



Dr. James C. Howell eFavorite Bible Verses

eFavoriteBibleVerses – cheerful giver

For God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Like most fundraisers, Paul eloquently tries to persuade the Christians in ancient Corinth to part with their money so he can corral enough shekels and denarii to stave off the desperate needs of the poor. We wonder if he met his goal.

“God loves a cheerful giver.” Paul does not say “God loves a grudging giver, God loves a guilty giver, God loves a calculating giver, God loves the giver who tosses in some spare change.” And Paul does not say “God doesn’t love an uncheerful giver, God is enraged with a non-giver, God blushes when he sees the chintzy giver.”

What is Paul up to? God loves everybody, of course – but perhaps you never get the love, you don’t let it into your self, if you are forever guarding and measuring what you dole out. God’s love frees you to give “cheerfully.” The Greek for “cheerful” is *hilaron*, as in “hilarious.” Sometimes our giving is “hilarious,” pathetically small given what God has done for us. But our giving can become “hilarious,” as in being caught off guard by the delight, the sheer joy, and even the hilarity the gift brings to the one in need.

Today the Church is in the peculiar business of cajoling its members every year to give, to meet the budget, to respond to new needs that have emerged. Paul has needs in mind, but he is not much interested in the worthiness of the recipients of the giving. Paul is gravely concerned for the salvation of the givers. The motivation to give isn’t the need, it’s the blessing. In the previous verse, Paul spoke of those who sow “bountifully.” This doesn’t just mean they give a lot. The Greek translated “bountifully” is *ep eulogiais*, meaning “from blessing,” or “with thanksgiving.” We give because we have been blessed; we give to demonstrate our profound gratitude to God.

Things have value, but we subvert their true value by clinging to them, in the same way we ruin relationships with people if we grasp after them instead of letting them bloom freely. Whenever St. Francis was given a gift, he would always ask the giver for permission to give it away if he should meet someone in need. In Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead*, the narrator says “My grandfather never kept anything that was worth giving away.”

The deepest value of our possessions remains underrated until they are unwrapped by someone to whom we give them. When we discover this, we become “cheerful” – and we get the love.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – everywhere, all the time

Hear, O Israel... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might. These words I command you this day shall be upon your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 – part 3).

If we are to love God, if we are to have faith, then the words of God must be a regular feature in our routine, always lurking in the back of our minds, figuring prominently in what we do, how we think, why we feel as we do.

Moses declares that God’s words should be “taught diligently”: the Hebrew word, *weshinnantam*, means “to sharpen.” Life in our culture is a continuous erosion of the soul, so our hearts are dull. We need to regain the edge of an awareness of God.

We are to speak of God while sitting at home, while walking outside: but does this happen? How can the things of

God become a natural topic of conversation without us appearing to be smug or sappy? The more familiar we become with God's words, God's thoughts, and God's activities, then the more we think, reflect, question, want to listen to others, and can share our humble insights when we converse with people who may or may not believe in God – without getting on their nerves!

The things of God are for when we lie down and when we rise up, our last thought before falling to sleep a prayer of gratitude, our first thought upon waking up a plea for God's guidance.

None of this comes easily. We need reminders: Moses encouraged the Israelites to bind God's words on their hands, between their eyes, and on the door jambs of houses... What!?!? Through history, Jews have fashioned and worn phylacteries, little boxes containing Bible verses, on their forearms and even on their heads; and you may have seen a Jewish home with a mezuzah, where a doorbell might be, a small container with Bible verses inside. Maybe we mimic that in some way: print out a key verse and carry it in your pocket, or stick it in your desk drawer. Hang a picture of St. Francis or Mother Teresa in your bedroom or den. Download a Scripture reading or hymn onto your iPod.

Unless we find very practical ways to be reminded of God, we drift into society's boring, consumer mindset, and we hardly ever think of God until there is a crisis. Love doesn't wait for a crisis...

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – with all your heart, soul and might

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:4 – part 2).

Love begins when we **Hear**. How can you love if you will not listen? To love God, we stop, we wait, we listen. We converse with God, not by hollering loudly toward the sky, but when we shut up, when we engage what God is saying to us in the pages of God's words to us: we open the Bible, read and listen – and love begins.

As if to press home the point that love is serious, and all-embracing, Moses expands his invitation to love. We love God **with**: with all your heart, not just in a convenient corner of your heart, but **all**; with all your soul, not just some spiritual side of yourself; and with all your might, not just the little bit of energy or the spare change you have left after you've checked everything off your to-do list.

The **heart**: not merely a red fleshy organ, but your desire, your passion, and in Deuteronomy, heart includes your mind, how you think, what you value. We redirect our desires, passion, values and thinking toward God – and God is loved.

The **soul**: my very life, and in Deuteronomy, to love with your soul means a willingness to sacrifice, to part with what is precious to me, for God. And not merely a "willingness" to sacrifice. If I love, I sacrifice. I examine my life, and start boxing up my valuables, my time, my lifestyle, all that I've been sheltering, and I offer it up to God – and God is loved.

Might: the Hebrew word me'od means strength, ability, and also our tangible goods. We increase our pledge, we give to missions, we donate not old junk we don't want but items we treasure; in our spare time we hammer, we mentor a struggling family, we do good – and God is loved.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – hear, O Israel, you shall love the Lord (part 1)

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:4).

These words ([called the Shema](#)) are the most sacred in all Judaism; Jews recite this passage (in Hebrew!) at the beginning and end of every day. When Jesus was asked to pinpoint the heart of all Scripture (Matthew 22:37), he turned here: *love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might.*

What does God expect? ask for? demand? and long for? Love. God doesn't say you must be good, or obedient, or frightened, or flawless. God wants love – but before you breathe a sigh of relief, remember how all-consuming, how downright scary and yet wonderful love is – or at least is supposed to be. We have trivialized love into nothing more than a fleeting mood, an emotion that surges and subsides. But love is a commitment, a determination, loyalty, action. It looks like goodness or obedience; there is a tender kind of fear that keeps love passionate; love strives to be as flawless as possible.

Notice love is commanded. Love is the kind of thing that can be commanded! Love! You can, you must, you'll miss everything if you don't. The premise to this uncompromising urgency to love God is that God not only exists, God not only loves you first, but God is **one**. We live as if there were many gods, a new deity around every corner; the garden variety gods of our culture (money, things, pleasure) are many, but they only burrow out a larger hole in the soul than the one we'd hoped they would fill. There is only one God, and that is why God is to be loved, not merely compartmentalized safely into a corner.

How do you love something (someone?) invisible like God? Watch for your next email...

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – come to me

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

In September some of our emails will focus on "Faith at Work." To those who labor, Jesus says "Come to me." But Jesus came to workers at work, to fishermen in their boats, to a tax collector in his office, to soldiers on duty. He found them to be exhausted, cynical – "heavy laden." In Bible times, everybody – Jesus included – worked all day long at backbreaking labor just to put a little food on the table, fell asleep exhausted at day's end, only to get up and do it again the next day.

In 2007, are we "heavy laden"? Is it stress? The responsibility? Ethical dilemmas? or the impersonal, uncertain rumbling of an economy that demands everything but doesn't exactly love you back? Click reply and tell me about your work, its blessings, its curse, and that will help me prepare for this Fall.

Jesus doesn't say "I will give you more to do." "I will give you rest." We could use a little rest. We feel like Sisyphus, heaving a rock up a hill, only to have it roll down to the bottom so we can start over, or like Atlas, hoisting the whole world on our shoulders. Jesus says "I will be Atlas, I will carry the world."

But we are not therefore free to flit about and do as we wish! "Take my yoke upon you." Jesus has his requirements. In fact, he asks us for everything. But his yoke fits, the labor is in sync with our heart's delight, and his Spirit blows a refreshing wind at our back to carry us and in our face to cool us.

He finds us in our work and calms our restless, beleaguered spirits. He calls us from our work and gives us permission to rest and be restored. A holy rhythm is established, as we discover our identity is not dictated by our place in the workforce, but by the God who made and will save us.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – strength perfected

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Paul, always confident of enjoying direct access to Jesus in heaven, tells us that Jesus told him this: *my grace is sufficient, my power is made perfect in weakness*. How did Jesus say this to Paul? We do not know: through worship? or did Paul come to a gradual awareness? Did he have a vision from heaven?

How perfect is this word for you and me! We live in a world that despises or cloaks weakness; we play to strength, we value success. But in the Gospel's upside down logic, weakness is good. It's not that the strong are doomed! Rather, the secret is acknowledging our weakness. I am vulnerable, unable to achieve what I most need in life; I am needy, mortal, uncertain – no matter how nimbly I erect a façade of having it all together.

For the Christian, weakness isn't a problem to be overcome: this is the opening for God to be God, to lift me up, to be great in me, in spite of me. "Jesus loves me, this I know... little ones to him belong" – and when I admit I am little, then I take hope: "They are weak, but he is strong."

Frederick Buechner once wrote that we live our lives like a clenched fist. The clenched fist can do many things: work, hang on to things, fight. But the one thing the clenched fist can never do is to accept a helping hand. When I am weak, when I suffer, when I am needy, when I let the truth about me be exposed, then God takes me by the hand. It is God's strength, not mine, God's unfathomable ability, not my meager attempts, God's marvelous grace, not my feeble stabs at doing a little bit of good, that matters.

Paul says God's strength is "made perfect" in weakness. The Greek verb *teleitai* means "brings to completion" or "made fully present." When I am weak, God's grace, God's unmerited, unstinting love for me, for us, is complete, no longer blockaded by my ego, by my titanic attempts to manage my own life; God is present, God is good, God is gracious. "Everything has a crack in it; that's how the light gets in" (Alan Jones).

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – a lamp

Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path (Psalm 119:105).

Imagine a world without artificial lighting. In a sense things are darker, but then the starry sky would have been brighter. To get around, you had to carry fire, a torch, a lantern, or you'd fall on the rocks or traipse off into a hole.

The beauty of the notion that God's word is that lamp to help me find my way in the dark and not get lost is twofold. Sometimes we talk about the Will of God, and we want to know what God has in store next week, next month, next year, for the rest of my life. Why doesn't God reveal the whole blueprint right now? Or what's wrong with me that I can't see where God is leading me? But God's word is just a lamp for your feet. How far ahead can you see with a lantern – and a Bronze age lantern, not one of those brilliant outdoors beacons people use today? Not far. But far enough. You see well enough to take the next step, and the next step. The end of the road is all darkness. But it will be lit when you get near enough.

So along the way, you have to do some trusting. Each step is a step of faith – which leads me to a second thing. What is the lamp to my feet? God's word. How much light is there in a word? Can you see a word? Words are not solid, they shed no real light – but they are what we need on the journey. The Psalmist, I think, imagines God speaking gently to us, over and over, "Here, this way, ooh, watch out, good job, over here, step up, keep coming, stop for a minute, rest awhile, get moving now, hurry through here..." The invisible word becomes the sure light.

How do we hear this word? God speaks, and God speaks primarily through the Bible – and we familiarize ourselves with the cadence and accent of God's voice by hearing it over and over, reading, studying, reflecting with others. Then, on that dark night, and even in the broad light of day, we have God guiding us as we move forward, telling us only what we need to know right now, for the very next step.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – this is the day

This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it (Psalm 118:24).

The Christian life would be immeasurably enriched if, when the alarm clock tolls in the morning, you could hit the off button, swivel your feet to the floor, stand up, take a good breath, and say “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” – and perhaps reiterate this most faithful thought throughout the day.

A day can feel onerous, or perhaps like a leaky sieve, minutes slipping away, too much to do, rushing. But God made the day. The sun comes up and sets because God planned it; there is a divine rhythm to life. Each day is a precious gift, not for you to consume or cram full, but to delight in God the giver of the day, to serve the God who gave you the time.

Every morning is a little Easter. The women discovered that Jesus’ tomb was empty at dawn. In Arthur Miller’s *After the Fall*, Quentin says “Every morning when I awake I’m full of hope, I’m like a boy! For an instant, there’s some unformed promise in the air. If I could corner that hope...and make it mine...”

Every evening is a little Sabbath. You rest. Mercifully, the so-called “bad day” does end. Perhaps when we pause to pray at day’s end, we notice much to be grateful for we’d missed. Mother Teresa said, “At the end of the day, look at your hands, and ask them, ‘Where have you been today? and what have you done?’”

The Hebrew original of this verse might be translated “This is the day on which the Lord has acted.” When the original Psalmist sang “This is the day the Lord has made,” he was thinking about the great day in Israel’s history, Passover, the day when the Lord acted to deliver his people from bondage, to set them free. We celebrate the great days on which the Lord acted: Christmas, when God came down and became small, to show us his heart, to win our hearts; Easter, when God raised Jesus from the grave and nixed the grip of death; and, if we think about it, every day, today. God acted today. God made today. God is involved. So no matter what else seems to transpire, we have good cause to be glad.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – weak prayer

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26).

Five years ago, I wrote a little book on prayer, and my premise was that prayer is hard. A surprising number of people took issue and said they find prayer to be easy, natural, like breathing. I am glad for them, although I wonder – since the greatest stalwarts of the faith through the centuries have found prayer to be hard.

Talking to God, whom you can’t see, who doesn’t obviously answer back, is no small thing. And what to say? You don’t want to sound like a child ordering up a wish list for Christmas. Sometimes our own struggles are so confusing we are struck speechless.

Weakness in prayer is good – because it is the weak, the vulnerable, the inarticulate, the one who in desperation can do nothing but cry out, that is the one who gets the heart of prayer, which is an utter dependence upon God, a total inability to manage my own life, an open hand ready to be pulled up out of the mire.

Imagine yourself praying, and taking enough time to wrestle with what really matters, with wounds, with fears, with regrets. You dig deep – but you realize you can’t burrow down as deeply as you wish. You want to go further, to get closer to God – and if you can listen, you can overhear a sigh, not your own sigh, but the sigh of the universe, the very heart of God, feeling everything you feel, and more, wrapping divine arms around you, giving voice to what you cannot explain yourself, and you discover that prayer is happening, even when you didn’t know how to pray.

Or at least this can happen, it's possible. In researching my book, I stumbled across great wisdom from people who know more about prayer than I do. Oscar Romero wrote, "God is not failing us when we don't feel his presence. God exists, and he exists even more, the farther you feel from him. God is closer to you when you think he is farther away and doesn't hear you. When you feel the anguished desire for God to come near because you don't feel him present, then God is very close to your anguish. When are we going to understand that God not only gives happiness, but also tests our faithfulness in moments of affliction? Let us learn from that cry of Christ that God is always our Father and never forsakes us, and that we are closer to him than we think."

And then Frederick Buechner wrote, "Everybody prays whether he thinks of it as praying or not. The odd silence you fall into when something very beautiful is happening or something very good or bad. The ah-h-h! that sometimes floats up out of you, the stammer of pain at somebody else's pain, the stammer of joy at somebody else's joy. Whatever words or sounds you use for sighing with over your own life. These are all prayers in their way. These are spoken not just to yourself but to something more familiar than yourself..."

Do you struggle to pray? Take comfort: the Spirit struggles with you.

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[See my book.](#) Learn more about [Oscar Romero](#), and about [Frederick Buechner](#).

eFavoriteBibleVerses – vision

The Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

What is the Bible? Not a ouija board or an answer book, but some amazingly effective eyeglasses that can correct our shortsightedness, our blurred vision.

Consider this story out of the Bronze age: God informs Samuel that one of Jesse's eight sons will be the next great king of Israel. Sizing up the young men, Samuel is impressed by the big boys, the swashbuckling Eliab, the muscular Abinadab, presuming one of these will be God's chosen leader. But one by one God says No, passing each lad, ever younger, ever smaller. In the end, it is David, the one Jesse had not even thought to include among the candidates, who is the one the Lord will use! The Bible's logic trumps in once more: it is the smallest, the weakest, the unlikely one that God uses, the one who relies not on his own strength, but has a "heart" for God, the one who is available to God, dependent upon God.

Faith is a new way of seeing, as if by x-ray, not fooled by the surface of things, but looking deeper, never gawking over the superficialities the world panders to, but sensitive only to love, openness to God, caring about what is of eternal significance. Can I learn to **see** the way the Lord sees when I look at anybody, the stranger, coworker, sibling, friend, spouse?

And going further: do I dare to be **seen** the way the Lord sees? The Lord looks on my heart, and this notion frightens me at first, for I know my heart is a tangle of darkness, mixed motives, a tug of war between noble impulses and tawdry cravings. But the Lord keeps looking, the Lord is merciful, the Lord never stops seeking an opening, a vulnerable willingness in my heart that says "This is who I am, make me into who you are." The façade comes crashing down, and I discover the love and empowering direction of God. Then I'm not impressed by the big or daunted by what plunged me into fear yesterday. I see myself, and you, and the stranger, the way the Lord sees. I even begin to see God clearly, perhaps for the first time.

I need the corrective lenses, and a heavy dose of God's focusing power. So I'll pray the words conceived by Richard of Chichester nearly 800 years ago, made popular in that great song from Godspell: *Oh dear Lord, three things I pray – to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly day by day.*

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – God is good

As for me, it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge (Psalm 73:28).

Psalm 73 begins by saying “Surely God is good to the pure in heart.” Surely God’s job is to be good to us, especially if we are good. But the writer of the Psalm has been schooled in the harsh realities of life: “But as for me, all the day long I have been stricken.” He has kept his heart generally clean, he’s done the right thing – but he’s had nothing but trouble and pain. If God is good, why do people – especially good people – suffer? Isn’t God supposed to protect us?

But the Bible never promised any such thing. The idea that the good are rewarded and the wicked are punished is absurd to anybody paying attention. Many who are rich and healthy are not so holy; otherwise you could peer in the windows of the biggest houses and find there champions of morality and piety. Don’t we all know people who are extraordinarily good and holy, but who suffer awfully?

Tempted to give up on God, the Psalmist goes into the sanctuary (verse 17) and then (and only then!) truth dawns. God is good to the pure in heart. But the “good” that God gives isn’t this or that tangible reward; the “good” isn’t health or wealth. No, God is the one whose love never fails, the one who is there, who is not trivialized by human notions of who deserves and who doesn’t. What God gives is God’s own self. As you grow older, you do not care much what you get from family for Christmas or your birthday, but you care immensely whether they show up or not. God shows up, God is present; all other goods pale in comparison. “For me, it is good to be near God.”

If God is the good, then what does it mean to have a pure heart? Not merely doing nice things or avoiding what’s naughty. What comes out of the heart? Love. The pure in heart love. Eternal life isn’t a reward: rather, we love God now, and the greatest conceivable gift is that our love relationship with God continues, it cannot be severed, it can bear any trial, it can endure all suffering. In *My Traitor’s Heart*, Rian Malan writes that “Love is worth nothing until it has been tested by its own defeat. Love, even if it ends in defeat, gives you a kind of honor; without love you have no honor at all. Love enables you to transcend defeat. Love is the only thing that leaves light inside you instead of the darkness.”

God is good, God is near to the pure in heart, to those who love God and want nothing else but to be near God.

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[Read more on why bad things happen.](#)

eFavoriteBibleVerses – love

Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God (1 John 4:7).

Or we could go with 1 John 4:8: *God is love.* Or verse 9: *In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world.* And what about verse 11? *If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.*

Notice John does not say “Love is God” (which our society might believe), but rather “God is love.” We need not infer that everything that pretends to be “love” in our world is somehow divine. “Love” is corrupted, demeaned, cheapened all the time – but our very awareness of this, our intuition that there must be such a thing as genuine, true, eternally unflinching love is a hint about the existence of love, our craving for love, our need to love.

We are all lovers; but our love gets disordered, perverted, pointed at the wrong things, and slammed shut behind some wall of the self. How can we get straightened out? and love in more proper, fulfilling ways? For John, “love” isn’t an idea we have that God happens to match sometimes. We do not really know what love is until we see what Jesus did, until through him we glimpse the heart of God. When we focus on Jesus, and open ourselves to the mysterious movement of the Spirit, our love is healed, we learn to love, our love grows, it is less self-destructive, better at achieving its purposes. Is my love like Jesus’ love? Does my life mirror the kind of love he had for God, for his friends,

for the people nobody else loved?

How could we convince anybody God even exists except by loving? Throughout history, skeptics have begun to believe in Christ, not because of intellectual arguments the Christians devised, but because of the way they loved each other.

Obviously we are not talking about love as some combustion, some feeling that erupts unexpectedly, as if God were Cupid firing arrows here and there. Love is a decision, a commitment, a determination, an action, many actions. Søren Kierkegaard wrote that “to love another person means to help that person to love God, and to be loved by another person is to be helped by that person to love God.”

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – cares

Cast your cares upon God, for he cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).

Jesus had a keen understanding of what we'd call “psychology” today, and especially the inner psychic uneasiness that worries, frets, tosses and turns at night, and gets paralyzed by fear of what hasn't happened yet. Anxiety: Jesus saw it in his friends, and urged them “Do not be anxious” (Matthew 6:25) – his most unheeded commandment!

How on earth can a thinking, caring person avoid anxiety? 1 Peter was written to Christians who had plenty of things to worry about, like no food, tax collectors fleecing them, Romans soldiers who might thrash you for no reason, and a looming sense that people despised you simply for being a Christian – and the counsel offered is perfect for them and for us: “Cast your cares upon God, for he cares for you.” God is not a remote deity who wound up the world to watch it tick from a distance. God is involved, God is all sympathy, God hovers over you when you are sleeping restlessly.

How interesting is this? The Greek verb, *merimnao*, means both “be anxious” and “care for.” Cast your cares/anxieties, your *merimnaos*, upon God, for he cares/is anxious, he *merimnaos* you. Could it be that anxiety and caring are opposite sides of the same emotion? If I am “anxious,” then there is someone I love, a situation that matters to me – but it feels like “anxiety” when I hold it inside, when I get vacuumed into the shell of my self to tremble over the thing alone, its gravity weighing me down.

But what if we let it go, crack open the hard casing of my self, and let it drift upward to God? When I “care” for someone, am I not “anxious” – but as we share it, the love banishes the darkness, the load lightens, and my anxiety abates, the other person's anxiety lessens? God cares. That is the whole Gospel in two words.

In the face of fear, uncertainty or suffering, we do what we can, and then we cast our care upon God, praying “We can no longer bear this alone; take it from us and bear it with us; you alone can handle this.”

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – things not seen

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

What is faith? “The conviction of things not seen.” But what are these things that we can't see? The obvious answer seems to be “invisible things”: I cannot see God. So faith is the mental leap, the spiritual courage to affirm the existence of what is invisible.

But is that correct? God knew we would need to see, to experience, to touch. One of Jesus' most eloquent followers wrote “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, and seen with our eyes, and touched with our hands concerning the word of life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it” (1 John 1:1). God did not remain aloof, but came down to be visualized, touched, heard.

We cannot see God, but not because God has been invisible. For the writer of Hebrews, the “things not seen” are not invisible things, but rather things that have not happened yet. What will happen tomorrow? Try as we might to plan, to build in security, to be prepared, the brutal truth is that we do not know. Probably the most important thing that will ever happen to me will be something I’d never thought of, and was woefully unprepared for.

So do we whoop it up today? or tremble in fear? No, we have faith – the assurance of things not seen. I cannot see the future, but I know Who will be in my future, the One who will get there before I do, our Lord whose presence will make whatever the future brings bearable, even joyful. Faith is when I move forward boldly, and even risk a few things now for God, because I have hope. Hope isn’t the sunny optimism that everything will be super tomorrow. Hope is buoyant.

So what are the “things hoped for”? We may want this gadget, we may wish for that pleasure. But what we really hope for, what we really need, is love, not being alone, the righting of all wrongs, the curing of all ills. We trust that God’s future with us will be even better, richer, more beautiful than we could envision. This excited expectation is faith.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – talking and thinking (part 2)

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer (Psalm 19:14).

What goes on inside my head? and why? How do I react to what I see? What am I feeling inside? Does God care? Is there a way of thinking, and feeling, that is pleasing to God (who gave me my brain and my emotions in the first place)? Thomas Merton asked “What good does it do to say a few formal prayers to Him and then turn away and give all my mind and will to things, desiring what falls far short of Him? The mind that is the prisoner of conventional ideas, and the will that is the captive of its own desire, cannot accept truth and supernatural desire.”

Paul acknowledged that “the mind of Christ” strikes the world as foolishness (1 Corinthians 2:16); we seek that secret wisdom. How do I change my mind, and begin to think God’s thoughts? How do I value what God values? and shudder over what mortifies God? How do I delight in what God enjoys?

For my “meditations” to be “acceptable” in God’s sight, some house cleaning (junk removal?) is required. I turn my head at the end of the day, bang it, and watch the clutter tumble out, leaving a clearing behind for God’s beautiful ideas and perspectives from the Bible and our worship to take up residence. I start to want what God wants; I stop craving what is not of God. I linger over thoughts that are holy, and flee those that are base.

You can’t get the mind of Christ the way Frankenstein got a brain, by getting hooked up for some high-powered transfer. You have to go back to school, immersing yourself in God’s words, reflecting on them, practicing them, living them – and gradually “the meditations of my heart” become more “acceptable” to our Lord.

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The Thomas Merton passage can be found in his classic book, [New Seeds of Contemplation](#).

eFavoriteBibleVerses – talking and thinking (part 1)

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer (Psalm 19:14).

If we are intrigued by what living with God all the time is like, we could begin by praying these eloquent words – although they might haunt us a bit. When we chat at the water cooler, interact at work, converse at a party: are the

“words of my mouth acceptable to you, O Lord”? There’s more here than avoiding cussing, and God isn’t particularly impressed by a pious, sugary, lilting niceness in our words. How do we talk in a way that pleases God and makes sense given our faith?

Talk is cheap, and our culture is precipitously sliding into ever more decadent talk. Politicians are vicious, TV stars are crass. Shouldn’t Christians monitor what we hear, and not be drawn into babbling away like everybody else? “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words never hurt me”? Nonsense. Words tear down, they belittle – but we want to use our words to build up, to encourage, to say things that are excellent, that are helpful to others.

The Christian knows when not to talk. Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggested that “we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words.” James, the brother of Jesus, warned that “the tongue is a fire” (James 3:6). Christians always tell the truth, although there are truths we keep to ourselves, for some brands of honesty are vicious.

We unwittingly declare our values through words, so to talk fawningly over the bogus anti-values of our culture hardly pleases God. If a researcher recorded your actual words over a year or two, what would they conclude really matters to you? Would they get a sense that God is in your life? or that you are kind? or compassionate? or virtuous (without being smug)? What is the tone of my talk? and is my talk (over many years) becoming more acceptable to God? and encouraging to others? Or less?

We want to talk about God, but we may get tongue-tied. Will I sound like an awkward toddler, so meager is my faith? Or will I turn the volume up too high and scare somebody off if I tell what God said to me yesterday? And with so much ridiculous, innocuous, manipulative chatter about God out there already, why add to the Lord’s name being taken in vain? Actions speak louder than words, right? But we need to say something about God, with ample room for questions, doubts, experiences, certainties, wonderings, tears and laughter! Dorothy Day said, “If I have achieved anything in my life, it is because I have not been embarrassed to talk about God.”

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – become like children

Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:2).

We sigh sweetly on hearing Jesus say “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them” (Matthew 19:14). But what could he mean by saying “Unless you become like children you will never enter the Kingdom”? Martin Luther, stressed by his rambunctious household, puzzled over this: “What was Jesus thinking? This is too much: must we become such idiots?”

In Jesus’ day, as in ours, children were thought of as preliminary people, as if marinating, little projects in the making. But Jesus not only welcomes them but points to them and says adults have unwittingly been plummeting downhill into immaturity for years. Grab your plastic bucket and pail, climb the hill, and become a child if you want to be truly mature, if you want to know God.

Consider Charles Peguy’s words: “You believe that children know nothing, and that parents and grown-up people know something. Well, I tell you it is the contrary. It is the parents, it is the grown-up people who know nothing. It is the children who know everything, for they know first innocence, which is everything.” Children are open, they have more questions than answers, they are receptive, their jaws drop in awe rather easily. Children are under no illusions of independence. They do not hide their treasures, and they share their toys. Their calendars are not yet filled, and they are not in a hurry.

Parents think of children as problems to be solved, as projects to be pursued, but children are mysteries to be loved. God, in the same way, is not a problem I try to solve with my brain, God is not a project I must manage or control; God is a mystery, and I am to love God the way a child loves her mother.

How on earth can a crusty, haggard, busy adult “become like a child”? You aren’t a victim as much as you think: you

can clear your calendar. Spend time with children: watch them, get on the ground and play with them, ask them to show you a treasure, and you show them one too. Share your toys.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – Word become flesh

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (John 1:14).

Words matter. Mind you, we have too many words, just blabbed all over the place, people, TV, cell phones and blackberries spouting words continuously but not saying much that matters. And yet words matter. At the end of the day, at the end of your life, it won't be things or food or anything else but words that will have mattered. I love you. I am leaving you. I forgive you. It's malignant. I am proud of you.

We sit in the pew, look at the pulpit, and hope that some word will be spoken. We look at a sunset or the stars and wish we could hear from the God who crafted it all. The Gospel of John surprises us with an eloquent word – that before anything existed, God spoke. God uttered a word and the world happened, life happened, love happened. God is not one to keep silent, although it might feel that way down here where there is so much racket. God speaks, in the book of nature, in the book we call the Bible – and in Jesus.

Who was Jesus? Debates rage over his historicity, his humanity – but John tells us that Jesus was the word of love God spoke so powerfully, so profoundly, so tenderly, that the word swirled into a breeze that swept up some matter, solidified, and became flesh, like me, like you, and although it was a beautiful thing that he walked, ate and touched, the most marvelous moment came when he spoke, perhaps first just some nonsense syllables in his mother's arms, then simple sentences with playmates, later reading aloud from the Bible (how familiar must the Word of God seemed to Jesus, who was himself the Word of God!), then standing on hillsides or in fishing boats speaking to friends and total strangers about the God he knew so intimately because he was in his own body precisely what God was trying to say. He was not running on empty, with just a bit of truth in a confused soul, or loving when the mood struck. He was full of grace and truth, so full it overflowed, poured right out of him on people who previously hadn't been sure if anything would ever really be true, or if they would ever really be loved.

God isn't silent. God has spoken, in the person of Jesus. God in Jesus spoke grace – unmerited, unshakeable, unbreakable love – and also truth: this isn't made up, God wasn't trying to trick anybody or talk anybody into anything. God is love, God speaks love, God's word of love became love itself, Jesus, speaking to anybody who would listen back then, and across the centuries to us today, if we will hear: The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – weight of glory

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17).

John Keats spoke of this world as "a vale of soul-making." But we act as if this world is all there is, forgetting that our life here is like a practice field where we fumble through skills for a game to be played after death, that our years here are like a music teacher going over scales, urging us to try a do-re-mi, so that in eternity we will be ready to join in the angelic chorus of fantastic, raucous, unspeakably beautiful music.

Yes, we have trouble here. But compared to the breadth, wonder and scope of life with God in heaven, what strikes us as unbearable now will seem like a trifle. Mind you, this truth doesn't trivialize or minimize the reality of pain now, or the grief that riddles the soul when a loved one has died.

And yet we are people who hope, who believe the best has not happened just yet. C.S. Lewis's preached on this verse during World War II, reminding embattled British citizens (who endured bombings every night!) that we are destined for "glory" – which means "good report with God, acceptance by God, and welcome into the heart of God. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last." You see, "there are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal" – including the dullest person you've ever met. If this moment's affliction will seem like a grain of sand on the beach of eternal joys to come, and if the person annoying me in this moment is no mere mortal but someone destined for glory, then I think and behave very differently right now.

The Greek word for "weight," *baros*, means something heavy, but also something full, overflowing. It is the love of God, the gift of salvation, that is so heavy it overflows delightfully, in me, and in you. For now we hope; in eternity the love of God will be superabundant, incomparable, more than compensating for whatever we and those we love (and even those we could care less about) have suffered here in this vale.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – ever flowing stream

Let justice roll down like waters, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24).

A recent poll asked Americans the origin of these phrases, "Let justice roll down like waters, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." The vast majority answered "Martin Luther King," and virtually no one answered "the prophet Amos." The cadences of King's "I have a dream" speech still echo profoundly 44 years later, although back then those listening knew he was summoning Amos – a fearless spokesman for God back in the eighth century.

Jeroboam was a popular king, the economy was booming, but Amos was grouchy – or we should say God was grouchy. Worship attendance was soaring, but God (through Amos) said "I hate the noise of your worship; instead, let justice roll..." God never seems to welcome worship that is not welded to a changed life; God is unimpressed by us going through the motions of hymns or prayers when we have not bothered ourselves with the social demands of the Gospel.

"Righteousness" means to be straight, obedient, holy. But what is "justice"? Isn't it when those who misbehave are punished? No: in Hebrew, *mishpat* ("justice") means that the poorest in a society are cared for. Don't drift into a conservative vs. liberal debate in your mind: God's demand, and there is no debate on this, is that we take care of people around us who are poor, disadvantaged, out of luck, hurting for any reason. We dodge our God-given responsibility by asking about the worthiness of recipients, but Jesus did not seem to ask why hungry people had gotten themselves into such a fix. He just fed them.

What is an "ever-flowing stream"? In Israel we regularly come across a wadi – a river bed that is dry much of the year, with water actually running only now and then. Amos chides the Israelites, who no doubt defended themselves: "We do good!" Like us, they subscribe to what John Wesley called "the doctrine of the devil": you do good when you feel like it – at Thanksgiving or Christmas, or when it's convenient or affordable. Amos says being holy or doing good for others shouldn't be a wadi, but rather an ever-flowing stream, always there, moving, giving drink to the thirsty, alive to God.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – angels unawares

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares (Hebrews 13:2).

While we may think of "hospitality" as good manners, the ability to entertain guests with flair, the Bible has something better in mind.

Anthony Robinson, in a book our church leaders studied 3 years ago, made a crucial distinction between

“friendliness” and “hospitality.” Many churches are friendly: people are jovial, shaking hands, gregarious. But maybe they are friendly with their friends, or with people like themselves. Hospitality is about welcoming the stranger, the person who is different, the one nobody else wants, the shrinking wallflower who looks lost, the person who didn’t get the memo about how to dress.

This verse echoes a wonderful story from Genesis 18. Abraham and Sarah welcomed and fed three travelling strangers traveling – who turned out to be angels bearing extraordinary news, the very hope Abraham and Sarah were desperate for. Angels in the Bible don’t shelter us so much as they bring a fresh, vital word from God to us. Hospitality to an angel isn’t merely being nice: God speaks to us through those to whom we are hospitable!

Have I been missing a few angels God has sent my way? When we exercise hospitality toward strangers, perhaps with simple kindness, but perhaps also getting to another part of town where you might bump into a stranger, you meet and really listen to somebody who is different – and God speaks. If we hang around with people like us, we only mirror our smallminded biases to one another.

Be open to connect with a stranger, somebody who lives differently, who doesn’t believe what you do, who doesn’t get you any more than you get him: you could be entertaining an angel unawares – and God has something marvelous to communicate to you through that encounter.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – your body is a temple

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit? You are not your own; so glorify God in your body (1 Corinthians 6:19).

Look in a mirror at your body. The world says you are a consumer, that your body is to be sculpted, or protected; it is something you use to have fun or to get ahead; that how you look, your presentation is everything. But is this why God gave me this body? Is it really so superficial and all about me? Paul offers a powerful alternative for how we view what we see in the mirror: your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

How can my body be a temple? A temple is a structure that exists for God, and really for no other purpose. A temple is a place where truth is spoken, and songs are sung. A place to be deadly serious, and therefore to be giddily joyful. A place where offerings are made to God. A place where the unloveliest are welcomed, for the doors are open, and even if God seems to be no place else, God is there, and when you exit you wish you could linger, and you let that craving to linger manifest itself in service and holiness outside the building.

Think of three things you do that you’d be too embarrassed to do in a holy place like a temple – and perhaps you don’t do them any more. Am I a temple for God? Isn’t the hidden truth unveiled when I look at my body as owned entirely by God, and that I exist to glorify God in my body? Do I glorify God in my body? by where I take it? by where I don’t go with it? by what I put into it? by what I don’t put into it? by how I use it? by how I care for it? by whom I welcome and befriend?

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – freedom

For freedom Christ has set us free; therefore stand fast, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1).

When it comes to words being thrown around carelessly, “freedom” rivals “love” as the most trivialized and misused. America is “the land of the free,” and we honor soldiers who die to “protect our freedom.” But what is freedom? Too often, it sounds self-obsessed – something like “I can do whatever I want.” Adams, Jefferson and their friends had something more profound in mind, something more akin to responsibility and meaningful participation in society.

When the Bible speaks of “freedom,” we are light years from “I can do whatever I want.” Freedom – theologically speaking – is more akin to surrender. The Spirit’s gift of freedom begins when I realize I’m not so free as I think. Karl Barth said that “to live in the Spirit means being set free and being permitted to live in freedom.” What a rude slap in the face, the Spirit’s bizarre suggestion that I am not free. Of course I am free! That’s the greatness of humanity!

But if I am free in some way, the Spirit exposes the awful truth that I have squandered my freedom. I am free to mess up, free to get shackled to habits that are not of God, and I exercise that freedom with abandon. I feel free, but isn’t it like the freedom of the prisoner, who can choose to wander about the cell, yet remains forever behind bars?

Only God has the power to set me free, to bring my stubborn will to the point of surrender – which is true freedom! Freedom isn’t about me; freedom is God in me. “Not my will, but your will be done” (Matthew 26:39); “Not I, but Christ in me” (Galatians 2:20). The Spirit sets us **free** from sin, free from hollowness, free from pointlessness, free from our proclivity to wound each other, free from sorrow. The Spirit sets us free **for** love, free to trust, free to serve, free to experience the beauty of life with God.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – whatever, wherever

Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God (Ruth 1:16).

Such lovely words, such a tender sentiment, quoted often in weddings – but do we know who said these words? to whom? and why? Ruth is speaking, not to her husband, but to her mother-in-law Naomi. Their plight is agonizing: they are both grieving widows, their husbands having just died. They are homeless, on the brink of starvation... and Ruth, a Moabite, raised to believe in a pantheon of gods very different from the God of Israel in whom Naomi believed, decides to stick with her mother-in-law, and to swear allegiance to her God, to our God.

Ruth could have gone home, played it safe, stuck with what was secure and familiar. But she ventured out – because she loved, and perhaps because she sensed in Naomi a depth of faith in a God that struck Ruth as more alluring, more loving than the old idols back in Moab.

Faith is relational – and I am not speaking merely of our relationship with God. I believe because I knew somebody who believed; I believe because I love somebody who believes; my faith stirs faith in someone else. Faith is something we do together; the faith of others can lift me up when I cannot believe for myself. Faith draws us into a company of believers, and what we share in common isn’t race, class or ancestry: we are the people who follow, who believe, together.

Faith is risky: we leave the cocoon of our prearranged lives and go – where? We do not know yet. Wherever God leads, that is where we will go. Maggie Ross called faith “a willingness for whatever.” Jesus asked this of his first disciples: “Put down your nets and follow me” (Matthew 4). Where? We do not know yet. But we know whom we are following, and we want to be near him, and that is enough, for he is the fullness of life, he is the way, the truth and the life.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – metamorphosis

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God (Romans 12:2).

Sometimes Christianity feels like a kind of dull conformity, a rigid grid of rules and thoughts we slavishly squash ourselves into. But there is more than enough conformity out in the world! Society shouts its demanding expectations

that we fit in, that our kids be “normal.” We learn our cues, we mimic fashions, behaviors, shopping trends...

Rather wonderfully, Paul urges us: “Do not be conformed to this world.” Life with God is not conformity; the life of faith is all about “transformation.” The Greek word is metamorphosis – the near miraculous process by which a grayish brown pouch is “transformed,” and a colorful butterfly takes flight. The power of God is like that: not cramming us into a hard shell with no wiggle room, but setting us free so we might soar, so we might discover our true beauty. We revel in the unique creature God made each one of us to be; God’s plan for me is special, God’s plan for you is special.

The Spirit’s work is a “renewed mind.” Our minds get stuck, hardened, and we think in the same old rut, but then God peels away the old patterns of thought and our imaginations are set on fire. We see the world, we see other people, as God sees. Then we begin to know God’s will, and we let it happen in our lives. In a world that endlessly debates the will of God, we who are transformed by God simply go out and do it, we trust it: we “prove” the will of God by embodying what Paul spoke of in the verse leading up to this one: “I appeal to you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.”

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – presence unaware

Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not know it (Genesis 28:16).

For someone out of the Bronze Age, Jacob leads a life that sounds strangely modern. Moving from place to place, wily enough to know how to get ahead in business, from a fine family but at odds with his in-laws, wife, and brother, with plenty of savoir-faire, lacking in piety, harboring more questions than answers about God.

Not one to be afraid of the dark, Jacob sleeps heavily one night and has one of those dreams that is so palpable you wake up feeling the real world is vague, and you want to rewind the clock to get back into the dream. He sees – what is it? A ladder? Or (as many Hebrew translators insist) a “ramp”? stretching up, up, into heaven itself. And there are – who? people? no, angels? climbing up, down, passing each other, this one drawing close to earth, another disappearing into the clouds...

And then Jacob woke up. “Surely the Lord is in this place but I did not know it.” He did not ask for the dream, he was not praying for God to show up, he was not even pretending to be pious. But he discovered that God was there. From whichever point on land he found himself, there was a vertical dimension he had not paid attention to: if I am standing, or sleeping, or walking, at work, playing, eating, on vacation, tangled in an argument, watching TV, jogging, kneeling in Church or misbehaving in my private time, God is there.

Is this lovely, comforting news? Or is the whole idea a bit scary, as if I’d best rethink my routine and what I do all day and all night long? Surely it is both, because surely the Lord is in this place, even if we did not know it. We just can’t plead ignorance any more.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – what to do?

We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You (2 Chronicles 20:12).

The books of 1st and 2nd Chronicles can make for some arid reading... but how lovely is this modest but utterly faithful prayer? We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You.

A coalition of petty tyrants have marshalled their armies and are marching in battle formation toward Israel’s border. The news comes to Israel’s king, Jehoshaphat. Unlike modern politicians, who posture for the cameras and talk tough, Jehoshaphat is described, quite understandably, as “fearful” (2 Chronicles 20:3). Instead of unleashing his

chariots and bowmen, he urges the whole nation to pray, and to fast. Sacrifices are expected from the people; they believe they must change their lifestyles for there to be any hope.

How stunning is this? Instead of uttering some cocksure plan, the king humbly says out loud, "We do not know what to do." If we are sober when we face difficulties, we also do not know what to do. No simple answer presents itself. Sometimes we seem trapped between alternatives, neither of which is promising. The frank admission of helplessness, of not knowing how to solve our problems, is not resignation to disaster; my inability to solve my troubles is the opening God needs. If I do not know what to do, I am thrown upon the grace and mercy of God; my weakness is my dependence upon God's promise.

We do not know what to do. But our eyes are upon God. We look to God, we maintain our focus, we are determined that whatever happens we will not take our eyes off God. Thomas Merton once wrote that all kinds of disaster might strike around us, but there is always one consolation – that "wherever I am, You, O Lord, are loved." There is plenty to fear. More often than we'd like to admit, we have no idea what to do. But our eyes are upon God.

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Learn more about [Jehoshaphat](#) – or look into the [Thomas Merton](#) reference.

eFavoriteBibleVerses – perfect gift

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change (James 1:17).

God gets blamed for all kinds of evil – understandably, since folks yearn to make sense of the chaos. But God does no evil; God only gives what is good. Our God is not moody, like those mythological divinities on Mt. Olympus: Zeus, Apollo, Athena. God's heart is stable; there is no dark shadow or shifting temperament.

Since there is evil in the world, and since our culture peppers us with notions that it's all up to us, that good is something I achieve, or luck into, then we need to remind ourselves constantly that "Every good and perfect gift is from above." Like the hungry Israelites in the wilderness, we look up each day for the manna that falls to feed us – and the next day we do the same thing (Exodus 16). And doesn't everything look different – and better – when viewed as a gift instead of as a possession?

We are not always shrewd at assessing what is good and what isn't. Sometimes what strikes us as problematical might be the very medicine our soul needs, and what we would count as just wonderful might poison the soul.

I wonder what James had in mind when he spoke of God's gift as "perfect"? The Greek word, *teleion*, does not mean flawless, or unbeatable; *teleion* means "accomplishing its purpose." What is God's purpose in giving gifts? To develop gratitude and faith in us.

[Kierkegaard](#) wrote that "God makes everything a good and perfect gift for those who are humble; every gift is perfect when received with thankfulness."

Or what if the author of this verse is the James who was the brother of our Lord? If we asked him "What is this 'perfect gift'?" would he have answered, "Jesus, of course"? What more perfect gift could God give? Jesus came down from God the Father, he is the Light of the world, he alone is sufficient, the deepest desire of our hearts.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – the Father's pottery

O Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay, You are our potter; we are all the work of Your hand (Isaiah 46:8).

Any time we use a word to imagine God, the word is never spacious enough to contain even a small percentage of God. And any word we use for God misrepresents God in some way. But words are all we have, and they are precious.

“Lord, You are our Father.” When my child, still just months old, looks up at me and manages to pronounce “Dada,” a gentle power is unleashed; love pulsates through the room. How many of us, as we advance in age, wouldn’t give all we possess for one more chance to look at a father who died years ago, smile, and stammer “Oh, Daddy.” Yes, all Dads falter, and some are downright mean – all the more reason to call God “Father,” since God never falters, is never mean.

Jesus was on such intimate terms with the omnipotent God who holds the universe on a fingertip that he called God “Dada” (“Abba” in Aramaic). God is our Father – and of course we could just as easily call God “Mother.” God is both, and unfathomably more, yet even more intensely personal, more tenderly affectionate toward us than Mother and Father.

And God is shaping, kneading, molding us into something. God the potter toils over the wheel, turning, turning, cradling what is malleable, not letting it harden until it has achieved the shape God desires. I am not the result of chance. I am not the sum total of my accomplishments. I am not defined by my missteps. I am the work of God’s hand. I may be a formless mess, but God isn’t finished with me yet.

Nowadays, pottery is decorative; it sits idly on a table. But in Bible times, pottery was functional, employed in the household to store, pour, or deliver nourishment. We were not made by God to be pretty ornaments; we do not exist for ourselves. God made us to use us to bring life to somebody else.

Oh, but I am of no use, we might say: I have been mistreated, dropped, and broken. But brokenness is especially valuable to God. “Everything has a crack in it; that’s how the light gets in” (Alan Jones).

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – Psalm 46:10 – be still

Be still, and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10).

So we want to explore a few Bible verses, to expand our spiritual horizons, to probe the depths of God’s heart, to be better. For any of this to happen, we have to stop.

For most of us, our lives are like some overloaded train rambling out of control. But instead of applying the brakes, we frantically shove more coal into the engine, going faster, taking on more cargo, rushing toward... well, we aren’t sure at all where we’re going. To be remotely serious about the Christian life, you have to stop, leap from the train if you have to, scrape your knees and elbows, then stand, dust yourself off, and be still.

“Be still and know that I am God” – and I’ve always thought the Psalmist should have added, “and you aren’t.” I am not God, and you aren’t either. God can handle being God just fine; I’m freed from that burden. Society says “It’s all up to you – so hurry, cram, grab, more, more, more.” No wonder we’re tired. No wonder we feel empty: we aren’t empty at all, just full of too much junk, too much rushing around, too much of the fiction that it’s all up to me.

To connect with God, we have to have the courage to slam on the brakes. Watch the house of cards tumble into a heap! – but then the cards are all on the table, and we look across at God and see his tender, firm, loving face. God reaches across the messy table, takes your hand gently, strongly, and says “Be still, and know that I am God.” “But what am I supposed to do?” And God answers, “Nothing just yet. For now, be still. Get calm inside. Be with me for a while.”

As you gaze at this computer screen, you are not alone. Others are with you. Together, we laugh at the idea we harbored just yesterday that we could be masters of our destiny. We wait, we are still, and we begin to know that God

is God.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses

What do you think about this? For the rest of the summer, our emails will look at “favorite Bible verses.” Each installment will focus on a verse, hopefully one that is rich enough, complex (or simple) enough to carry a good bit of weight. I’ll add a few reflections, of course.

This approach makes me a bit anxious. The Bible wasn’t divided into verses for the first 1,500 years of its life! ...and Christians have a bad habit of lopping a single verse off from its broader context and thereby misconstruing what’s really going on: with just a verse we can far too easily import our own wishful thinking into the Bible. As Shakespeare put it, “...”

But we will take the risk, and try to use a verse as a window into the larger adventure of the passage where it occurs, and of the book in which the passage occurs, and of the entire Bible, and maybe even of God’s mind-boggling labor of love in the universe.

Three things: 1. As always, you can share these emails with anyone: forward with abandon! And you can reply to me at any time with questions and thoughts.

2. The human brain is a marvel, vast, capable of remembering many things; we use only a tiny percentage of what God has wired in there. Christians of days gone by felt it was a virtue to memorize key Bible verses – so that in a crisis (or in a blessed moment) you could retrieve a phrase to connect encouragingly with God (or to express gratitude to God). Give it a try: make it a little personal quest to memorize one or two or a dozen or four dozen verses this summer.

3. Help me plot where we are going by sharing with me a favorite Bible verse of your own. I’d love to hear what text means a lot to you – and why.

Thanks, as always, for reading. It is a privilege to share these cyberspace moments together!

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