



Dr. James C. Howell eFavorite Bible Verses

eFavoriteBibleVerses – excellent medicine

“A cheerful heart is excellent medicine; a downcast spirit wastes the bones away” (Proverbs 17:22).

Recently someone forwarded me a study indicating prayer has no impact on heart disease; then the next day someone else dropped off a different study demonstrating significant percentage points of improvement in prayed-for heart patients.

Some day we'll reflect on whether or how prayer works... but is the Proverb true? “A cheerful heart is excellent medicine”? “A downcast spirit wastes the bones away”? Could it be that the spiritual contribution to good health is not a mere prayer floated heavenward, but a consistent disposition in the heart, a deeply cultivated trust in God, a buoyant joyfulness that can weather difficulty?

I hesitate to explore this, because I know and love profoundly devoted people who suffer awful illnesses, and a handful of sleazy folks who never think twice about God who are in remarkable health. But it's not all or nothing, is it?

Recently I read Francis MacNutt's bestseller, [Healing](#), in which he explores the hidden linkages between body and spirit. We can easily see how anxiety can poison the soul and we wind up with physical symptoms (headaches, stomach acid); Jesus not only told us “Do not be anxious” (Matthew 6:25), but he decisively inaugurated the kingdom of God so we actually have no need to be anxious. What did Paul urge? “Whatever is true, whatever is pure, if there is any excellence, think on these things... and the peace of God will be with you” (Philippians 4:8); the mind focused on God is less likely to overindulge in alcohol, is better able to cope, and the sense of being held firmly in God's strong, loving hands brings peace and joy – not the absence of illness, or freedom from pain and agony, but a solid baseline of support that is “excellent medicine.”

A barrier to the cheerful heart is a lack of forgiveness. MacNutt insists that “we ourselves block physical healing through our own coldness, our own resentment and lack of forgiveness.” Don't you feel a physical knot when anger is harbored? If Jesus came to gift us with anything, it is not health so much as love. Isn't the healing power of love “excellent medicine”? MacNutt even cites medical data: “Loving relationships are a powerful antidote to such deadly diseases as cancer; loneliness and lack of love depress our immune system.”

Again, in the presence of much love there can be much sickness; but if we are sick, if we are depressed, if we bear chronic pain, isn't love the most “excellent medicine”? God's love, and the love of the Church, a community of believers who refuse to leave us in isolation: excellent medicine, and cheerfulness dawns on the heart.

Let us be clear: my health is not the reason God exists! But God is the creator, God wired us, God mapped out the way to live, and the closer I am to God, the more diligently I cultivate the habits of soul God suggests (including prayerfulness, but also community, and the hard business of forgiveness), the more we have good cause to expect the surprise benefit of improved health and a happier heart.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – justice

“Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute” (Psalm 82:3).

When we think about those who are weak, or without a father, we might pity them. Or, we might rail against what's wrong in somebody else's culture, why somebody doesn't just do the right thing. We think, Just be strong, just take advantage of economic opportunity! I have...! But the Bible politely refuses to expend energy on blame and grouching; the heart of the Bible looks on the weak, the fatherless, the afflicted, and the destitute and, instead of ignoring them,

or faulting them, or judging them, the Bible says “Give them justice.”

The Hebrew word translated “justice” is intriguing: mishpat is not frontier justice, or work ethic justice, where the good are rewarded, and the wicked are punished, where everybody gets what they deserve. Mishpat is God’s justice; mishpat portrays the kind of society God wants, that God foresees as best for God’s people. Mishpat happens when the poorest, the neediest, those left out are cared for. In the Bible’s vision of human life, a just society is the one that (whatever your political inclinations might be) insures that the needy are lifted up, fed, not shunted off to the side, not blamed, but loved, empowered, included; the unjust society is the one that insists on “fairness,” that is willing to let some have plenty while others have nothing, that turns a blind eye to those who are hurting.

And did you notice the first word in Psalm 82:3? “Give.” Give them mishpat. Not “make them grovel for it,” or “Insist that they earn their own way,” but “Give justice to the weak, to the fatherless.” Those who have must give – not in a paternalistic, charitable mood, but the way a family marshals resources to help a member of the family who’s in a tough spot. We love; we don’t brush crumbs off the table to the dogs; we make a place at our table for the weak, the fatherless. We stand up for them when nobody else will speak; we become the voice of those who have no voice. “Maintain the right of the afflicted and destitute.” Advocacy is part of the Christian life; we do not merely mail in charity to the needy, and we do not even stop if we have managed to befriend them. We stand with them, we press for their good.

Or so we are taught by God; “the Bible tells me so.” Too many of us think we know better than God. We have our pet ways of thinking about goods and resources, and what somebody out there ought to do, and the way we prefer to disburse what we have. But what matters is not What is my best wisdom about the problems of the world? and Who doesn’t have a father and why? and How is it that people come to be poor? The only question that matters is What does God want me to do in response to injustice, to the existence of the weak, the destitute, the fatherless, the afflicted? “Give – yes, give! justice – mishpat justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right – stick up for, phone up some connections you might have, advocate for the afflicted and the destitute.” That is, unless you think you know better than God...

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – salvation

“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation” (Isaiah 12:2).

In a consumer society, we may be tempted to think of salvation as one more commodity to purchase for ourselves, one more really marvelous possession to pick up along the way. Not surprisingly, our mental picture of salvation looks like lounging on soft pillow by a lovely pool, whatever we’ve desired in the life being totally satisfied, all that we’ve cherished surrounding us in unfathomably abundance. As Tammy Faye Baker put it when asked how she felt about dying, she was excited – since heaven will be “like shopping all day in the mall with no credit card limit.”

The prophet Isaiah didn’t say “Surely me and all the stuff I adore – that will be my salvation.” Instead we are tantalized by something even better, by a hope that puts the mall and all its baubles, and even the most pampered, comfortable life in the shade: “Surely God is my salvation.” Salvation isn’t a state of being, it isn’t a possession, it isn’t about grand things for me at all; Salvation is God. God is “my strength and my might.” As Psalm 73 so beautifully portrays the heart of someone suffering and near death, “Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing on earth I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

What could be better than God? Don’t we notice this craving for a person, for love, as we mature in life? Children scribble a long list of things they want for Christmas; but ask anyone with some age, some wisdom, some hurts, some treasured experiences “What do you want for Christmas?” It’s simple: “I just want you to come, I just want us to be together.” It’s a person, not any thing – and that is the beauty of the Gospel. God could have rained down packages of food or diamond clusters or grand mansions upon us. But God gave what was most precious to God, and what is most needed by us: God gave God’s own self. “Surely God is my salvation.” We need never be afraid,

not because we have an unscalable fence or a clever alarm system; we have God. We are never alone, not because God guarantees us a gaggle of fellow party-goers or folks to bike with; we have God.

Perhaps the great theologian in history was St. Thomas Aquinas, who published thousands of pages expounding the grandeur of God, teaching generations the truth about God. As he lay dying, a distinct voice was heard in the room: "Thomas, you have spoken well of me; what reward would you ask of me in return?" And Thomas replied, "Nothing but your self, O Lord."

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – prayers for the children

"I am a woman sorely troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:15).

Once the center of gravity in Israel's political and religious life, [Shiloh](#) is now little more than some old rocks, an intriguing archaeological site, in a barren expanse of land few visit. Among the stones scholars can detect the city gate, dwellings, and perhaps the altar. What is harder to detect is the personal drama, the heartbreak, love, grief, laughter, tears, dreams and faith that made the place what it was.

How poignant is the story in 1 Samuel 1? Hannah was unable to bear children – her frustration made worse by her husband's other wife who snidely mocked her. When they went up to worship at Shiloh, Hannah prayed; her womb was empty, but her soul was rich. So absorbed was she in her praying that Eli, the priest, presumed she was drunk! – much like the first Christians on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:13). Instead of lashing out or feeling sorry for herself, Hannah prayed, not pouring wine into her mouth to allay her grief, but pouring out her heart to God.

Eli was moved by her prayer, and assured her God would hear. Notice 1 Samuel 1:11: when she prayed to give birth to a child, her wish was not "so I can have a child and be fulfilled." Instead, she pledged that if she had a child she would consecrate that child to God's service. Could it be we might rethink why we have children – not for us, but to commit that child to God? Could it be that the hidden purpose of a family is not to be "happy," but to live out a passionate devotion to God?

Her prayers remind me of those of another mother: [Monica](#), mother of St. Augustine. Her son was grown, but showed no signs of commitment to Christ, and his lifestyle was troubling. Monica prayed as intently as Hannah; [Ambrose](#), the priest, witnessed her profound supplications and declared "It is not possible that the child of so many tears could be lost."

Sometimes in the obituaries, I read about an older woman of immense faith. When her "survivors" are listed – a son, a granddaughter – I think "Yes, he survived, and so did she, probably because of the treasury of prayers offered up by this one who has died; imagine how many times, and with how much love, she had prayed for them!"

School starts soon. People grouse about budgets; education gets politicized like everything else. But what if the people of faith, daily and with large-hearted determination, prayed for the children (and teachers, administrators, drivers, support staff)?

I read a study involving two hospitals that indicated "Prayer works." Holy people prayed for patients in one hospital but not the other, and the prayed-for patients showed slight improvement. We're glad to hear this! What if we conducted a serious test of prayer involving two schools? But instead of praying for one and not the other, we pray for both?

Pray for the school that serves your neighborhood, but then pray for another elsewhere in the city, where prayer might be the last best hope on earth for God's children. And then we might hear God's voice, just as Hannah heard Eli's, offering words of hope – or more likely words of challenge: "Keep praying, but then ask if you, or your Church family, might be the answer to your own prayers for the children."

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – fiery furnace

“Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; but if he does not, be it know to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image you have set up” (Daniel 3:17).

Little children learn the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and perhaps they can sing (with the sizzle sound) “It’s cool in the furnace.” But the immense courage, the stalwart faith of these three Israelites is for grownups, for those who dare to live boldly for God in the teeth of a glitzy world that fawns after shiny lies.

The setting is ancient [Babylon](#), the most powerful of empires, featuring one of the “Seven Wonders” – the [Hanging Gardens](#). Israel has been crushed by Nebuchadnezzar’s merciless army, Jerusalem reduced to rubble, and its citizens compelled to live in exile far from home.

The mighty king did what all potentates and societies do: he wanted unity, he required loyalty, he had a litmus test for whether you were with him for against him. A dizzyingly tall, opulent statue before which all were to bow down: are you patriotic? Will you fit in here in Babylon? It’s not hard to recall history’s chronicle of political regimes who insist on obsequious support, who brook no dissent – and even cultures (like our own) that demand that we fit in, that we bow to the gods of this world, or you’re an outcast.

Threatened with death by fire, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego make a startling declaration that must have offended and stunned the king. “Our God” (who certainly appeared to be a pipsqueak among the gods to Nebuchadnezzar) “is able to deliver us.” Nebuchadnezzar must have snickered. Strong faith in the true God draws sneers in every age.

But notice what they say next. Not, “God will deliver us so we aren’t worried about your fire.” Instead they say “God can deliver us, but even if he doesn’t we still will never, ever bow down.” This is faith. This is true courage, and untouchable hope. No optimistic “Oh, because of God everything will turn out just fine.” They are fully prepared to bear whatever the cost to remain doggedly loyal to a God others disregard. Nothing can strike fear into their hearts, or prompt them to a change of heart. The martyrs through history are our most stellar heroes, those making the ultimate sacrifice for their commitment to God.

Their miraculous rescue from the fire is almost anticlimactic after their stirring profession of faith. Nebuchadnezzar saw not three but four men in the furnace... and then the three walked out: “their hair was not singed, and no smell of fire was upon them.”

What is the depth of our faith? or the extent of our commitment to God? Do we merely “trust” God to shelter us from all harm? Or do we follow in the steps of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – oh, and also Jesus, and Peter, and a holy host of saints and martyrs? We know God can do anything; but even if God does not work a miracle for us, even if we are ridiculed or even endangered, we will be steadfast in our refusal to bow down to the glittering images the world vaunts as the good life. We will never cave in, we will never smoothly fit in. As Jesus put it, perhaps thinking of this very story, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body! So fear not; everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven” (Matthew 10:28).

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – the power of mercy

“There is forgiveness with You, so that You might be feared” (Psalm 130:4).

How strange! Psalm 130:4 seems to suggest that the purpose of forgiveness, the reason there is such a thing, is “so that God might be feared.” But isn’t religion supposed to obliterate fear? Isn’t the purpose of forgiveness that – well,

that I can be forgiven?

Perhaps the theologians from centuries ago were right: religion isn't about me getting my spiritual life in order, or about me insuring my eternal destiny. Maybe it's about God, the glory of God – and when we focus on the wonder of God, the magnificence of God, and our jaws drop in awestruck wonder, then we have discovered our reason for existence.

Why would the Psalm hope to instill fear? We may say that the “fear” of God is more like reverence, and it is. Perhaps also there is a proper kind of fear, not fearing this or that circumstance in life, but trembling in dead earnest before the God whose immense power translates into tender love. The old hymn sings, “’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear.” And think about Exodus 20:20: “Do not fear; for God has come to prove you, and that the fear of Him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin.” Wow.

The lessons hidden in Psalm 130:4 and Exodus 20:20 are many. Don't we suffer from a shallow, flabby understanding of mercy and forgiveness? In my book on the [Beatitudes](#), I wrote “We are a permissive people, but then we show no mercy. Could it be that we will have to remember how to be merciful before we can get our house in order and ratchet up our moral zeal as a people? Mercy requires a high standard, doesn't it?”

And we are terribly confused about forgiveness; we foolishly think forgiveness means “Oh, it doesn't matter.” But forgiveness is when we say “This matters so much we've got to do something about it. We've got to reconcile.” Reconciliation isn't easy. Forgiveness is the hardest work – fearsome work, yet the larger fear is not to reconcile. You have to dig stuff up and wrestle with it. You must be brutally honest, yet kind. You listen deeply enough to understand those hidden causes of what has gone on between you and the other person. Forgiveness isn't always a warm fuzzy feeling. If you forgive me, it doesn't mean you feel like showering me with hugs and kisses. Forgiveness is a decision, a commitment to look at me through God's eyes, to stick with me.

God forgives. God looks at us through God's eyes; God sticks with us. [Shakespeare](#) spoke of mercy as “twice blest; It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes... Though justice be thy plea, consider this, that, in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation.” But could it be that mercy and justice are not opposites, not contrary options, but rather friends, two elements which, if combined in the laboratory of life with God, work some healing alchemy in the soul? We are forgiven so God might be feared; we receive mercy so we might be holy. Fear God! then do not fear, for God has come to prove you, that you may not sin. It's the power of mercy.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – waiting

“For God alone my soul waits in silence; I shall not be moved” (Psalm 62:1).

Faith waits. Faith is waiting, a patient stillness, a trust that trains binoculars toward the distance, watching for even a small movement, the subtle sign of God's action that comes in its own time. Faith is countercultural for us, largely because we hate waiting. We want to keep moving, we want it to happen now, we want to seize control. What are we waiting for, anyhow? My prince to come? The next big deal? Some dramatic turn of fortune? A quick resolution? Feeling better in five minutes? What would really satisfy? What is worth waiting for – if we could learn to wait?

St. Augustine began his spiritual [autobiography](#) by saying “O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.” Is my impatience, my inability to sit still, my frenetic round of busy-ness really an index into my lack of a sound relationship with God? Can I feel the itch inside, but then remember to calm down, realizing God is just beyond the horizon, coming, saving, loving – and all I need to do is to wait? My moving may plunge me into disaster; only God's moving matters. What happens “now” is gone by the next time I say “now.” Our true life of togetherness with God is “now” only in God's good future. When I am in control, I get a lot of me; to let God be in control, I have to wait, to look and see, to expect something far greater than me. “Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength” (Isaiah 40:31).

Stillness not only places me squarely in the presence of God. Waiting on God also refurbishes the most essential

virtue of the soul: commitment. I'm never sure if it's right to say "We modern people are not good at commitment," or "We modern people are just committed to the wrong things." We flit about, the heat of the moment loosens what we thought we had glued down; feelings predictably ramble wildly and we break commitments (and hearts). But when we are still, silently before God, when we wait only on God, we learn the secrets of "I shall not be moved," of commitment.

[Lewis Smedes](#) was right: "Somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. If you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God. When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty. When a person makes a promise, he stakes a claim for freedom and power. When you make a promise, you take a hand in creating your own future." Or in silent stillness you realize and enact the commitment of God's own future with you!

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – humility

"O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great for me" (Psalm 131:1).

What a lovely confession: "my eyes are not raised too high." And how odd, in our bloated, puffed up culture where elastic egos stretch to the snapping point. Nothing is too high for us; each one of us gets duped into thinking "I am the center of the universe, I can manage my own life, it's all up to me, all my cravings must be satisfied."

Jesus said "Blessed are the meek" (Matthew 5:3). Paul said "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to, but think with sober judgment" (Romans 12:2-3). Like drunks spouting sophomoric nonsense, we have forgotten the virtue of humility, the cardinal Christian virtue, the ground of all goodness. If I am humble, I can get out of the way, and defer to others; if we are humble, we can and will serve any and every other person, rich or poor, stranger or friend. We see every person, and our own lives, as Jesus did, humbly, eyes not cockily raised.

[J.R.R. Tolkien](#)'s duly famous and fabulously successful books, *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (and films) narrate the exploits of hobbits, diminutive characters in this epic fantasy who have no epic ambitions at all. They are childlike in stature, content to stick to the shire; they feel no urges to own much. So why do we adore and cheer for these Hobbits? and why is their unlikely triumph over evil so exciting? Is it an unwitting recognition of our own need for humility? or that we've gotten "too big for our britches"? Martin Luther defined faith as "the humility that turns its back on its own reason and strength."

Even if we are the recipients of adulation, or lots of money, we turn our backs, bow humbly, or get rid of whatever inflates the ego. [Thomas Merton](#) wrote, "The humble man receives praise the way a clean window take the light of the sun. The truer and more intense the light is, the less you see of the glass." The humble can receive direction; the humble are ready to be used by God. [Merton](#) was right: "Humility sets us free to do what is really good, by showing us our illusions and withdrawing our will from what was only an apparent good."

It is God who is high; it is God who alone can be God; we are relieved of the burden (and the ridiculous stupidity) of trying to play God. To be able to say "my eyes are not raised to high, I do not occupy myself with things too great for me," we pray, as [St. Francis](#) did, kneeling, head bowed, raising his eyes only to look at the cross of Christ: "Most high, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart, and give me, Lord, correct faith, firm hope, perfect charity, wisdom and perception, that I may do what is truly your most holy will." I will not let my life be frittered away in all the world fancies as cool, hip, chic, grand... but I will know the most high God and do that high God's most holy will.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – a poet in your pocket

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:1).

In last week’s email, we cited the wisdom of [Clint McCann](#): “For Psalm 1, happiness involves not enjoying oneself but delight in the teaching of God. The goal of life is to be found not in self-fulfillment but in praising God. Prosperity does not involve getting what one wants; rather, it comes from being connected to the source of life.” How do we shift from the chase for self-fulfillment to the calm excitement of praise? How do we make a connection to the source of life?

We block out time for prayer, we never miss worship, we become daily students of Scripture. But it’s even more. Of the blessed man, Psalm 1 says “On God’s law he meditates day and night.” At [Qumran](#), where the Dead Sea Scrolls were written, the Jewish Essenes took this seriously, and scheduled it so that somebody from their village was studying and copying out by hand Scripture 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

You can’t stay up all night reading the Bible; you have to earn a living, eat, clean house, and exercise. But is there a way to make “the law of the Lord” a streaming, omnipresent reality in our daily routine? Yes, we begin by making a devotional regimen as essential as brushing our teeth, and yes, we plant little mnemonic devices (a cross, a printed prayer, a picture of St. Francis) in the desk, bathroom, kitchen, car. But can we begin to conceive of God as a constant companion?

Sometimes when I travel, I am alone, and it’s not as much fun as when I travel with my wife, my children, or a friend. The joy of walking together, pointing – “Wow, did you see that?” – settling down for a meal, chatting over the highlights and challenges of the day: can we in our minds imagine what isn’t imaginary at all but is the ultimate truth of reality? that we are never alone, that God is there beside us wherever we find ourselves? I talk to myself more than I like to admit to myself... Can I talk instead to God? Can what I studied when I opened my Bible last night or this morning come alive in a seemingly un-religious situation? Do I behave differently if God is there? Isn’t the comfort of God’s lingering presence the holy solution to the nagging loneliness we bear deep inside?

And don’t underestimate the crucial need we have to become diligent students of Scripture. I know some people love Bible study, and to others it just feels corny, irrelevant, abstruse somehow... but Jesus called “disciples” (a word which means “students”). God wants to be known, understood, reflected upon in the mind, explored intellectually; we are wired to discover immense fulfillment in the simple probing of the heart and nature of God, in the mental stimulation of reliving the Bible’s stories and singing its songs.

In 1776, America defined itself around the free “pursuit of happiness.” But notice what the great historian [David McCullough](#) has to say about the Founding Fathers: “To them, the ‘pursuit of happiness’ didn’t mean long vacations or material possessions or ease. As much as anything it meant the life of the mind and spirit. It meant education and the love of learning. Jefferson defined happiness as his intellectual pursuits. John Adams, in a letter to his son John Quincy when the boy was a student at the University of Leiden, stressed that he should carry a book with him wherever he went. It was his happiness that mattered, Adams told him. ‘You will never be alone with a poet in your pocket.’”

The Psalmist is the poet you can keep in your pocket, and by the lovely gift of this poet you will never be alone.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – beautiful feet

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns’” (Isaiah 52:7).

How beautiful are the feet of the one who brings good tidings? We might prefer a handsome face, a memorable phrase, a beaming smile, perhaps even a gesturing hand – but feet?

Imagine you are a citizen of an ancient city, and the men of the place have marched off to some distant battlefield in the hopes of defending home, family, tribe and nation. No internet, no CNN news updates, no satellite coverage: day by day you wait, you fret, you pray, and you cannot resist lingering on the wall of the city, scanning the horizon, waiting for someone to come with news, any news. But then could you bear bad tidings, which meant not merely the loss of loved ones, but also the pending pillaging and destruction of your home and village.

“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him bringing good tidings, publishing peace.” Actually if anybody came at all, it meant at least somebody escaped – and if that messenger came in haste, not limping, not bloodied but jubilant, waving arms, getting closer, shouting something – and then we hear it: “Your God reigns!” We won, or at least we survived; God intervened, God helped us, God saved us.

The Good News of God’s grand work in the universe is like this. We do not see the battle for good unfolding right before our eyes. The scene is out of sight, the victory won or lost in a different place and time – and yet we wait for the news, and we rejoice at its arrival.

We give thanks to God for those who bring the Good News! At our Church last Sunday we installed our new ministers. They are not above the laity; they do not minister in place of the laity. They are not the warriors, but the runners who come with news from a distant ground. Their feet, their walk up the aisle into the pulpit, their standing on tiptoe to remind us of what we know but might have forgotten about the wonder of God: “How beautiful are their feet.”

We often speak of the Church as the “[hands of Christ](#).” We are also his feet: we the Church go about doing good. We move. The Church is not a still-life, not a fortress to hide from the perils of the world. We walk, we run out into the world to exhibit God’s victory. Where we go, out in mission, across town or around the world, or the way we walk around school or the office, the neighborhood or the golf course: our feet are instruments of God’s peace.

And I cannot conclude without these great words from Mark Helprin’s [Soldier of the Great War](#): walking with a much younger man who complains of fatigue, Allesandro, a wily World War I veteran, declares, “You may be tall, handsome, intelligent and gifted; but if you have feet of despair you might as well shine shoes on the Via del Corso; feet of despair are too tender, can’t fight back. Under prolonged assault they come apart and bleed to death; they become infected and swollen in half an hour. On the other hand are feet of invincibility. Feet of invincibility are ugly, but they last forever - building defenses where they are attacked, turning color, reportioning and repositioning themselves until they look like bulldogs.” Indeed: how lovely are the feet of the Body of Christ.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – two roads diverged

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:1).

How fascinating: the book of Psalms, the prayer book of the Bible, the hymnal of ancient Israel, opens with a poem about ethics, lifestyle, decisions. It is as if the secret tip is being shared before we bother praying or worshipping: the goal is a changed life, God requires a decision, it’s black and white, God wants to pervade the part of you that chooses. A thousand little decisions, the occasional big Decision: do you “walk in the counsel of the wicked?” or “delight in the law of the Lord”?

Once the choice is framed this way, it’s no choice at all, is it? I mean, you would never knowingly choose evil or destruction. Will I jump off a cliff? or sit down to a sumptuous dinner with those I love? Will I ruin my life? or fulfill my destiny? But if the choice is so easy, why then do we find our ears perking up to the whispering of wickedness? and why would our attitude toward “the law of the Lord” not be fairly characterized as “delight”?

The “counsel of the wicked” is sneaky, isn’t it? The devil doesn’t jump out in a red suit, breathing fire, wielding a blazing pitchfork; no, the devil dresses up like an angel of light, promising you the moon. The “good life” is defined by society in ways that mimic the good life God offers, yet different enough to fool us and lead us to a vapid life that pays little attention to God and leaves you hollow inside. Wealth, pleasure, leisure – not evil, but a bit out of kilter with

God's adventure, which would be the richness of generosity and prayer, the pleasure of service and worship, the leisure of Sabbath rest and silence in the presence of God. Society says "Don't break the law, maximize your portfolio, travel and relish the party circuit" – but the Psalm shakes its head and pities us for missing out on the "delight in the law of the Lord."

Part of our quandary is this: Robert Frost wrote "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry that I could not travel both..." But we think we can travel both – and not only both, but other roads as well. I'm in a clearing, four roads diverge, and I can't miss a thing: I'll take all four! But we cannot take four, or seven, or even two: you wind up splintered, divided, out of focus, and the "road less travelled," the way of him whose delight is in the law of the Lord, seems boring or restrictive, when in fact it is the true joy of every heart.

"Blessed is the man...whose delight is in the law of the Lord." Some scholars like to translate "Blessed" as "Happy," although we had better be careful. Our frenetic quest for "happiness" can deflect us from God. My friend and Psalms scholar [Clint McCann](#) put it well: "For Psalm 1, happiness involves not enjoying oneself but delight in the teaching of God. The goal of life is to be found not in self-fulfillment but in praising God. Prosperity does not involve getting what one wants; rather, it comes from being connected to the source of life."

How do we learn to praise? How to become "connected to the source of life"? More on this in our next email...

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – let earth receive her king

"The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice" (Psalm 97:1).

We have a little cluster of Psalms (93 through 99) whose primary theme is "The Lord reigns! The Lord is King!" Worshipers in ancient Israel must have had considerable hutzpah to travel for miles in caravans over rocky, dangerous terrain to press with the crowd into the temple to shout "The Lord is King!" – because they must have known their temple was a pipsqueak among ancient temples.

Their God (whose 'name' was 'Yahweh') must have seemed like the weakling on the playground of bigger, more impressive deities (like Marduk or Ea of the mighty Babylonians, or Osiris or Horus of the wealthy Egyptians). All other gods could boast of military triumphs, vast hordes of gold, shinier cultic objects; if success was the measure, the gods of the Assyrians or the Phoenicians or just about anybody else had superior reasons to elicit praise from their subjects. Psalm 97 says "Let the earth rejoice" – but I imagine the rest of the earth smirked, chuckled in ridicule, when Israel gathered to sing that Israel's Lord was King.

Why this foolishness in Israel? Was it lunacy? – or a profound faith that could stand boldly in the face of being small, puny, a laughingstock and still affirm that "Our Lord is King! – and yours isn't"? Did they understand the true nature of the true God? I suspect they did, although it was when Jesus arrived that the world was treated to the ultimate display of what exactly a King looks like. Jesus lay in a manger instead of a palace. Jesus surrounded himself with poor clueless fishermen instead of a slick bureaucracy. Jesus recruited an army of grateful lepers instead of well-drilled regiments. Jesus rode a wobbly donkey instead of a sprightly stallion. Jesus assumed a cross instead of a throne, a crown of thorns not gold and jewels.

Laugh out loud when the Wise Men tell King Herod, "We have come to worship the king" (Matthew 2:2) – a rather rude affront to the guy sitting in the palace. Furrow your brow when Pontius Pilate snidely asks Jesus "Are you a king?" (John 18:37).

Christians who strive for power in America or any other place on earth misconstrue the heart of our faith. We are historically wary of power: when J.R.R. Tolkien told his scintillating stories of the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*, and their quest not to possess the ring of power but to destroy it, he articulated in fable form the essence of Christianity, which is not about us wielding power; we yield to the power of God.

Or perhaps wisdom intuits that with our God, we glimpse a very different, and much better type of royalty. "The word

of the cross is folly to the perishing, but to us being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). "Love is the only force capable of turning an enemy into a friend" (Martin Luther King, Jr.). Want to see power? Watch Jesus touch the untouchables, or wash the feet of those who would gladly have washed his. Watch Jesus surrender his very life, so powerful was his love. Watch Jesus forgive the very people who just spat on him and drove nails into his flesh. Watch Jesus breathe his last – and then quite fantastically show up three days later. "The Lord is King! Let the earth rejoice."

The world still mockingly laughs – or yawns. But we know, and we pray, and praise the Lord who is king. "Let the earth rejoice": we pray that they will, and until they do, we rejoice for them, on their behalf, raising a chorus of "Joy to the world; let earth receive her King!" on behalf of those who are tone deaf, who have not yet grasped the true nature of power, the wonder of love become flesh.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – sing praises with the lyre

"Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre and the sound of melody! With trumpets make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!" (Psalm 98:5).

Once in a while I try in my mind to imagine the sound of ancient musical instruments; more often than that, I try to imagine the mindset of the ancient Israelites who played them. When they thought of God, their first reflex was Praise. Our first reflex might be far more utilitarian: I ask God for stuff, I measure God by whether God seems to be doing what I need – or I question God.

But Israel praised. Praise is our amazement at God and God's greatness, our recognition of the power and tenderness of the Creator. Praise enjoys and celebrates God's love, and is our best attempt to feel, say, or sing something appropriate to God. Praise doesn't ask "What have you done for me lately?" but instead exclaims "How great Thou art!" Psalms scholar [Walter Brueggemann](#) explains praise for us: "All of life exists for the sake of God. Praise articulates and embodies our capacity to yield, submit, and abandon ourselves in trust and gratitude to the One whose we are. God is addressed not because we have need, but simply because God is God."

Praise doesn't "work," it is not productive, it isn't about me. Praise is downright wasteful in terms of possible ways to spend your time. To think of God like a lover, one on whom you might dote for hours, requires considerable imagination, a radical reshaping of the soul.

Israel praised with makeshift instruments which craftsmen labored over – and their sole purpose was to produce sound that would rise to the skies and be heard by God. Psalm 98 speaks of the lyre. Wasn't the lyre the instrument Orpheus played in that mythological story? Sailors constantly shipwrecked when seduced by the songs of the sirens. Odysseus managed to sail past their perilous rocks by stuffing wax in the ears of the rowers and strapping himself to the mast of the ship; but Orpheus simply pulled out his lyre and played a song more beautiful than that of the sirens, and the rowers listened to his song and sailed to safety.

Praise is our best counter to evil in the world. If we are "lost in wonder, love and praise," there is not much chance we will stumble into tawdry sin, or find ourselves jaded and cynical. Praise is the cure for despair, and loneliness; if we "make a joyful noise to the Lord" we experience a quiet in the soul, a community of love.

Psalm 98 praises the Lord "for he has done marvelous things... He has made known his victory" (verse 1). Weaving the universe into existence, fashioning the delicate petals on a rose or crafting massive canyons, musing in wisdom, promising eternal bliss: the greatness of God could occupy us for every minute of every day as we notice some new aspect of the divine wonder; we would never grow weary or exhaust the possibilities. Of course, the most marvelous "thing" God ever did was to visit us on earth: Jesus, by simply showing up, by teaching, touching, suffering and rising, was and is marvelous; Jesus is the victory of God – and our only sensible response is not to co-opt him into aiding us with our agenda, but simply to praise.

Late in her life, [Dorothy Day](#) was asked to write an autobiography. She thought a while and then said she couldn't,

because she kept thinking about Jesus, and his visit long ago, his love, his grace, and how fortunate she had been “to have had Jesus on my mind for so long.” It’s the beautiful song; we hear it and we are safe, we are delighted, we are home.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – like a child at home

“And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Psalm 23:6).

Let us speak a third time of the 23rd Psalm. If “Thou art with me” is the focal point of the Psalm, and if “I shall not want” is the beginning of a new life of being satisfied with God, then the end of our life with God is this: “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” End of life – not so much as the hour of death, but life’s purpose, the reason you are here, the destiny for which you might prepare yourself.

Why do we want stuff like iPhones and vacation houses? Is it sheer coveting? A rage of acquisition? I don’t think so. We want communication devices because we long to connect. “E.T., phone home!” We want a house, or a better house, because – no matter how far we travel, no matter how happy or sad our nuclear family might have been – we carry inside a yearning for home. In our mobile society we may be clueless about where that might be, or if it really exists. But we still want, above all else, to go home.

Perhaps [T.S. Eliot](#) was right: “The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” Or consider this: if you are lucky like me, you have fond memories of summertime junkets to the home of your grandparents. For me, it was a house that is factually small now when I drive by as a grownup – but as a child it was large, large in love, large in special treats, large in cousins and fun, another home, one without problems or homework or chores, a special place of a more unconditional kind of love. Does God give us such places in our memory so that we will learn to desire the home for which God destines us when this life is over?

[Isaac Watts](#), as he wrote marvelous hymns, often recast Psalms into slightly different language. His metric version of the 23rd Psalm is eloquent, elegant, moving: “The sure provisions of my God attend me all my days; O may Your House be my abode, and all my work be praise. There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come; no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home.”

Like a child at home. Yes, some children bear the misfortune of a home that is more warfare than peace, more division than love. But the very fact that we recoil at the idea of any child anywhere not enjoying peace and love at home is evidence that God has wired into our hearts a keen sense of a proper destiny – which looks like me as a boy at my grandmother’s table or on my grandfather’s lap. Various happenings in the life we know here strike us as urgent, they make us anxious, or perhaps we have some fun or face trials. But it is all a preparation for a grand homecoming, when we will “find a settled rest... no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home.” Or as the Psalmist sang, “And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – shall not want

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).

In our last email we started at the epicenter of Psalm 23: “For Thou art with me.” Consider this: if we genuinely and in the marrow of our being believe that God is with us, then the only logical consequence would be, “I shall not want.”

We’ve read it, uttered it, delighted in it: but have we thought about it? Or lived it out in reality? “I shall not want”? Our whole life is about wanting: I want, I want, I shop, I look, I don’t hang on to stuff so much as I just always want some new stuff. In our consumer culture, I shall want, I shall always want, I shall never stop all my wanting because the mall titillates me with ever new shiny, unnecessary objects and I am actually instructed from childhood up to want –

and not merely to want, but to have.

I shall not want? “The Lord is my shepherd,” and if the Lord is the shepherd, then I am a sheep, and the reason sheep need a shepherd is simple: sheep nibble themselves lost. They are not brilliant creatures, and we cannot be flattered that the Psalm thinks of us as sheep. Leave a sheep without a shepherd, and he nibbles a bit of grass here, wanders over there for another blade of grass, sees a patch just past that rock, and before you know it the sheep is lost, or has fallen into a ravine, or been devoured by a wolf.

The Hebrew original of Psalm 23 is perhaps better translated “I shall lack nothing,” or “I shall lack no good thing.” What do I lack? Well, I lack an iPhone or a house at the coast; I lack a fully-funded pension just yet, and I lack... We can fill in the blank endlessly. But to ask “What do I lack?” in the sense of “What really matters that I do not have?” What at the hour of death would I dare not lack? What, as I grow older, would it kill me to lack? The answers aren’t iPhones or vacation houses. Jesus spoke with the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-30), who claimed to be good, and he had plenty of stuff. What did Jesus say? “One thing you still lack.” We don’t lack lots of things: we lack just one. The one thing we lack is intimacy with God; the one and only thing that can fashion in our souls the feeling of “I shall not want,” or “I lack no good thing” is... God. Nothing else. No massive pile of something else. Just the Lord who is a good shepherd to the sheep who, were it not for the shepherd, would nibble themselves into oblivion.

God is our satisfaction; God is good enough. For a sheep like myself who has mouthed society’s nonsense “I shall want, I shall want,” then because I know God, my insatiable desires fade, and I become perhaps for the first time in my life truly contented. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – thou art with me

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4).

The 23rd Psalm is virtually a spiritual rock star, a perennial favorite – and yet for all its familiarity there may be some nuances to the Psalm we have missed, some reflections scholars might share that can deepen our sense of probably the most comforting words ever composed.

Consider one four letter word in verse four: thou. The second person pronoun “thou” is old English, a relic from the 1611 King James Version. The vast majority of the time we prefer modern translations of the Bible – but Christians cling to a 400 year old translation of Psalm 23. But why? Could it be that elevated language, words with some lineage and dignity, are appropriate to the grandeur, the majesty, the immeasurable grace of God who is indeed our shepherd?

And here is a fascinating item: in the original Hebrew of Psalm 23, there are exactly 26 words before “Thou art with me,” and exactly 26 words after “Thou art with me.” Could be chance – but perhaps the poet was boldly declaring that God being with us is at the very center of our lives, the apogee of all that transpires, the focal point of the universe? God is with us. We are not alone down here. The whole Gospel is that God is with us; Jesus was called “Emmanuel,” which means “God with us.” John Wesley’s dying words were “The best of all is, God is with us.” God doesn’t shelter us from trouble, God doesn’t magically manipulate everything to suit us. But the glorious With is unassailable, unchangeable, the only fact that matters.

This marvelous news draws our attention again to the Thou. For the first 3 verses of the Psalm, God is spoken of in the third person: “The Lord is my shepherd... he leads me... he restores my soul.” But with the Thou, the third person shifts to second person: “for Thou art with me, thy rod... thou preparest a table...” Instead of talking about God, the Psalmist begins to talk to God; instead of God in the head, God is a friend in the heart, a conversation happens, a relationship grows. This is faith. This is the only true comfort.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – joy

“My Father is glorified when you bear fruit... I have said these things so my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:8).

Americans are people who know how to have fun; we have our diversions, we shop, we party, we travel. We cherish our right to “the pursuit of happiness.” But God made us for something higher, more enduring and even more delightful than mere happiness; God made us for joy. Joy isn't happiness times two, or a really tall pile of fun. Joy is calmer, deeper, not hinged to any circumstance. Joy is a gyroscope in the soul that tells you where God is, no matter where you are or what has just transpired – and joy delights in knowing God is there; joy takes comfort in God being there; joy smiles in the dark.

In one sense, we choose joy. We forever stumble upon some fork in the road, and we can choose joy, or choose to be resentful. And yet the very choice of joy is a gift of the Spirit, who is forever coaxing us toward joy. You don't pursue joy, seize it, and stash it in your pocket; Joy is a gift you are surprised has shown up. When it manifests itself, you chuckle and say Thanks be to God, I couldn't have won this myself. In fact, joy is barricaded from my heart by sin, by pride, by my sense of self-entitlement. That barricade must be torn down, by confession, by humility, by a profound sense of gratitude for even the smallest little gift I might have taken for granted five minutes earlier.

What did Jesus desire? “That my joy may be in you.” Notice: it's Jesus' joy, not something you have, or concoct in yourself. Joy is proximity to Jesus; Joy is transplanted in you; it's Jesus' joy, not yours, which makes it more... joyful.

Paul says Joy is a “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22). Like all fruit, joy requires time, tending, maturity. Evelyn Underhill notes that “it is rather immature to be upset about the weather... Pursuing the spiritual course, we must expect fog, cold, persistent cloudiness, gales, and sudden stinging hail, as well as the sun.” Joy is about consistency in the spiritual life. Joy knows God is incapable of drifting away from us, and the very fact that we turn our heads and grope after God in the dark is God's gift that gives birth to joy.

Joy is always elusive, at least on this side of eternity. We taste joy, but the very taste whets our appetite for more. C.S. Lewis defined joy as “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.” We live in this in-between zone defined by 1 Peter 1:6-8: “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may suffer trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold tested by fire, may redound to praise... of Jesus Christ. Without having seen him you love him, and you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy.”

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – more than human

“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap your field to its very border; you shall leave some for the poor and for the sojourner. I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:9).

At first glance, Leviticus seems like an antiquated, bizarre, boring list of rules that could not possibly be pertinent to modern people who, after all, are saved by the unearnable love of God, not by our adherence to Bronze Age laws. But God gave Leviticus to God's people, and Jesus treasured the book, quoting from it in his teaching.

Leviticus is God's instruction on how to be holy, how to be good, how to mirror the being of God – who cares about what we do with our pots and pans, the way we garden or strike business deals, our bodily functions and how we mark our calendars. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “If a man is not more than human then he is less than human. In order to be a man, you have to be more than a man; in order to be a people we have to be more than a people. Israel was made to be a holy people.”

How can we be more? and a holy people? To people who were hungry, to those who were desperate for rain in order to survive, who worked scabbly soil with their bare hands, who weeded and harvested with no machinery or chemicals – to dirt poor farmers, God said “When you reap the harvest, don't reap all the way to the edge; leave

some for the poor.”

But they were poor! Yet, for people who are more, for people who are holy, even if they are poor, there is always somebody poorer, somebody else to consider, a stranger, an outsider, some sojourner just passing through. You don't wish they would just go away or cease to exist, or that they would grow their own food. You get what you need, but you never take all you could talk yourself into needing: you leave some for the poor, the person nobody else wants, who has no field.

Notice Leviticus doesn't say “When the crops are fantastic, leave some.” No, people who are more, people who are holy always leave some, they never take all they might talk themselves into needing – and perhaps especially so in the lean years. When the crops are thin, when the clouds have proven stingy, it's no time to tighten the reins on helping the poor. The poor need what's left on the edge of the field more when times are tough; the goodness of the people who are more, who are holy, is more generous, more noble during daunting economic times than when the financial tide has risen.

We find ourselves in difficult economic times. We grumble about the price of gas, nobody's getting pay raises, the stock market is wobbly. Charitable agencies are struggling like never before, with rising demand and shrinking supply. So how during such times is God calling us to be more than human? to be more than a people but a holy people?

Isn't our Church being called on to rise to the occasion, to be people of the hour, to do more, not less, to reap but not reap all the way to the edge because times are treacherous, to reap perhaps not even as close as usual to the edge because times are treacherous? If the federal government just sent me an “economic stimulus” check, whose economic struggle is most in need of stimulation? Mine? or the one with no field, the sojourner, the poor? Do I reap to the edge? or leave for others? How creative can I be so I can be more, not merely have more? What is God calling the Body of Christ to be and do so we can be more, and be holy?

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – freedom

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

Freedom: the word of the week, although we have thinned down the observance of July 4 to such trivial levels that even freedom may not be spoken of much during a long weekend of picnics, water, fireworks, and fun.

Freedom (the way John Locke and the Founding Fathers who read him so diligently would have conceived it) is a native property of the soul, and we are to be vigilant to shield that inborn drive to self-determination from governments or anybody out there; to squash or limit freedom strikes us as the epitome of immorality.

How interesting is it, then, that in the history of Christianity, one of the most ferocious debates has been over whether we are free or not? St. Augustine argued with Pelagius and won, as did Martin Luther over Erasmus: you may feel free, but you are not free at all. Rifling through the pages of Scripture, and thinking deeply about their own lives, they realized that freedom is not something you indelibly have; it is not at all an unalienable right. Your will, the part of you that decides, feels and acts, is shackled. We are creatures of habits, driven by compulsions, hooked on sin – addicts, if you will. Like Paul, we discover that “the good I wish to do I cannot do” (Romans 7). Peer deeply into your soul and you notice a kind of combat being waged, and you cannot simply “just say no.”

The most important events of our lives are not chosen. Stuff happens to us. We find ourselves carried along by forces and events... and doesn't the way we Americans talk about freedom begin at times to sound like self-indulgence, as in “I can do whatever I want”? Adams, Jefferson and their friends had something better in mind, something more akin to responsibility and meaningful participation in society.

Paul goes even further. Freedom isn't something you have; it is precisely what you do not have until you are “set free”

by the Spirit. Freedom – theologically speaking – is more akin to surrender, applying the brakes to me doing as I wish, opening myself to the power of God. [Karl Barth](#) said that “to live in the Spirit means being set free and being permitted to live in freedom.” Or as [Frederick Buechner](#) put it, “We have freedom to the degree that the master whom we obey grants it to us in return for our obedience.”

Freedom – Christianity-style freedom – is the joyful liberation of the one who has shed any notion of “I will do as I wish,” happily assuming the prayerful posture of “Lord, not my will, but your will be done.” Freedom is the thank-you note you write to God the great Physician for healing a diseased soul. Freedom is freedom from sin, freedom from hollowness, free from pointlessness, freedom from our proclivity to wound each other, freedom from sorrow. The Spirit sets us free for love, free to trust, free to serve, free to experience the beauty of life with God.

Freedom is Jesus. If you want to see freedom this July 4, in addition to a proper remembrance of the good of our nation, reading the Declaration of Independence, singing the National Anthem or raising a flag, look to Jesus, the only person who was truly free. He freely came down the ladder of power into a humble manger; he freely left his livelihood to follow God; he freely courted violence against himself out of his love for total strangers; he freely exhibited God’s free grace when the soldiers handcuffed him; he freely refused to wield his immense power as he breathed his last; he freely forgave, freely rose, freely rules in humble love, and freely sets us prisoners free.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – paradise today

“Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Gasping for air, racked with pain, moments from death, Jesus turned to a criminal, a lawbreaker the Romans had deemed worthy of execution, and showed him mercy. Actually “mercy” would be an understatement; not merely kind and forgiving, Jesus pledges to this villain the grandest, most beautiful gift imaginable: eternal life, in paradise, with Jesus.

Jesus had a lifelong habit of mercy, of overabundant giving, not to the holy and squeaky clean, but to the lost, those hopelessly in the wrong. And notice that Jesus, in what must be the loneliest, most horrific moment of his or anyone’s life, dying an excruciating death, isn’t absorbed in himself, but is focused on others, even a total stranger. “What wondrous love is this?”

How startling is it that Jesus said “Today you will be with me in paradise” – not “at the end of time” or “in a few thousand years” but “Today!” Was Jesus speaking metaphorically, deploying a touch of hyperbole to comfort a dying man? How does time actually work when we reckon with death and eternity? Countless theologians have debated this: do the dead go immediately to life in heaven? or is there a waiting period, the “sleep of the soul” (1 Thessalonians 4:13, Ephesians 5:14) until the end of time?

Our brains are incapable of imagining a world or any sort of existence apart from time. Something happens – now! – but now it is in the past, and something else is coming; we move along the arrow of time, the past stretching behind us, the future not yet dawned. But as involved as God gets in our arrow of time, God is always outside of time. God holds all of time in God’s hands the way you and I might hold a stone or a stick: inside time we think far back into our childhood or the Mesozoic era, or forward toward our old age or the 23rd century, back to when we began reading this email and forward to when the next email arrives; but to God it is all one, all simultaneous.

When we die, when life on this earth is no more, we exit time; we join God outside time, don’t we? We sing, “When we’ve been there 10,000 years... we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’d first begun.” Through death’s door, we step outside of time – and so doesn’t that mean that the criminal did indeed join Jesus in paradise “Today” – and wasn’t the “Today” for him the same as the “Today” for my grandfather or the apostle Paul, your spouse or St. Francis or your good friend who died on some yesterday or another, as it will be the same “Today” for you and me whenever our time on earth is over?

For those of us who survive the death of a loved one, time still grinds along. But the wait, the ache of separation, is

our problem, but not a problem for the one who “Today” is in paradise. We do not know these things with certainty, of course; but we can be sure that C.S. Lewis was right about even our most fantastic speculation over the wonder of eternal life: “Guesses, of course, only guesses. If they are not true, something better will be.”

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – golden rule

“Whatever you wish others would do to you, do so to them” (Matthew 7:12).

How odd is it that Jesus’ most famous saying (the so-called Golden Rule – “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) is seemingly out of character for him? and not really translated correctly? Perhaps we latch onto Jesus’ words, foolishly thinking he’s advocating tit for tat, the greasing of palms: cut a business partner in on a deal, and he’ll help you make some dough next time; whisper a rumor and hope something gets whispered back; rub my back, I’ll rub yours; we’re wheelin’ and dealin’ with Jesus’ endorsement. But wasn’t Jesus the one who said “Turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39)? “Invite those to dinner who cannot invite you back” (Luke 14:13)? “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44)? “Lend, expecting nothing in return” (Luke 6:35)? Why would Jesus suddenly play “even Steven” with “Do unto others”?

Notice what Jesus didn’t say. He definitely didn’t say “Do unto others so they will do unto you,” or “Do unto others before they do unto you,” or “Do unto others as they have done to you.” Notice Jesus actually didn’t even say “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Instead of starting with you as the one acting, Jesus begins with how you feel about being treated by someone else acting: “Whatever you wish others would do to you, do so to them.” See the difference? Jesus was speaking to people who were disregarded as nobodies, who never got any respect, who had nothing. To people frequently mistreated, who might only dream of receiving a little respect and kindness, Jesus invited them to imagine how they wish they could be treated – and then to act that way toward others.

When Jesus suggested “Whatever you wish others would do to you, do so to them,” he was in the thick of a stunning conversation about asking, and gift giving – and especially the way God gives far more generously even than we do. For us, the very thought of doing for others, of giving to others, is alien. We are taught to focus on our selves: it’s all about me, what am I getting out of this, what’s in it for me. Like Narcissus, we gaze into the mirror and think we see in our own reflection the center of the universe.

But Jesus invites us into a life that isn’t about me; my life is about others. What should I do for them, with them? Not what makes me feel good, but in my imagination I try to get inside their heads, I remember times I felt left out, in need, lonely, desolate, lost – and what might have helped? Then I act, not to gain anything for myself – except the sheer joy of being in sync with one more wise word from our Lord.

And speaking of our Lord: we can always reflect upon Jesus, who must have taken “Whatever you wish others would do to you, do so to them” very seriously for himself. What did Jesus do to other people? That must be what Jesus wishes we would do. Jesus loved. Jesus touched the untouchables. Jesus respectfully asked questions and conversed on the things of God. Jesus was tender, compassionate – and in his pattern of action we discover our blueprint for living. What he did to others must be what he wishes we would do too.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – the fast God chooses

“Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness,...to share your bread with the hungry?” (Isaiah 58:6).

Imagine a religious mindset that was willing to fast, only to be upbraided by God’s prophet for missing the point! Isaiah isn’t saying “Don’t bother fasting” – but he is urging a fuller, more comprehensive kind of spirituality. Do we merely pray? or read our Bible and bat around pious thoughts? or read spiritual classics and sing hymns? Isn’t there an earthly, earthy, grittier dimension to life with God? Don’t we keep God at arms’ distance until we serve? until we

discover that the life of faith isn't me consuming, me getting some God along with everything else I am accumulating?

Thinking of the very holy people to whom Isaiah spoke, Barbara Brown Taylor said, "They thought God was supposed to be with them when they prayed and fasted and studied their scriptures. They thought nothing pleased God more than to find them on their knees – but they were wrong. God was not at their prayer desks with them. God was out in the streets, warming his hands over a can of burning garbage with a bunch of drifters, delivering sacks of groceries at the housing project. God was not parked in their sanctuaries, waiting for one of them to stop by for a talk. God was in the emergency room at the hospital, in the waiting room at the labor pool, in the lobby of the police station, not only to comfort those who were stuck there but also to stir them up. They had hoped they could keep their faith a private matter between them and their God, but it turned out to be an illusion."

We do find God in worship, in private devotion, in Bible study; but then we only see God in profile, from one side only, until we get out in the world and connect with the poor. We just have too much, and we can't see over the pile; we can't move out of the press of the pile of stuff. Faith always involves a fast: doing without something we crave, not soaking in so much that there is no room for God, letting hunger linger instead of satisfying it so we might discover our deep hunger for God. Renunciation is a foundation of life with God.

Getting off our knees and out into the streets, to serve God tangibly in the world, is a kind of fast: you do without something, you spend less time on a hobby, you don't dabble in some diversion you relish, you miss a TV show or a tennis date, you forsake that extra hour at the office, you use money you'd squander on something self-indulgent – and you invest in ministry. You fast from something you treasure in your life to honor God with the fast God requires, to connect with God not merely from one side, but head on, face to face, seeing perhaps for the first time the real face of God in the person in need. "Is not this the fast I choose: to share your bread with the hungry?"

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – even the sparrow

"Even the sparrow finds a home at Your altars, O Lord of hosts" (Psalm 84:3).

Birds must have posed a few problems for the people in charge of keeping the temple spick and span. Who was the wise Psalmist who looked up into the rafters, noticed a nest of sparrows, overheard somebody grouching about how irksome sparrows can be, and then wrote a poem and set it to music celebrating the wonder of God's house – which is so splendid, so embracing of all creatures great and small, that even the sparrow, even the lowliest, unloveliest bird finds a home there.

Jesus picked up on God's goodness, even to sparrows... when he preached to people who were themselves rather sparrow-like. Never were those in his crowd considered to be eagles, or flamingos, birds admired for their plumage or voice; they were of no value to anybody – but to God, who is as attentive to a sparrow as to any creature.

St. Francis was out walking one day when a large flock of birds began chirping loudly. He stopped, and spoke to the birds: "My sisters, always be grateful to God for giving you the air in which to fly, and trees for your homes, worms and streams for your sustenance, feathers to keep you warm; beware the sin of ingratitude, and always give thanks to God." Sparrows probably don't harbor feelings of independence, they don't boast of being self-made; and how generous of Jesus to single them out for special attention!

God is like that, not doting on what the world fawns over, but on the humble, the unnoticed, the despised. One of my favorite novels is *The Sparrow*, by Mary Doria Russell. In a memorable scene, a priest explains why there is suffering in the world: "There's an old Jewish story that says in the beginning God was everywhere and everything, a totality. But to make creation, God had to remove Himself from some part of the universe, so something besides Himself could exist. So He breathed in, and in the places where God withdrew, there Creation exists." The cynic with whom he is talking replies indignantly: "So God just leaves? Abandons creation?" The priest replies, "No. He watches. He rejoices. He weeps. He observes the moral drama of human life and gives meaning to it by caring passionately about us, and remembering." And then he recalls the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:29: "Not one sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing about it."

Jesus didn't say sparrows never fall to the ground. But God knows, God watches, God cares passionately. God remembers – even the sparrow, whose home is with God.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – loving God (part 2)

“When they finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs’” (John 21:15).

Jesus asks “Do you love me?” not once but three times... but why? we do not know. And what does Jesus mean when he adds “more than these”: “Do you love me more than these what?” More than the fishing boat, the nets, the way of life Peter knew and relied on? More than the other disciples? I heard Jeremy Troxler, a friend in ministry, ask if Jesus might have been jostling Peter a bit, since Peter often thought of himself as superior in faith to the other disciples: “Do you really think you love me more than other people do?” Wouldn't Jesus want us to avoid comparing our faith to others, and realize we love Jesus together with other people?

Do you love me “more than these”? Might he mean the blessings God gives? We love what God gives us – but do we love God? Is God merely the one we hold at bay as long as we get the good things we want from God? Doesn't God want our time, our hearts, our selves – the way a parent wants to be loved, to be together, not just the dispenser of cash or other provisions on demand?

Maggie Ross once wrote that there are people who prefer an “experience” of God over God himself. We want the feeling, the warm rush of emotion – but isn't a substantial relationship with God more than something we experience inside our selves? Shouldn't our faith be about God, not just me and my religious emotions? Can we stick close to God during stretches of time when the feelings may have subsided or even drifted into darkness?

Peter insists that he does indeed love Jesus. We wish we could see Jesus' face: did he smile? Nod? Raise an eyebrow? Extend his arms? We know his next words, though: “Feed my sheep.” If we claim we love God, if we even wish to love God, it involves feeding God's sheep, caring for those who (like sheep) are hungry and thirsty, who dumbly drift off course, who nibble themselves lost.

In John 21, Jesus is depicted as using an unusual, theologically profound Greek word for “love”: agapé, which is deeper than what we feel for family and friends, deeper than simple liking or affection. This love, agapé, is eager to love the unlovable, the stranger nobody else will attend to, even my enemy. This divine love, agapé, does not bubble up spontaneously in the soul; it must be learned, our hearts must be cured to harbor agape. We pray for the miracle of God's Spirit to love through us and in spite of us with the agapé with which Jesus loves us.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – loving God

“When they finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs’” (John 21:15).

In perhaps his most poignant conversation, Jesus asks Peter a question: “Do you love me?” We think this question is designed to reveal the heart of Peter (the one who must answer), but maybe it tells us even more about Jesus than Peter, more about God than about us (who must answer today). If Jesus asks “Do you love me?” it must be that Jesus wonders, that Jesus is intrigued by what is in our hearts, that Jesus wants something more than intellectual interest or distant admiration.

In Fiddler on the Roof, Tevye (the ‘papa’ of grown daughters) surprises his wife Golda by asking “Do you love me?” She shakes her head and replies, “For 25 years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, given you children...

there's trouble in the town... Why talk about love now?" But he persists, "Do you love me?" We may do things for God, we may serve in the Church, we may refrain from immortality, study our Bibles and pray now and then: all good, all outward expressions (perhaps!?) of an inward love. But Jesus, like Tevye, presses us: "Do you love me?"

Belief may seem hard enough in a world like ours – and let's face it, God doesn't pop out in the open so we can embrace God or wrap up a present to show our love. But it is good to know that the goal, the relationship sought on God's side, is love, not servility, not nice behavior, not intellectual banter, but something close, personal.

What might draw us into love with Jesus? In our relationships, who is more vulnerable, the one who asks "Do you love me?" or the one who is asked? If you ask, you are entirely vulnerable, because the one asked might look away, or respond with something vague, or the one loved might not love in return (or even wound you) – which is crushing, terribly hurtful to the one who loves and has risked everything by asking. Jesus puts himself in the vulnerable position – which God has always done, no matter how much we fancy God as all-powerful and all-controlling. Jesus loves, God loves, God takes the risk of vulnerability, bearing the possibility of rejection – because God loves, and "love does not insist on its own way" (1 Corinthians 13:5). We may feel vulnerable, our souls are riddled with fears and anxieties. When will we realize that our only security, our true home, is with the God who loves us enough to come down, to love us, to risk whether we love in return or not? How will we answer the only question that matters: "Do you love me?"

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – graven images

"The gods of the people are idols, but the Lord made the heavens" (Psalm 96:5).

Public debate has raged over how public the Ten Commandments ought to be. The very first commandment is daunting, humbling, crowding our lifestyle and mindset more than we might imagine: "You shall have no other gods" (Exodus 20:3). Sounds simple enough, but the embarrassing truth is that the human soul is a "factory of idols" (as John Calvin aptly put it). We stupidly bow down to faked gods that are not God at all, pretenders who usurp the place where only the true, living God should be. What is your "god"? That is, what do you ultimately care about? What will you do literally anything for? What is it that you can't get off your mind? What to you is the fullness of life? What drives your decisions and arouses your passion? False gods promise you heaven; but they cannot deliver, they cannot fulfill, they poison the soul.

In ancient Israel, an uncompromising rule made Israel downright strange compared to all the non-Israelites on the planet: "No graven images." Every other nation had golden bulls, little silver figurines, fantastically carved eagles and massive stone lions to represent their gods. Worshippers weren't unintelligent: they knew the image wasn't really a god! The sculptor was a guy they knew... but they wanted to build the grandest possible image to underscore the greatness of Marduk, Osiris, Ea, Ishtar, Baal, the pantheon of gods who were all about power, military might, economic energy, crushing foes, and fertility.

Israel's God insisted that we get confused about the true God if we reduce that God to something we want, to something we might happen to admire. God is known through what God says, not any 'thing'; and the risk in not listening to the real God and concocting our own images of what we prefer God to be is poignantly described by Eugene Peterson: "We go off and make an image of God that cuts him down to a size that fits what we want in God... The image is a god with all the God taken out of it so that we can continue to be our own gods." Ouch! Wasn't that Adam and Eve's problem, the craving to be god, to be the center of the universe, for it to be all about "me," instead of letting God be God?

The irony is that the God we refuse to notice, who is right in front of our noses, and above the clouds, bigger than any glittering image, is the only real joy, the unshakably solid hope, the deepest desire of our hearts, the truth of the universe. I'm no good at playing like I'm God; I've hoisted the whole world on my shoulders and it's wearing me out. I fawn after money, diversions, baubles, gadgets, experiences, but they leave me hollow. How wise was Martin Luther when he declared that the grace of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is hidden inside the first commandment? The good news? We need no other gods; the one true God is reliable, full of grace and truth, our present delight, our

future destiny: "The gods of the people are idols, but the Lord made the heavens."

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – I am the way

"Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me'" (John 14:6).

Email has the same problem as the Bible: you never can pick up tone of voice, or facial expressions. When Jesus said "I am the way, the truth and the life," were his words punctuated, firm, brows furrowed, using his hands to narrow the scope? Or was he tender, hands outstretched, his heart almost breaking?

We Christians have this notoriously bad habit of taking the words of the Bible and twisting them into a barbed wire fence, to protect ourselves and shut others out, instead of letting God's Word manifest itself as a window flung open, the arms of God's love embracing us. What prompted Jesus to say "I am the way, the truth and the life"? and what might it mean for us?

Consider the context. Jesus is not delivering a dogmatic lecture or conducting a discussion group on the relationship between Christianity and the world religions. He has just finished an ominous dinner, his last with his beloved friends, the room thick with fear and sorrow. He has just washed the confused disciples' feet; they are dazed, forlorn, dimly aware he is about to leave them, and they don't know whether to cling doggedly to him or flee for the exits. To his companions riddled with gloom, Jesus begins: "Let not your hearts be troubled... I go to prepare a place for you." But they plead with him: "We do not know the way."

By "way" they don't mean the one and only thought pattern that purchases salvation; they mean a road, a door, the literal path where Jesus is going. And Jesus, typically (just as he had said "I am the light of the world" to people groping in the dark, "I am the bread of life" to people hungry for bread, "I am the living water" to those with a gnawing thirst in their gut) says "I am the way. Stay close to me, I am the road, the door."

I do not believe Jesus was slamming the security gates of heaven shut to keep the riffraff out. I believe he was comforting the hopeless by saying "Don't despair: there is a way, you aren't stuck down here with nothing but your own resources, I am God come down to carry you on the wings of grace to your destiny." When we listen to Jesus, when we follow him, when we gaze into his heart and mind, we see clearly the character, heart and very being of God. Jesus is not only the way, but also the truth (in a world of lies and deception) and the life (in the realm where death seems to trump in with the final word).

All religions are not the same; not all paths to God are valid. Jesus is the pure, eternally intended revelation of God, the embodied mercy of God. Philip asks him, "Show us the Father," and Jesus did by simply standing there, but then by washing their feet, praying in Gethsemane, forgiving his executors, extending mercy to a common criminal, dying, ushering us into the presence of God. He indeed is the way. "No one comes to the Father but by me."

But notice: Jesus did not say "No one comes to the Father but by that person's faith, spirituality, moral rectitude, right thinking about God, or Church membership." We get confused, and think salvation comes by my stellar decision for God. We are saved by God, not by our religiosity, however noble. We are saved by grace, the free, unmerited favor of God. If this is so, was Jesus saying only Christians who think the right things about him are saved? Wasn't Jesus extending his arms as wide as the world – as wide as the cross? and that is precisely why he is the way?

I do not believe Jesus intended to define ultimate truth about salvation in John 14:6 – although I do believe he is the inescapable truth about God and the way God saves people and the world. But how then do we think about people who don't believe in Christ, who embrace other faiths, who could care less? Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote an insightful book called *Dare We Hope that All Will Be Saved?* He does not claim that everyone will be saved; but he says the Christian (if you have even the faintest grasp on the depth of God's love) has no other option but to hope every person will be saved. No one is dispensable; we never look at him or her or them and say "They are toast." We believe passionately in Jesus; therefore we see even the most vehement unbeliever as someone loved profoundly by God who we hope will save that person. No other thoughts allowed; all notions of condemnation are banished by Love.

And might it be that Jesus is the way even for some who don't accept him – for all sorts of odd reasons? from never having heard about Jesus to only hearing about Jesus from vile people? In his classic Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis wrote, “The truth is, God has not told us what His arrangements about other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.” Is this nonsense? Perhaps – but we hope not; we are the people Jesus taught to hope, to have pure hearts, to get so close to him in his mercy that we become mercy and hope ourselves.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – God’s plan for your life (part 1)

“I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

Recently I finished writing a book called The Will of God. Toward the end of chapter 2, I explore the notion I hear from many Christians – that God has “a plan for my life.” As appealing as this may be, and as caring and personal as God always is, the fact is the Bible just doesn't say a word about God having a blueprint, a script, a “plan” for my life, how I will grow up, whom I will marry, how things will unfold, even when I will die. In a way, such a “plan” might be comforting; but then do we really want to be pawns on God's chessboard, being moved about with no responsibility? And what about when someone does something horrible? Is God planning to lace your life with misery now and then?

If we read Jeremiah 29:11 carefully, we notice that God's “plans for good” are not for Jeremiah, or any other individual. The word “you” (in “the plans I have for you”) is plural; in the South, God would say “the plans I have for y'all.” The future, the hope God gives “you” (“y'all”) is for a crowd, for the community, for the nation. God called Jeremiah to speak God's Word, not to this man or woman, or just to you or me, but to the nation of Israel during its most perilous time in history.

And Israel is not our nation, and Israel isn't just any random nation. Israel is the nation God chose because God wanted to use Israel to save the world. When it appeared Israel was crumbling and probably would cease to exist, God declared that God wasn't through with Israel yet; God's promises to use Israel were not broken, God's purpose to use this nation was not thwarted. God still had plans for you-plural, for y'all together, for the nation.

So who is the “y'all” God has plans for now? Israel? Perhaps. The United States? America just isn't on the Old Testament radar screen. Could it be the Church? Aren't we the “y'all” God promises to use for good? God is not through with the Church, the coalesced body of believers who, by the grace of God, never lose their future, hope, and destined role for the sake of the world. God has plans for the Church – so Church is about being God's instrument, not whether it suits me or entertains me. I never go solo with God; my life in God's plan is interlaced with others in God's “y'all” or not at all. I do not therefore lose my individuality, but I finally discover it when I find my proper place in the Body of Christ.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – God’s plan for your life (part 2)

“I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

In part 1 we began to investigate this eloquent passage from Jeremiah – and the fascinating twist is that the word “you” is plural! God has plans for “y'all,” for us, for the people of Israel, not individuals isolated from everybody else; each one of us is invited to discover the privilege of being a part of God's plan, which involves the whole people of God together. The question isn't “What is God's plan for me?” but “What is God's plan for us?” How good of God, not to make us go it alone, but to give us good company in the life of faith!

I would clarify that this doesn't make God's plan less personal, but more personal. If you are part of a family, or a team, it isn't less personal that you are one among others; there is more love, meaningful sharing, you don't have to bear life alone. Part of God's plan is that "It is not good for you to be alone" (Genesis 2:18); God gives us fellowship, the dizzying privilege of being part of something bigger than just me or my life.

To our Bible students, we plead and cajole: "Context, context, context!" Browse through all of Jeremiah, and then read all of chapter 29 closely. Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian juggernaut has conquered Jerusalem, reducing the city to rubble, marching the few survivors off the live hundreds of miles away in exile. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God advises the people to settle down, to take the long-term view; God will not sweep down in the next 70 minutes to rescue the people. They have, not 70 minutes or 70 days, but 70 years to wait before God acts decisively to redeem the people of Israel.

Seventy years? Who will be around then? Only the youngest children had a chance to live so long. So God's plan cannot be thwarted, but God's plan also isn't instantaneous; stellar patience, a dogged hope, a willingness to cope with unrealized dreams is required of us – and a profound trust in God's good purpose. "Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a single lifetime... therefore we are saved by hope" (Reinhold Niebuhr).

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – knowing God

"Thus says the Lord: 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness, for in these things I delight'" (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

We are taught not to "boast." The braggart blows himself up with the hot air of pretension, cloaking hidden insecurities. And yet there is a good sort of pride, some tag we happily associate ourselves with; our "glory" is that noblest aspect of our life which we gladly will share, which clarifies who we are.

Our problem, as God (through Jeremiah) not so gently suggests, is we get confused, as if we hang from our heels and think up is down, crummy is cool, trash is valuable, and the tragedy of life is we expend ourselves on what glitters but is nothing more than a trap. We take pride in lesser goods, in ourselves, in our stuff, our status, whom we know...

...although at the end of the day, whom we know is all that matters. Not "Did I make great connections to help me get ahead?" or "Did I find Mr. or Ms. Right?" but "Did I know God?" To know God is everything, the gyroscope of grace that orients us, the prize possession you pull out to share with guests. Knowledge of God is a peculiar kind of knowing: not like completing a homework assignment or mastering facts or multiplication tables. Frederick Buechner says that "to know is to participate in, to become imbued with, for better or worse to be affected by. When you really know a person, the knowledge becomes part of who you are; it gets into the bloodstream."

Does knowing God define me? Has it gotten into my bloodstream? What is my prize possession? Some thing? or the things I know of God, the stories of Jesus I recall, the Psalm I read, the moments of prayer and sensing God's presence? Think of anyone you'd count it a privilege to know, and the impact of merely knowing her (or him). Or consider the great thought from the musical *Wicked* ("I know I'm who I am today because I knew you... I have been changed for good"). To know God can be my highest boast, my signal achievement, the most precious gift, what I lift up as defining me: "Let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows God."

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – gossip and speculation

"If anyone thinks he is religious, but does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is vain" (James 1:26).

James, the brother of our Lord, does not merely say that failure to “bridle the tongue” is a little peccadillo; he roundly declares that if you gossip “your religion is vain.” Why? The soul that relishes rumor and murmurs what is secret is out of sync with God in more ways than just this one.

Gossip (even though we all know we shouldn’t gossip!) has its allures. You hear the low-down, it’s usually salacious, and it’s not being spread around to just everybody: it was whispered “just to you, so don’t tell anybody else.” Typically gossip is couched in the disguise of care: “But we’re just concerned.” Mary, the mother of James and Jesus, would have required her sons to memorize Proverbs 18:8 (“The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body”) – a wise warning to them and to us about the enticing nature of a secret disguised as concern.

James says the faithful Christian will “bridle the tongue.” It is just as hard, or perhaps even harder, to “bridle the mind.” Something inexplicable happens, we don’t know the facts, and so guesses and illogical inferences rush into the void; we speculate, we surmise, but then falsehood takes on reality.

What to do when the inevitable urge to speculate pops up like those annoying computer ads? Pray. A guess presents itself, or you actually hear a tidbit of a rumor: stop, slam the door shut, use the time you would have let your mind drift in speculation to pray for the person involved, or even for the gossiper whispering in your ear. James, the brother of our Lord, said “the tongue is a fire” (James 3:6); James, the author of this email, says “the ear is the kindling.” Don’t listen, politely decline to hear or entertain gossip, let the void be filled with prayer and thoughts of God.

To pass along mere rumor, or even damaging facts about someone else, diminishes not merely the object of the whispering, but all of us. Gossip may or may not be factual truth; but it always takes on shades of the lie because of the betrayal of love and respect involved, and it always devastates the soul, and doesn’t exactly please or glorify God.

Perhaps the lone, hidden virtue in gossip is that the gossiper’s frown or lifted eyebrow intimates a moral judgment. If we say “Oh, he cheated on her,” we declare to each other that adultery is a moral disaster, and we not only don’t approve but swear we would never do such a thing. But aren’t there nobler ways to be moral people, to share our ethical stances without the merciless chitchat about someone who isn’t present?

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – spiritual worship

“I appeal to you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1).

On another occasion we reflected together on verse 2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed...” Christianity is no dull conformity; the world that is out of sync with God is all about conformity! The secret to transformation, morphing from the cocoon of a ‘normal’ life to the colorful beauty of life with God is worship.

Worship, at least in this verse from Paul, is not a sequence of motions you go through in a sanctuary. Worship is when we “present our bodies as a living sacrifice.” We attend worship, we enter into it humbly and eagerly – but then we seek the new posture out in the world, a passion of the soul to offer up who I am, all I have, my full-bodied existence to God. I am not my own; I am entirely God’s property. In ancient Israel, if you owned sheep, or grew some wheat, you took the firstborn, the best you had, and gave it to God – as a sign that it all belonged to God, and never was withheld from God’s disposal. How different from our “spare change” approach to giving, our spending mindlessly on our own diversions but being very thrifty in the things of God.

In our culture, obsessed with consuming and “more,” we need to weigh the virtue of sacrifice, ridding ourselves of something precious. Eugene Peterson recently said that “Sacrifice exposes spiritual fantasy as a masquerade of faith. Sacrifice scraps any illusion, no matter how pious, that is spun by the devil. Sacrifice plucks out the avaricious eye. Sacrifice lops off the grasping hand. Sacrifice is a readiness to interrupt whatever we are doing and build an altar, bind whatever we happen to be carrying with us at the moment, place it on the altar, and see what God wills to

do with it.”

In Romans 12, Paul is thinking about ethics, our moral behavior as followers of Jesus. Moral quandaries puzzle us, but they seem far simpler when we think of life as worship. My body, my time, my stuff, my abilities, this decision, that spare hour: all are God’s, all are my pleasure to hand over to God. “Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord to thee” (as the old hymn invites us to pray).

Then (and only then!) comes the transformation. God takes what I offer to God and makes it holy, valuable, places it meaningfully into the plot of God’s adventure on earth; and my life becomes a thing of beauty in God’s eyes. The world may scratch its head and wonder, but then the world might also be drawn to me, to the Church, to God, for instead of a convenient, superficial Christianity, the real thing will be in evidence – and we believe that a life devoted to God is lovely, alluring, persuasive.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – the God of hope

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Romans 15:13).

If we probe the inner meaning of this marvelous verse, we might ask: what does Paul mean when he uses “of hope” to modify “God”? Is it that God is the source of hope? or is God the object of hope? The Giver of hope? or the One hoped in?

Perhaps it is both. Paul could have said “May God fill you...” but he expands upon God and attaches a profound, eloquent new name to the ultimate power of the universe: “the God of hope.” If we know God, if we gaze upon God, if we draw close to the heart of God, then Hope is there, Hope happens, Hope encourages.

What exactly is Hope? Martin Luther King, after some discouraging days, said “I am no longer optimistic, but I remain hopeful.” Optimism is our hunch that things will get better, that we can do better, that tomorrow will be sunnier. We get attached to energetic friends, we pin our fantasies on buoyant leaders – but no individual is big enough, good enough, or smart enough to usher in the dawning of God’s new day. Hope is different from optimism, and hope is superior to optimism: hope isn’t merely about tomorrow, but stretches to the very consummation of time and history. Hope is prepared to weather any storm that might blow in tomorrow or the next day. Hope depends, not on us, but on God.

Hope isn’t something you grit your teeth and muster; hope is not a strong-willed positive attitude in the face of difficulty, or a thing “in the soul with feathers... that never stops” (as Emily Dickinson described it). Hope isn’t a native ability in me; rather, Hope is when I reach up and grab hold of (or let myself be grasped by) what God is doing. Paul clarified this in the second half of the verse: Hope thrives “by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Read the verse again: Hope is in God, and by God’s power we may actually “abound in hope.” Christians are peculiar: “Hope is that characteristic which has in every age most strikingly distinguished the authentic Christian from his pagan neighbours” (C.E.B. Cranfield). We “abound” in hope, our cup overflows, we seem silly-headed to the unhopeful, but our hope cannot be denied since it is God’s Hope, God’s gift, God captivating us into the life of the God whose nickname is Hope.

So what will happen tomorrow? We do not know, but whatever unfolds we can deal with it, or we know and trust the One who can. Will a brilliant leader swoop in on a chariot to save us? No, and we don’t need one, for we have God – or God has us securely in God’s hands.

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – how the mighty have fallen

On hearing the news of the death of two of Israel's most accomplished warriors, Saul and Jonathan, David grieved poetically, and required all of Israel to remember their heroes: "Thy glory, O Israel, is slain upon the hills; how the mighty are fallen! Saul and Jonathan, beloved and beautiful; in life and death they were swifter than eagles, stronger than lions. Daughters of Israel, weep over Saul" (1 Samuel 1).

In similar fashion, on Memorial Day Americans are to remember soldiers felled in battle. Too often, I fear, we cloak their deaths in political rhetoric: "He died so we could be free," or "He gave his life for his country." But I am thinking of the actual moment on the field of combat, and what a young person's death might mean for that person, for their family, and even what such a death might tell us about our life with God.

What might a dying soldier feel? Memory of home, family, the woods where he played, a younger sister? Or of a lover back home? Dreams of just one more hug from dad, one more glass of tea with Grandma? Excruciating sorrow? A noble pride? What moment could bear a more profound paradox than a soldier's final breaths? The darkest, most tragic fate laced by a heroic bravery, a tug of war between courage and terror, the sheer bad luck of being the one hit, the peculiar luck of one nearby who was not hit, one pocket of the mind proud to be privileged to lose everything for love of country, that pocket quickly flooded by the most urgent craving to exit this place and somehow get home?

What of the grief of a mother, father, sibling, spouse, child? I know of no more poignant expression of the grief over the abrupt, inexplicable loss of a loved one than in Homer's Iliad. Andromache, working her loom, heard wailing outside: She trembled. 'I must see what has happened. My heart is in my throat, my knees are like ice. Something terrible has happened; I'm afraid it is my brave Hector. He never held back safe, he always charged ahead, second to none in fighting spirit.' With these words on her lips she ran outdoors like a madwoman, heart racing, pushed through the crowd and saw her husband. Black night swept over her eyes. She reeled backward, gasping, Hector's sisters holding her as she raved madly for death until she caught her breath. 'Hector, you are leaving me in sorrow, with the son you and I bore but cannot bless; there's nothing left in life but pain.'

In the death of any soldier, and in all our grief, what we see, if we look, is the fallen world Christ came to redeem. We are all of us mortal, although we forget until reminded by the sudden loss of someone who one minute earlier seemed invulnerable. And what about the guy on the other side of battle? Is the foe the epitome of evil? Wasn't he also somebody's little boy, somebody who loved home and country, brave and fearful? Why do we human beings have to fight with one another? What flaw in the marrow of our being shoves us into battles? No one loves war: it is a mistake to think we have the peace advocates and their foes are the warriors; who wants peace more than the people who wind up on the front line of battles they didn't choose?

Can we hear the sorrow in Jesus' haunting rumination that "there will be wars and rumors of wars"? Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who told his followers "Put down your sword" (Matthew 26:52), was himself a victim of war, a cold, steely war where Roman regiments executed anybody who seemed to pose a security risk. Jesus walked into no man's land as an unarmed combatant, taking on evil itself, dueling with the devil, invading our fallen world where there is no peace, where mortality ravages, so that at the end of time there would be no more war, no more death, nothing but peace.

His was the "ultimate sacrifice" – and he would have us to remember, to eat bread and drink wine "in remembrance" of him, to let the plea of the thief ("Remember me when you come into your kingdom") which Jesus heard as he struggled on his battlefield echo through time, and to believe that this son of Mary, friend to the despised, the very son of God, was the one who died so we could be free, for our salvation, for peace.

Contemplating his death on the cross, we weep: "How the mighty one has fallen" – but then we thumb forward through God's Word to Paul's stunning words about the destiny of the crucified Jesus: "What is sown perishable is raised imperishable; what is sown in dishonor is raised in glory... We shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. Death is swallowed up in victory!" (1 Corinthians 15).

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eFavoriteBibleVerses – out of the depths

“Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord” (Psalm 130:1).

In Bible times, people lifted their eyes and raised their hands, they climbed to the top of mountains or tall towers, sensing that God was up there, on high, looming above them. But the miracle recorded in Scripture is not that there is a God up there; God is down here, God is most profoundly present down low, not in our sunny moments but in our darkest pit of despair.

During the long night between his arrest in Gethsemane and his sham trial and execution, Jesus spent the night in jail – his prison nothing more than a dark, dank stone hole below the ground. What did Jesus do all night? Did he recall the prayer he learned as a child from his mother? “Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord” (Psalm 130:1).

When we find ourselves in some hole from which we cannot seem to extricate ourselves, where there is seemingly no light or hope, God not only hears from such a low point. God has even entered into the darkest pit imaginable. If you have plummeted into despair, if you have made an awful mistake, if you don't even have the energy left to surrender, God may feel far away. You pray, but after rising only a little ways your prayers tumble harmlessly back to the hard, cold floor. But when your prayers crash around you, the shattered pieces are gathered into the loving arms of God who is lower than your lowest low, for whom the abyss is not really dark at all.

To discover this truth, to be embraced in the powerful tenderness of God's love requires a kind of patience. The Psalm that begins “Out of the depths I cry” continues by declaring “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits” (Psalm 130:5). Jesus was cruelly killed and buried in the depths of the earth, in the same sort of dark stone cave in which he'd spent the previous night. Easter was coming – but those who loved him had to wait. Waiting is hard; we want God to levitate us swiftly out of the pit. But time passes: forever to us in our agony, but the twinkling of an eye to God.

And so in the depths we pray, we wait, we trust, we hope – not for God to show up, but in the very presence of the God who unknown to us was waiting for us when we first slipped down into the dark, sorrowful abyss, who flat out will not leave without us, who would no more leave us desolate in the depths than he would leave his own beloved Son in that grave outside Jerusalem.

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