hospitality as part of the life of God, part of the traffic of heaven. And they like being in this traffic.

But people with an inhospitable attitude will find that the smallest demand on their time and space makes them exhausted. They've drawn their fences in around them so tight that there's no room there for anybody but themselves. This is exhausting because there's no air. These people are breathing their own carbon dioxide.

"Practice hospitality." This is a recipe for making life work. And there are people who know this in their bones.

I've often thought of those brave Christian people who protected Jews inside their homes during World War II. In reading about these Christian hosts, I've been struck by how terribly dangerous their generosity was, and how much they risked to offer it. They made a space for persecuted Jews, and they did so in the valley of the shadow of death, because Nazis deported not only Jews but also anybody who harbored them.

So here they were, these hospitable Christians with Jews in their attics. They didn't have a lot of money, and under occupation they certainly didn't have a lot of power or leverage. What they had was their home. They controlled it. They knew its sounds and spaces and hiding places. They had

their home and so that's what they offered. They knew they might lose their lives by sheltering Jews, but they did it anyhow and damned the consequences.

They believed in God, and they wanted one day to go to God with a clear conscience. They believed in Christ and thought their lives really belonged to him. Their lives were not their own, and never was this more of a comfort to them and a threat to the Nazis than during the time I'm describing.

Righteous Gentiles. Heroes of hospitality. And, remarkably, these people never thought of their activity that way. They never made much of it. They didn't think they were so righteous. They just did what came naturally to them.

How does something like that happen? Where does character like that come from?

It comes from faith and work. And the work part of it comes from good manners that flow into and out of good morals. Do some little acts, and start a practice; follow your practice, and form a habit; form some habits, and build a character; build a character, and let it become part of your destiny on judgment day when the questioning begins about whether we practiced hospitality.

Prayer

*Triune God, ultimate host of others, give us
grace to make room for others and to
welcome them in the name of Jesus. Amen.*



If Only There Were Someone

Reading: Job 9:1–14, 32–35 (NIV)

If only there were someone to mediate between us, someone to bring us together. (Job 9:33)

Job is the only book of the Bible that begins with a bet. In the beginning of Job, God and Satan get into an argument, and they decide to settle their argument by making a bet.

In Job 1, all of God's angels come in to make their report, and one of them gets singled out. His name is Satan, which means the Accuser. God singles out the Accuser and starts to quiz him. Where have you been? asks God. Where I'm supposed to be, says Satan. I've been east and west; I've been north and south. I've been ranging across the earth. I've been looking around and taking names.

Well, says God, you must have noticed my man Job! I'm sure you don't have anything on *him*. This man is as straight as a post. He's as clean as they come. If the world were full of Jobs, then you'd be out of a job.

Not a chance, says Satan.

And then he counterthrusts with a question that has pierced the hearts of believers for centuries. God says, Look at my servant Job. And Satan asks God a simple question. "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9).

Sure, Job serves you, says Satan. Of course he does.

He's nobody's fool. You've made him rich. You send him a check every time he says the Apostles' Creed. Of course he serves you. What do you expect?

Does Job serve you for nothing?

It's a rhetorical question, of course. It's like asking, Is the pope Presbyterian? Did Billy Graham launch *Playboy* magazine? Do you ever get a hospital bill that's lower than you expected?

Does Job serve God for *nothing*? asks Satan.

And so the drama opens and the contest begins. The Accuser looks at Job's wealth, and he says to God, Look, you've *bought* this man's faith. He's got big barns and big kids and a little wife who used to be Miss Harvest Queen. He's got flocks of woolly sheep and a whole stable full of all-terrain camels with all the bells and whistles on them, including those new front-loading feedbags.

Of course he serves you, says Satan. He knows which side of the valley gets the sunshine. We're not talking about some ignoramus here! This man's faith is up for bid—and so far, you've been the highest bidder. But you stretch out your hand against Job and touch all that he has, and Mr. Health and Wealth will curse you to your face. I'll bet Job will curse you to your face!

You're on, says the Lord. I bet he won't.

And so Job is thrown out there on the gameboard to be moved around by Satan—who is smart and tough and violent. But he is also under God's control. You might say Satan is a pit bull, but he is on God's tether.

Poor Job knows nothing about it. He's not in on any of it. All Job knows is that his life begins to fall apart. Terrorists steal his oxen and kill his servants. Lightning strikes his sheep. And then, one day, a sandstorm devastates Job's family home, and the roof falls in on Job's children. Finally, Job himself gets sick and ends up sitting on a dung heap, nursing his case of shingles and cursing the day of his birth.

Then Job's friends come over to comfort him. It's so much more fun to talk about pain than to suffer it, and these guys are talkers. They look at his lost children, and his oozing sores, and his flattened bank account, and they tell him it is all for the best. Happy is the man whom God reproves, says Eliphaz (5:17). All this trouble here—it's all for your own good.

Job isn't impressed. What do you do when God becomes hostile? What do you do when you can't manage without God, and yet you can't make any sense out of God either? God exists—that's not the problem. But something has gone wrong in God. Some wire in God has gotten crossed. Something has come over God.

What do you do then? Gather a few clichés from your friends? Call up some overfed minister and get him to pray over the telephone? Maybe somebody with a smooth voice and a textbook answer?

We've heard that sort of thing. People who want to *explain* our suffering to us. God is testing you! they say. God is toughening you. God is disciplining you! God gave you your throat cancer, but never mind, because Romans 8:28 says that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

We have heard it all. And Job hears it—yard upon yard of conventional wisdom from his friends. It's one of the most maddening parts of his suffering that Job must sit there listening to all this. Job's friends stuff him to the teeth with all the orthodox phrases until at last Job begs them, pleads with them, to do him one favor: Shut up.

Job will not suffer fools. He has no room in him for easy answers. Like a child who finds gross evil in trusted adults, Job is *confused* by the character change in God.

Job is like Josef K. in Franz Kafka's story *The Trial*. In this story, Josef is followed. Then he's arrested. And then he's tried and executed without ever finding out what it's all about. It's like one of those bad dreams we've all had. You wake up feeling guilty, but you can't remember what for.

So it goes with Job. He can't figure it out. Why has all this happened? Why has it happened to *him*? What has gone wrong with God?

In Elie Wiesel's little autobiography, *Night*, we find some of Job's horror. Wiesel escaped Auschwitz as a boy but not before he had come face-to-face with the nightmare of human evil. The Nazis murdered Wiesel's mother, his beloved little sister, and all the rest of his family except his father.

And Wiesel reflects on this with the tone of a man who has been forced to look into the abyss of the universe. These are his words:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never.¹

Wiesel quit praying—and yet he couldn't quit praying. Wiesel turned away from God, but then he turned back. Who else can you turn to when life goes wrong? Who else can you shout at? Who else *is* there?

And so it is with Job. He can't live with God, but he can't live without God either. At times he accuses. At times he shouts. But he will not let go. Job keeps knocking at the door of heaven until his knuckles are smashed and his hands are running with blood.

Even by the end of the book Job doesn't really get an explanation from God. He comes to see the mystery of God and the greatness of God. In fact, Job gets *overwhelmed* by the mystery of God and the presence of God. But he never does get all the answers he wants. He gets an encounter instead. What Job gets is God—so much God that his heart melts and his faith revives, and he makes a full turn in faith toward the God he had accused.

But, before that, in chapter 9 we find Job ready to call it quits. He has raved about the insanity of life. He has yelled at God to come out of hiding and stand up like a man and answer for his actions.

Then the raving breaks off. It's no use. None of it can ever work. Human beings are only tiny nonentities; God is the one who stretches out the heavens and tramples on the waves of the sea. God is the everlasting one who reaches across all the ages.

So what hope is there, Job wants to know, that God's power and human weakness could ever be brought together? God can make us or break us. God can love us or leave us. We can't win. No matter how desperate we are, God always has the final word—or can bully us into submission with a final silence.

It is this silence of God, this emphatic silence, that frustrates Job into an almost lunatic rage. God will not *appear*. If Job could somehow see God, lay hold of God, get God into court to answer charges. But there you are. There isn't any way to do that. There isn't any bridge between us and everlasting God.

“He is not a mere mortal like me that I might answer him, that we might confront each other in court” (Job 9:32).

And then, into the jumble of Job's mind leaps a sudden idea—and almost as soon as he thinks of it, Job knows it's crazy. But then the idea comes back. It's almost as though something or someone were whispering to Job. Here's the way Job puts his idea: “If only there were someone to mediate between us, someone to bring us together” (9:33). If only there could be a third party to this quarrel, someone to get the bewildering God and the tormented human together. A mediator, no less.²

Job's bitterness toward God stops for a moment as this thin strand of an idea leaps across the gap between them. With utter wistfulness Job imagines a strange thing—a third party between God and humanity, someone, says Job, who could place his hand upon us both. This mediator could say: Job, here is where you have spoken when you didn't know what you were talking about. You have been rash in your charges against God. And then the umpire could turn to God: God, he might say, you too have some adjustments to make in your tormenting of this poor man and your terrible refusal to explain yourself.

If only there were a mediator between us, says Job, who could lay one hand on God's shoulder and one on mine.

Ah, well, it's only a notion, of course. Job knows as well as any sophomore that wishing doesn't make a thing true. No use sighing and supposing. Back he goes to his realities. Back he goes to his groping and complaining. He has had one flash of insight—one inspiration, we might call it—and then it's gone. There is one word of light in Job's darkness. It's the word "mediator." But the word does not become flesh.

And yet, Job's word speaks to us with a power and a beauty that we had better take to heart. Job's suffering skews his vision, that's true. He thinks his mediator might actually have to correct God. Still, even though his vision is partly out of focus, Job does imagine a time when God and humanity come together, and the estrangement is over. Somewhere beyond Job's groping—somewhere the curtain parts for just a second, and Job sees into the possibilities of God.

A mediator is needed. Someone to lay his hand upon us both.

One nail-torn hand upon the broken humanity there on the garbage heap, one mangled hand upon the King of heaven. "If only there were someone . . ." God and humanity reconciled because of the coming of a person.

Could that ever happen?

Prayer

*Only you, Lord Jesus Christ, only you can
reconcile all things in heaven and on earth.
Amen.*

Notes

Introduction

1. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 96.

Chapter 1: Under the Wings of God

1. John Timmer, *God of Weakness: How God Works through the Weak Things of the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 42.

Chapter 2: God on the Loose

1. Donald Juel, "Reflections on Mark's Gospel," St. Olaf Conference on Theology and Music, St. Olaf College, July 17, 1997.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 120–21.
3. Juel, "Reflections on Mark's Gospel."

Chapter 3: With All Your Mind

1. Howard Lowry, "The Apprentice's Secret," in *College Talks*, ed. James R. Blackwood (New York: Oxford University Press), 172.
2. Dietrich von Hildebrand and Alice von Hildebrand, *The Art of Living* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 1965), 75–76.

Chapter 4: Are You the One?

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, "A Cure for Despair," in *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 22.

Chapter 5: The Inescapable God

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 18–19.
2. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1955), 42–45.
3. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.17.38, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 201.

Chapter 6: Clothe Yourself with Patience

1. Erma Bombeck, *Forever, Erma: Best-Loved Writing from America's Favorite Humorist* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 1996), 219.
2. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 131.

Chapter 7: In the Interim

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 66.
2. Paula Fredriksen, comment in "The Thought of Boethius," PhD seminar hosted by Karlfried Froehlich, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, September 1975.

3. Justo González, *Alabadle!* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 18.
4. Lewis Smedes, *Standing on the Promises: Keeping Hope Alive for a Tomorrow We Cannot Control* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 173.
5. Abraham Davenport, quoted in Timothy Dwight, *Connecticut Historical Connections*, 2nd ed. (1836), compiled by John Warner Barber (New York: Arkose, 2015), 403.

Chapter 8: God Just in Case

1. Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, ed. Henry Eyster Jacobs (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication Society, 1911), available at <https://www.lutheranlibrary.org/pdf/194-jacobs-luther-large-catechism.pdf>.
2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 428.

Chapter 9: Christ Lifted Up

1. Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 90.
2. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 40.
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Scholastic, 1955), 163.

Chapter 10: On the Receiving End

1. Scott Hoezee, *The Riddle of Grace: Applying Grace to the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 99–109.
2. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, ed. Gordon D. Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 650–51.

Chapter 12: Self-Deception

1. William Manchester, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill*, vol. 2, *Alone: 1932–1940*, 3 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 2012), 84–86, 137–38, 205–6.
2. Manchester, *Last Lion*, 2:223.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 174.

Chapter 14: Afraid of Easter

1. Susan Wise Bauer, “Stephen King’s Tragic Kingdom,” *Books & Culture*, March/April 1997, 14.
2. Frederick Buechner, “The End Is Life,” in *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: HarperOne, 1966), 77.

Chapter 15: Neighbor Love

1. Mary Kay Magistad, “Cambodian Artist after Khmer Rouge,” *Morning Edition*, NPR, September 3, 1998, <https://www.npr.org/1998/09/03/1024779/cambodian-artist-after-khmer-rouge>.

Chapter 17: Clothe Yourselves with Humility

1. Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor, 1994), 124.

Chapter 18: For All Who Are Far Away

1. Halford E. Luccock, “A Dangerous Pentecost,” in *Marching Off the Map and Other Sermons* (New York: Harper, 1952), available at <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/22813/in-his-sermon-a-dangerous-pentecost-halford-by-sermon-central>.

2. “Amazing Grace with Bill Moyers,” 1990, PBS, available at <https://vimeo.com/467526919>.
3. “Amazing Grace with Bill Moyers.”

Chapter 19: Practice Hospitality

1. Judith Martin, *Miss Manners’ Guide for the Turn of the Millennium* (New York: Pharos, 1989), 199.
2. Martin, *Miss Manners’ Guide*, 199.
3. Martin, *Miss Manners’ Guide*, 133.
4. Martin, *Miss Manners’ Guide*, 66.

Chapter 20: If Only There Were Someone

1. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam, 1982), 32.
2. I owe the gist of this paragraph and parts of the rest of this reflection to my mentor Douglas E. Nelson.

“Plantinga is attuned to the depths and secrets of Scripture”

Longing. Hope. Love. Fear. These are just some of the experiences embodied in the infinitely rich Christian life. In *Under the Wings of God*, seasoned author Cornelius Plantinga explores these facets and more, reflecting on the joys and challenges of a life lived in the presence of God.

“Combining a keen mind and a pastoral heart, Plantinga is attuned to the depths and secrets of Scripture. Listen with him and hear from God in ways you never have before.”

—JAMES K. A. SMITH, Calvin University; editor in chief, *Image*;
author of *How to Inhabit Time*

“Plantinga enables his reader to see the extraordinary holiness of our ordinary lives.”

—DAVID A. DAVIS, pastor, Nassau Presbyterian Church, Princeton, New Jersey

“Beautifully written and thoroughly researched,
this book is a gift to the church.”

—MARY S. HULST, university pastor, Calvin University

“This little book is chock-full of spiritual protein and vitamins,
delectably prepared. Read slowly, and be nourished.”

—ROBERT C. ROBERTS, Baylor University (emeritus)

“Hearing Plantinga’s sermons as a student years ago made me want to be a preacher. I cannot recommend this book highly enough.”

—PETER JONKER, minister of preaching, LaGrave Avenue
Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan



Cornelius (Neal) Plantinga (PhD, Princeton Theological Seminary) is senior research fellow at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and president emeritus of Calvin Theological Seminary. He is the author of many books, including the *Christianity Today* Book Award winners *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, *Engaging God's World*, and *Reading for Preaching*.

COVER DESIGN: LAURA KLYNSTRA
COVER IMAGE: DAWN HANNA / TREVILLION IMAGES
AUTHOR PHOTOGRAPH: DEBORAH HOAG

 **Brazos Press**
a division of Baker Publishing Group



Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.



z-library.se

singlelogin.re

go-to-zlibrary.se

single-login.ru



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>