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TIDINGS

Volume 87, Number 10, November, 2024

DO YOU TAKE JESUS TO WORK?

*All the decisions we must
make about our work begin
by including the Lord.*



Building faith in the
Christadelphian community.

TIDINGS

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E D I T O R I A L

DO YOU TAKE JESUS TO WORK?

Invite the Lord into your work life. Invite him to the conflicts and challenges you are facing. Pray that he will make his way plain before your face. Jesus is willing and capable of solving issues such as excessive work demands.



I'VE been retired for almost six years. It has been wonderful to be relieved of the constant workplace pressures. I thank God for giving me the health and means to retire.

But I must admit that I was, for many years, under the “spell” of my career. I somewhat blindly bought into the idea of developing a career and pursuing my career objectives. Looking back, I can see some value in career management. Developing skills and accomplishing educational requirements qualified me to do interesting work for which I was well-compensated.

However, what was essential for me as a believer was recognizing how career goals would be created and what tradeoffs I would or would not be willing to make. Some of this was pretty straightforward and relatively simple. My wife and I would not accept any opportunity that would isolate our family from an ecclesia. I would not accept any position I believed was a potential compromise to my faith. So, defense industry jobs and certain entertainment-related jobs were not for me. Over the years, some opportunities arose in those industries, and I never regretted turning them down flat. We saw these as faith-based goals that we shared as a believing couple.

Some of the best advice I received from a brother (now asleep in Christ) was to identify my priorities in life clearly. He suggested I prioritize and identify the top five. So, for me, that was being a servant of God first, secondly being a good servant to my wife and family, third providing stability for my family (both geographically

and economically), and then much farther down the list was interesting work and the ability to be part of an excellent work team. Those may be similar or dissimilar to your values, too. Identifying these allowed me to evaluate any opportunity and career path with my faith values leading the way. Looking back, this was the most impactful career advice I ever received.

During my career, I saw countless people make decisions about jobs without adequately contemplating what it would mean to their own values. If the new opportunity was a promotion, they took it, regardless of the impact on their children and extended family. Too often, this led to people taking jobs that represented higher pay but left them and their families miserable.

Lesson Learned

In my own blindness, I often thought that I lived in two worlds. The first was my religious life. This was the one I lived with my family, my ecclesia, and the broader community. My second world was the workplace. I needed to be consistent in my behaviors in both worlds, but I felt that when I was at the workplace, I was pretty much on my own. This was the secular world, and while I was sure God was watching over me, I doubted He was at all concerned with the trivial issues I faced, such as launching new products, meeting our sales quota, or financial solvency. These were all too mundane, too secular for His concern. I had erected a wall in my life where I did the best I could to get through the day, the quarter, the year—on my own.

One Sunday, I was scheduled to exhort to my home ecclesia. The daily reading was on Luke 5, which you may remember is the accounting of several events and teachings that occurred in the ministry of Jesus along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. One miracle really struck me—the fish catch. This is when the disciples had been in their workplace all day (the fishing boat) and were completely exasperated. This narrative rang true to me because, at that time, at my workplace, we were struggling with a new technology that we were attempting to bring to market. No matter how many meetings or long work hours we put in, it seemed we just couldn't move it forward. Maybe the disciples had a similar wall they had constructed? They knew that lake like the back of their hand. They thought they knew where fish could be caught. This knowledge was based on decades of toil and experience on these same waters.

In their frustration, Jesus, who was not a fisherman by trade and from the hill country of Nazareth, told them to “*launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught* [catch].” (Luke 5:4) Peter's reaction to Jesus seemed to be mere compliance. Some versions indicate that instead of lowering the nets (plural) as Jesus had commanded, he instead lowered a net (singular). Of course, the rest of the story is well-known. The fish catch was so abundant that the net broke.

By chance, I decided to look at Bro. Melva Purkis's *A Life of Jesus*,¹ which I had read years before. This book is truly one of the best our community

has ever written, as it paints a vivid picture of our Lord's life. What Bro. Purkis commented on really resonated with me.

Peter was willing to acknowledge the leadership of his new master in spiritual paths, but surely Jesus had nothing to teach him in his daily tasks. Ah, Peter, how wrong you are! How wrong is every disciple who fails to acknowledge Jesus as the master in every walk of life and every place of experience. Unless our surrender is complete, we shall toil all night and catch nothing.

So, yes, Peter, Jesus knows where the fish are. This idea opened up a new way of thinking about the workplace for me. The Lord Jesus Christ is with me at work and knows the way forward through the dilemmas I face. I would be better off asking him to guide me at the workplace than assuming I could figure it out.

Don't get me wrong. We are expected to use our brains and to do honest work. I didn't expect Jesus to reveal a new strategy with the Food and Drug Administration for our new product. But I believed he would provide strength and assurance when others pulled their hair out. When I was having a protracted problem with the deficient performance of an employee or persistent inter-company conflict, I understood I could pray to my Lord and He could show me the way to represent His peace in a world of chaos. He could, symbolically, direct the fish to my net.

This insight directs us back to career management. I now see with great clarity that the Lord was always involved in my career. He brought me into opportunities that I didn't engineer. He guided me through the disappointments and low valleys, from which there were great lessons to be learned. He was always there. He knew what I needed **and what I didn't**. In a way, I identified with Peter's confession, "*Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*" (Luke 5:8). Why hadn't I seen his powerful hand more clearly? Why hadn't I taken the stressors of work to him more frequently in prayer? Why did I limit the Lord?

Advice To Younger Workers

Invite the Lord into your work life. Invite him to the conflicts and challenges you are facing. Pray that he

will make his way plain before your face. Jesus is willing and capable of solving issues such as excessive work demands. He will help you find unity and harmony in work relationships. He has no limitations. Make your own list of top life priorities, and make sure the LORD God is number one. Use this criteria and earnest prayer when making the decisions before you. One of our favorite hymns declares,

Be prayerful my brother
And look to your Maker,
He's promised to help you
And waits for your call;
Just tell him your trouble,
He is the Almighty
There's nothing too big
and there's nothing too small.²



Sadly, when working, we often spend more time with people at our workplace than with our own family. There will always be limited discretionary time and energy for the pursuits that most matter to us. Life requires trade-offs and some concessions, but we cannot compromise our commitment to God.

Later in Luke's gospel, we are introduced to the man with "I-itis." His whole focus in life was to take God's blessings and use them for himself. Look at this man's values in Luke 12:17-19. They are all about material gain, and God is not a primary goal.

And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.

The conclusion of this parable is found in verse 21:

So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

The Lord doesn't condemn us for success in our careers. In fact, whether we have a successful or unsuccessful career is meaningless from a spiritual perspective. But the warning is that

while it isn't wrong to lay up for the future, it cannot be at the expense of our discipleship now. Riches toward God come first. Always.

This principle seems to be useful for our working lives. Most of us are required to work. We approach our work with singleness of heart and not as "menpleasers." (Ephesians 6:5-6). Our time at work becomes a

"workshop" for our spiritual lives, where we learn how to rely on our Lord in all things. All the decisions we must make about our work begin by including the Lord. He knows where to cast the net. Recognize him as the one who holds your full life, including your career, in his hands. Bring him to work with you! He will bless you as he sees fit. These are the behaviors of laying up riches to God now. For the reward he is offering is far greater than rubies or gold.

[God] will help you find unity and harmony in work relationships. He has no limitations.

Dave Jennings

¹ Purkis, Melva, *The Christadelphian*, 404 Shaftmoor Lane, Hall Green, Birmingham, 1964, p. 97.

² Hymn 357, words by Bro. James Stott (1922-1991), music by Bro. Andrew Johnson, Christadelphian Magazine and Publishing Association, Ltd., 2002.

PSALMS FOR THE NIGHT SEASONS

By Nathan Badger

BETRAYAL

BETRAYAL is one of the most devastating forms of pain we can experience. It cuts into our lives like a knife and creates a deep wound. It leaves us feeling hurt, angry, confused, and isolated. Have you ever been betrayed? Have you ever betrayed someone else? Have you ever found yourself tossing and turning through the night, struggling with the aftermath of a betrayal?

The Psalms demonstrate that betrayal fueled many of David's night seasons (Psalm 22:2; 16:7). Betrayal created turmoil, intense pain, and sleepless nights. Thankfully, the Psalms also

share solutions or “night-lights” that David used to heal from betrayal. God sustained him through these seasons and eventually helped him sleep (Psa 3:5; 4:8). As we explore David's experiences, they validate our own struggles and help us illuminate and apply David's solutions.¹

David—A Circle of Betrayal

Three Psalms vividly highlight David's experiences with betrayal. The heading of Psalm 52 informs us that this is “*A Psalm of David, when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul, and said unto him, David is come to the house*

of Ahimelech.” In 1 Samuel 21, David visits Ahimelech, the High Priest at Nob, while on the run from Saul (v. 7). Doeg the Edomite, Saul’s head shepherd, spots David at the tabernacle and reveals his location. Saul then orders Doeg to kill Ahimelech, eighty-five Levites, and the citizens of Nob as punishment for protecting David (1 Samuel 22:9-22). If we were in David’s sandals, how would we feel? Surely very betrayed, despite Doeg being our enemy. David accurately describes Doeg as a man who “lovest evil more than good.” (Psalm 52:3).

The heading to Psalm 54 reads: “A Psalm of David, when the Ziphites came and said to Saul, Doth not David hide himself with us?” Twice, we find David hiding from Saul with the Ziphites in the woods of Hachilah (1 Samuel 23:19; 26:1). Like Doeg, they reveal his location to Saul and encourage him to come and capture David. David escapes both times, but the betrayal of the Ziphites must have caused great misery in his life. Unlike Doeg, the Ziphites were from the tribe of Judah and were, therefore, his own countrymen! No wonder David labels them as “strangers” and “oppressors” (Psalm 54:3) instead of helpers, confidants, and relatives.

In Psalm 55, David laments: “For it is not an enemy who taunts me—then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—then I could hide from him.” (v. 12 ESV). Who is this person who defamed and betrayed David? The next verse reveals some clues: “But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together,

within God’s house we walked in the throng.” (vv. 13-14). David summarizes the events of 2 Samuel 15 when his son Absalom organizes an enormous coup against David, and he is forced to flee Jerusalem with his family to escape certain death. Sadly, as described in this Psalm, Absalom enlists the support of Ahithophel, David’s friend and chief counselor (2 Samuel 16:23). At this news, David weeps bitterly (2 Samuel 15:30-31), and his heart was “sore pained within me.” (Psalm 55:4).

These three Psalms describe David’s painful experiences of betrayal. But it is important to remember that David was also a betrayer. Ahithophel was likely the grandfather of Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:3; 2 Samuel 23:34). By adultery and murder, David had disgraced both. Ahithophel must have grieved this insult for years and repaid it during Absalom’s coup. In addition, Eliam and Uriah (Bathsheba’s father and husband) were two of David’s top mighty men (2 Samuel 23:34, 39). Both men were traumatically betrayed by David, as were David’s family and the entire nation of Israel.

Understanding Betrayal

It is helpful to understand what betrayal means. The Hebrew word for “betray” is *rammah*, meaning cast, shoot or hurl down. The Greek word *paradidomi* means to give into the hand of another. Both describe the trauma we feel when betrayed. We feel like we are thrown down like a piece of trash, shot by a bow or handed over to an enemy.

Betrayal is often defined as a sense of harm experienced from a violation of trust. Trust is a key element in betrayal.



We feel terribly “thrown down” because our trust has been violated or destroyed. As a result, betrayal typically triggers feelings of rejection, abandonment, self-doubt, and aloneness. It implies that the betrayer does not hold the relationship in high regard and is acting selfishly.

Betrayal comes in many forms. It can arise from not feeling prioritized, supported, reciprocated, or remembered. It may involve breaking confidentiality, privacy, or moral standards. We betray when we lie, deceive, gossip, defame, or disclose information to someone else that causes damage. Public humiliation or ridicule, such as on Facebook, other social media, or the workplace, can also evoke feelings of betrayal. Infidelity (i.e., having an affair), absence, disrespect, or even work layoffs also cause us to feel betrayed. Even addictions (alcohol, pornography, drugs) and mental health challenges can leave us feeling betrayed. The physical, emotional, and mental impacts of betrayal are well-documented and not to be trivialized. When we are betrayed, we may experience guilt, loss of self-esteem,

grief, trauma (e.g., PTSD), panic attacks, difficulties trusting, thoughts of suicide, physical pain, nightmares, anxiety and depression and mental disorders. Even denial can be used as a coping mechanism. In severe cases, healing may require professional help from a doctor or therapist.

Night Lights for Betrayal

How do we respond if we feel betrayed? Psalms 52, 54, and 55 capture David’s experiences with betrayal and some of the “night-lights” or solutions he utilized to illuminate a path of healing and recovery. I have included below six “night lights” from these Psalms.

1) Anger

Each of the Psalms captures the intense anger David felt when betrayed. Phrases such as “*Destroy... and divide their tongues*” (Psalm 55:9), “*let them go down quick into hell*” (Psalm 55:15), and “*bring them down to the pit of destruction*” (Psalm 55:23) are a little shocking. However, betrayal can be wicked, nasty, and extremely hurtful. David’s imprecations indicate his deep upset and desire to create a God-fearing kingdom.

Anger is a God-given emotion. The key is what we do with it. David encourages us to *“Be angry, and do not sin, ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.”* (Psalm 4:4 ESV), as he demonstrates in these Psalms. Sharing our anger with God can be therapeutic and is a helpful way of processing this emotion healthily. The goal is to release the pressure, refocus our minds, and dispel our anger as soon as possible so that we do not sin and achieve peace in our minds and in our beds at night. God wants to hear our troubles and encourages us to *“cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee.”* (Psalm 55:22).

2) Space

David’s betrayals forced him to pine for an exit plan. We see this when he cries out: *“Oh that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away, and be at rest; yes, I would wander far away; I would lodge in the wilderness.”* (Psalm 55:6-7 ESV). Eventually, David acts on his thoughts and flees Jerusalem from the conspiracy of violent men who are about to take the lives of him and his family (2 Samuel 15:15-19; 17:22).

This reaction may seem like escapism, but removing ourselves from a betrayer is often helpful, especially if their behavior is damaging. This space allows tensions to cool, refocus, let the storm pass, heal, and de-escalate. Ultimately, this “space” may also provide opportunities for reconciliation and restoration of

the relationship rather than allowing it to erode further. At times, creating space is imperative, particularly when addictions or abuse threaten our safety.

3) Retaliation

When we are betrayed, it is tempting to take matters into our own hands and retaliate or vindicate ourselves. We may gossip, slander, or even impose the same hurt and pain we felt on our betrayer. David’s solution was very different: *“But I call to God, and the LORD will save me... he hears my voice.” “God will break you down forever; he will snatch and tear you from your tent.” “O God, save me by your name, and vindicate me by your might.”* (Psalm 55:16-17; Psalm 52:5; Psalm 54:1 ESV). Instead of retaliating or escalating things, he hands the betrayers over to God and lets God deal with them.

David backs up his words with actions. As he scrambles from Jerusalem, he meets Shimei, a relative of Saul. Shimei curses him incessantly and throws dust and rocks at David and his men—a bold betrayal against his king and soldiers! While Abishai threatens to cut off Shimei’s head, David’s

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response is to hand this treachery to God. His restraint is stunning: *“Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the LORD has told him to. It may be that the LORD will look on the wrong done to me, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing today.”*

(2 Samuel 16:11-12 ESV). When we are betrayed, we can trust that God hears our pleas for help and believe that vengeance and vindication are God's prerogative despite all we have endured.

4) Tongue

One of the most damaging weapons of betrayal is the tongue! David illustrates this when he describes Ahithophel: *"The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart; His words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords."* (Psalm 55:21 NKJV). Shimei's curses

were equally violent. Scathing words are also spoken of Doeg: *"Your tongue plots destruction, like a sharp razor, you worker of deceit. You love... lying... and all words that devour, O deceitful tongue."* (Psalm 52:2-4 ESV).

Do we do the same with our own tongues? It is quite easy to lash out at our betrayer and be a "razor tongue" like Doeg and Shimei or "double-tongued" like Ahithophel. But David is counseling us to be different than his betrayers. We can easily "slay" others with our words, gossip, or add slander and start fires that burn down relations and even ecclesias.



David also describes how “*tongues*” were the cause of the “*violence, strife... ruin... and fraud.*” (Psalm 55:9-11 ESV) that erupted in Jerusalem during Absalom’s coup. Many had joined the betrayal, propagating rumors, lies, and hatred within the walls. Like Jerusalem, do we “join the coup” and speak words and stories against others that are akin to starting a war? Proverbs counsels us with sound advice: “*He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him.*” (Proverbs 18:13 NKJV). If we are outside of someone else’s betrayal, we must understand the matter thoroughly before speaking—and better yet, not speak at all!

5) Trust

The Psalms use the word “trust” seventy-one times—the most of any book. In Hebrew, this word means to feel safe or confident with and to take refuge or security in. It conveys a sense of intimacy, closeness, and protection. This sense is apparent when the Psalmist uses it several times to describe us as chicks under the shelter of God’s wings (Psalm 36:7; 61:4; 91:4). Trust lies at the heart of betrayal. David reveals this when he describes Ahithophel’s infidelity: “*My companion stretched out his hand against his friends; he violated his covenant..*” (Psalm 55:20 ESV). “*Even my own close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.*” (Psalm 41:9 ESV). In other words, Ahithophel destroyed trust and close friendship by violating promises. Rather than being a source of intimate refuge, David felt like his chief counselor had drop-kicked him!

The Psalms emphasize trust because God wants us to build trusting relations with each other and Him. We often hear the expression, “Just trust me.” However, research shows trust doesn’t generally happen this way. If we want to be trusted, we must prove ourselves trustworthy. In other words, trust is earned. Someone is trustworthy when a) their words can be trusted, b) their actions can be trusted, and c) when their actions match their words. It means we are reliable, have integrity, are sincere, accountable, committed, confidential, consistent, and respect boundaries. Are we trustworthy people? Do we build relationships with trustworthy people? Is our ecclesia a trustworthy refuge where we can be vulnerable with each other?

Trustworthiness also describes God’s character. We want to emulate this trait! If we feel we cannot trust anyone and have been betrayed, the Psalms and David show we can always trust God: “*But I will trust in thee.*” (Psalm 55:23) “*I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever.*” (Psalm 52:8). Are we building our trust in God, who is forever a safe wing to shelter under?

6) Forgiveness

I believe forgiveness is the most important “night-light” to betrayal. Despite Shimei’s unfathomable treatment of David, he later humbles himself, apologizes for his treacherous behavior, and is graciously pardoned by David: “*Thou shalt not die.*” (2 Samuel 19:18-23). These are the exact words Nathan offered David when he admitted his sin with Bathsheba and Uriah and are a stunning illustration

of Christ's command to "*Love your enemies, bless them that curse you.*" (Matthew 5:44).

Forgiveness is intentionally letting go of resentment, anger, and hurt. It follows Christ's commands and example, releases us from the power of bitterness, restores our mental, physical, and spiritual health, and allows us to move forward with peace and hope. It does not require an apology from our betrayer and is not necessarily "forgetting"—lessons may need to be learned, and there may be consequences to the betrayal. It is not the same as reconciliation, though this should be the goal. If we have been betrayed, have we forgiven? If we are the betrayer, have we asked forgiveness from both God and those suffering from our actions?

"One of You Will Betray Me"

Take another look at Psalm 55. Who do these words remind you of? "*For it was not an enemy who reproaches me... But it was you, a man my equal, my companion... we took sweet counsel together, and walked to the house of God in the throng.*" (Psalm 55:12-14 NKJV). David is describing Ahithophel, but the words are also Messianic. They describe Jesus's experiences when betrayed by his friend Judas. Jesus had predicted this sad treachery while he shared the Last Supper with his disciples: "*One of you shall betray me.*" (John 13:21).

Painfully, Jesus knew what it meant to be betrayed by a close friend, even to death! He was also betrayed by other friends, family members, and fellow Jews. Sometimes, we all betray our Lord when we behave in a manner that does not demonstrate our close friendship and love for him.

We experience betrayal, so we intimately know what Jesus experienced during his betrayals. And Jesus experienced betrayal so that he can be "*touched with the feelings of our infirmities*" (Hebrews 4:15) when we are devastated by betrayal. The Psalms aided Jesus as he responded to his betrayals—just as they can benefit us. They taught Jesus he could trust God completely, that vengeance and retaliation were to be left to God; he held his tongue and shared his pain and agony with God. Ultimately, they taught Jesus what he demonstrated on the cross: "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*" (Luke 23:34).

If we are losing sleep because of betrayal, may we, like David and our Lord, be helped through this night season by turning to the light of the Psalms.

*Nathan Badger,
Cambridge Ecclesia, ON*

¹ Note that this is the third article on "Psalms for the Night Seasons," with the previous being published in April and September of 2023.

ECCLESIAL SUPPORT FOR PERSONAL WITNESSING

Each of us provides exclusive contact points for those we interact with. Just like the uniqueness of a fingerprint, no two disciples have the same reach.

By Dave Jennings



IT strikes me that the Lord Jesus Christ could have organized the Great Commission in so many ways. However, it was by Divine wisdom that each disciple of Christ, regardless of perceived capability, would embrace personal witnessing as an intrinsic part of their spiritual life. The benefit of witnessing is unique in that it benefits both the hearer and the one doing the witnessing. When faced with fear and uncertainty in conversations with

friends and colleagues, we learn to trust our Lord. We understand we can overcome our inadequacies because Christ strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). When we trust in him and do his work, we gain spiritual effervescence that builds our faith.

Somewhere in Christadelphian history, it seems we started thinking of preaching as being carefully organized and executed ecclesial programs, often done by our most capable speakers.

Undoubtedly, these programs have been highly effective in many cases, and God has blessed us with men and women who have open hearts and minds and have heard our witness. But hasn't it always been that more intimate personal witness was the most effective way to connect people to our God?

An Inextricable Part

Each of us provides exclusive contact points for those we interact with. Just like the uniqueness of a fingerprint, no two disciples have the same reach. Each will have distinctive touch points at work, in our neighborhood, with our family, and in the local community. You are the light in each of those scenarios, offering to illuminate their room of darkness. The Lord Jesus Christ knows this. He will prepare you to be the conduit for his truth as he searches for men and women with open and contrite hearts in our community. It is his work. Paul spoke of the responsibility each believer has for witnessing. It all starts with prayer.

Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart. Pray for us, too, that God will give us many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ. That is why I am here in chains. Pray that I will proclaim this message as clearly as I should. Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone. (Colossians 4:2-6 NLT).

All personal preaching must start with earnest prayer. Such prayers ask God to open our eyes to discover opportunities to witness to others. We ask Him to help us see the doors He is opening for speaking a word. We ask Him to lead us to these people. Then, we ask for courage and strength to speak. We must look for His direction when we pray to our God for such opportunities. As Paul said, we want to “*make the most of every opportunity.*”

But Paul mentions another, perhaps underused, aspect of preaching. We need to pray for each other to be able to witness. Now, the Apostle Paul had already been told he was a chosen vessel, one who was to bear the name of Jesus Christ before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15). Still, the Apostle counted it great gain when his brothers and sisters petitioned God to help him proclaim the gospel. Further, Paul asks the Colossians to pray that he might “*proclaim this message as clearly as I should.*” This request was made as he lay in chains in Rome! Prayers for preaching the gospel were part of first-century fellowship. It connected all members of the community in purpose and service. It helped everyone to know they could contribute.

I suspect there may be very few of us who have sustained our own prayers for a “*door of utterance*” (Colossians 4:3 KJV) to be opened for our fellow brothers and sisters. Some may remember and bless the work of our missionary families. But it would be unusual, in my experience, for us to think about praying for our brother

and sister to be given opportunities to proclaim the Word. How wonderful it would be to know that when we are anxious about speaking to a neighbor, we have others praying for us. We can share that fellowship daily, not only when we meet for worship services.

What Can Ecclesias Do?

Healthy ecclesias, as Bro. Roberts commented in *The Ecclesial Guide*, should keep a balance of focusing on the edification of members and the promulgation of the gospel to those outside. Accepting that personal witnessing may be the most effective way for us to preach, ecclesias would do well to provide practical “how to” education and encouragement to members about personal witnessing. Beyond expounding on the Biblical admonition to preach, ecclesias can teach members how to generate spiritual conversations with friends and colleagues. This effort requires having a genuine interest in others. It starts with just being friendly! We look for common ground, areas, or experiences where we may share a common interest. These “connections” provide openings to share a small thought or make a spiritual observation.

Once we have provided education to our members (I recommend including young people), it would be helpful for ecclesias to keep personal witnessing as an ongoing agenda item. Some church denominations find it useful for leaders to develop messaging on critical issues in the news. What is a message we might have on the Gaza War, the upcoming elections, gun violence, social injustice, or environmental threats? Members might find it extremely helpful to

discuss what we consider saying to our friends and colleagues.

Ecclesias would benefit from classes on first principles, focusing on wresting some of the false doctrines known in other churches. For example, classes on how to discuss Satan and the Devil with a friend would be extremely valuable.

One of the most important things an ecclesia can do is offer ecclesial classes, talks, and events that would attract members to invite friends and colleagues. Compelling talks on relevant and current concerns would greatly help someone wanting to introduce a friend to the ecclesia. Social events, like a pancake breakfast, a barbeque, or a charity car wash, can be an excellent way to introduce interested friends to the ecclesia. It would be ideal to have an event each month that members would be excited to invite their friends to.

Talk Together

When we see personal witnessing as a significant part of our faith lives, discussing our experiences is valuable. It is common to share insights from reading the Word or even lessons in applying the gospel to our lives. It encourages us to hear others also get an elevated heartbeat when before a judge explaining why we abstain from jury duty. Or to listen to a success story of how a brother or sister has been speaking with a neighbor who seems to be showing interest. The fact is our conversations in the truth are usually aimed at strengthening one another in the main focus areas of our lives. Let's elevate our personal witnessing stories to such a level. Surely, we can encourage and strengthen one another and share

ideas that might be just what you want in your interactions with friends and colleagues. Ecclesias would find a way to bring personal witnessing and the experiences of our members to the ongoing agenda for our consideration.

This Special Series

We are thankful to the writers of this special series on personal witnessing.

- In February, Bro. Joe Hill provided a Biblical review of how preaching was accomplished in Bible times. This effort was helpful as it reminded us that preaching is the core of who we must be as believers.
- In March, Bro. Peter Hemingray surveyed preaching efforts in North America over 170 years. This series reminded us of the personal creativity and passion brothers and sisters have had for sharing their faith. It has made huge differences in the conversion of many and strengthened our Christian community.
- In May, Bro. Jeff Gelineau reminded us that our own story may be an extremely powerful witness. Simply sharing what the gospel has meant to you and your family is a wonderful place to start conversations.
- In June, Bro. Martin Webster shared an excellent article on the fears and joys of witnessing. In it, he provided valuable insights into overcoming fear through humility and love. He called on all of us to look for ways to spread the word in our communities.

- In September, Bro. Darren Tappouras shared his thoughts on preaching readiness. He demonstrated that all preparation for preaching starts with earnest prayer. It calls for a partnership with the Divine!
- In our October issue, Bro. John Bilello reminded us that in all preaching, we must acknowledge our sufficiency is of God. We are doing His work, and what we accomplish is through His strength, not our own. Bro. John also called on the community to rethink how we might harness technology to promote the Word effectively.

We were also honored to have four brothers and sisters share their personal stories of how they came to the truth. We thank them for sharing their insights and celebrate their presence in our community today.

May we all pause for a moment and prayerfully think about people in our lives to whom we might purposely reach out? Let's begin by petitioning our LORD to show us opportunities to preach, making them plain before our face. Let us all commit to speaking a "*word in season*." Someone touched our lives, and it has brought us unspeakable joy. By God's grace, may we also offer a cup of cold water to someone else who is terribly thirsty.

Dave Jennings

HOW DO YOU SUPPORT YOUR WIFE SPIRITUALLY?

I hope to provide an objective look at the qualities I initially overlooked when presented with this question, which I think sometimes we as a community can ignore.

By Josiah Hewitson



FOR someone who usually has a lot to say, I have found it exceptionally hard to put into words my thoughts on the topic of this article. When asked if I could write an article on what I did to support my wife spiritually, my initial response was the same as any time I have to talk about myself: one of self-deprecation. This reaction has actually made it difficult to objectively examine

my actions in a way that would make something meaningful for you to read. I doubt anyone reading this wants to hear about how often I fail to be the one who suggests we do the daily readings or how I often mock the idea of listening to a class by saying I don't want to be yelled at by a particular angry brother. Yet, those shortcomings were all I could think of. How could I, who was so bad

at doing the things we as a community have set as the standard actions to live by, give advice or thoughts that would not sound hypocritical or proud? After many starts and stops and many months, I think where I have landed is that I am not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but there are some things I get at least a passing grade in, and it's in those things that I want to focus on.

While I whole-heartedly endorse and encourage you to be the leader in your household who picks up the Bible and gets everyone to do the readings, Bible study, or listen to talks, I am not going to focus on those things because I personally don't see this as an area that I can give credible advice in. Instead, I hope to provide an objective look at the qualities I initially overlooked when presented with this question, which I think sometimes we as a community can ignore. To that end, I want to write about leading others by submitting to them. I know, at first, that sounds a little counterintuitive. However, I think it's one of the pillars that has helped my relationships, not just with my wife but also in the ecclesia. So, to that end, I want first to share what I think leadership by submitting is, and then share some examples I see in my relationship with my wife. Hopefully, in all this, we can grow in our service, not just to our spouses, but to our family and communities and ultimately to our Creator.

First, what do I mean when I say leading by submitting? The idea of submitting to each other is pretty clear

in Scripture. I will let you dive into all the verses that talk about submitting, but just these three, Ephesians 5:21, 1 Corinthians 16:16, and 1 Peter 5:5, provide an obvious summary. 1 Peter 5 specifically paints a picture where we must be *"clothed in humility towards one another."* In 1 Corinthians 16:16 (NASB), we are told to *"be subject to such as these and to everyone who helps in the work and labors."* In Ephesians 5:21(NASB), Paul states, *"and subject yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ."* So submitting, putting others first and acting humbly towards each other seems like a pretty clear command. But how do you couple that with leading? I found myself often trying to puzzle this concept out, as my father instilled in me the need to lead others and not let them lead you astray. So, how can we do both things, submit to each other, and also lead? The answer comes in many verses and is found in phrases such as *"a soft answer turns away wrath,"* (Proverbs 15:1 ESV), in building each other up, in exhorting each other, in having the peace that passes understanding. It's having the character of Christ, which was rooted in faith and in how we approach this life in meekness and humility. It's in knowing our weakness and, as I have often sung to myself, knowing that "I could be wrong." I would say leading by submitting is being willing to support others and their ideas even when you don't always think it's the best way forward. A good example of this from Scripture might be Christ's ability to work with his apostles, even when their plan forward wasn't his. For

example, Peter cut off Malchus's ear in the garden. Christ doesn't stop Peter from bringing a sword or from even striking the servant, but he does heal the servant and rebuke Peter afterward. Sometimes, it's the ability to sing backup vocals to someone else's lead singing that's needed in life. It is the idea that sometimes our relationships with people are often more important than the outcomes of whatever we are doing; we set aside what we think should happen in preference to how it happens. I believe this can be hard for some people to do, while it comes naturally for others. I know personally it can be extremely hard to give up my expectation of an outcome in favor of helping someone else in their efforts, but hopefully, we can start to see how this works with some examples specifically from my life and supporting my wife spiritually.

I often find that when it comes to my ecclesial and married life, I am not leading from the front. I have found that if someone else knows what they want to do, I am good at finding the

wanted to do it was all she needed. This realization has been a long learning process for me because I am naturally a problem solver. So, separating the sounding board from the requests for help hasn't always been smooth on my part. However, I will say that some of my happiest moments have been seeing what my wife can accomplish when she sets herself to the task and being there to encourage, listen, support, and suggest. It has been a privilege and an area critical to our spiritual growth. While I might want to take charge in those situations, to tell my wife how I think she should run things or how she should handle situations, I find that frequently all she needs is someone to help her think through the situation, talk through options, and help her organize her thoughts. By no means do I say I always do this, but the times she feels supported the most are when I have been able to give an attentive ear to listen and haven't just rushed to provide my thoughts or ideas.

This method is also true in ecclesial life. Sometimes, I can be so quick to

Sometimes our relationships with people are often more important than the outcomes of whatever we are doing...

things that support them in their efforts. As an example, Jenny has run multiple Vacation Bible Schools during our marriage, and while I was not present at many of them due to work, I was there in the months and weeks leading up to them. Often, just being the sounding board as she worked through what she wanted to do and how she

offer my thoughts and ideas that I miss the need in the ecclesia for someone to merely listen to others, hear their ideas, and provide godly advice.

Another aspect of leading in service comes in the act of anticipating needs. When I have the most helpful impact on others is when I am there to support them before they themselves even



know they need it or ask for it. Being able to anticipate the needs of others can be a tricky skill to learn but it has the potential to be the most impactful tool we have to support each other, both spiritually and physically. For instance, seeing that a craft project will generate a lot of waste, it would be useful to find a trash bag or trash can and start collecting the trash before it becomes a big issue, which can make an enormous difference in how well the craft goes. There are all sorts of examples of this. Making dinner when you know that the afternoon activities will run late. Providing coffee or tea in the morning to help start the day. Finding the right tool to help finish a job. Showing up or volunteering to transport people before being asked. All it takes is a knowledge of the situation and the person you are working with and a desire to make a difference. These actions can make or break someone's day or perception of an event.

Just think of all the times when you finish an arduous task only to find all the tools you used now need to be cleaned and put away. How much better is it when you see someone has already started the work cleaning up for you? In these acts of service, of anticipation, we find our best service to each other. Just consider the parable of the slave and master. When the slave comes in from the field, the master doesn't tell them to eat, instead instructing them to clothe themselves and feed the master, and then feed themselves. *"So you too, when you do all the things which were commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'"* (Luke 17:10 NASB).

This idea brings me to my last point: the impact the simple act of being willing to be the sole provider for my family makes. Before I dive in here, I don't want you to think that I am saying that the husband has to be the breadwinner or the husband has to be the only breadwinner. I also don't want you to think I am saying that we have been blessed this way or as if it was my ability or skill that has allowed this. I will say that we made the choice early on in our marriage that we wanted to raise a family where Jenny was at home with the kids and I worked. God has graciously allowed us to continue with that choice for almost sixteen years. As I considered how I supported my wife spiritually, I think one of the greatest pillars of support, which has probably done the most in allowing her to grow spiritually, has been God blessing us with the ability to have one income to provide for our household. He has allowed that provision to come through me. This situation, in turn, has allowed Jenny to homeschool our children, take them on trips and visits, run and support various VBSs and Bible Schools, and generally do the activities we would consider critical in raising the children God blessed us with. She has grown spiritually as she has led our children through their education, helped others in all sorts of ways physically and spiritually, and worked to support various ecclesial functions.

I certainly don't think this is the only way to live, and I know other families grow and live in different ways, but I know that this has worked well for us and has helped Jenny grow into

the wonderful woman she is today. If you find yourself looking for ways to support your wife and community, sometimes just choosing to go to work every morning, to put the hours in, to make the small choices day after day to build a foundation for your life, that can have a profound impact on your family. Serving others can be as simple as just providing a stable foundation for your family to build and grow from.

Of course, sometimes God does not make it possible for a family to operate as ours has, with the husband as the breadwinner. But that does not take away the husband's responsibility to support his wife spiritually. If your wife is contributing to the family finances, be proactive in appreciating her efforts. If she comes home from work exhausted, prayerfully look for ways to lighten her load, anticipating her needs as only a husband can. If kids need to be dropped off or picked up or extra chores need to be done, these can all be God-given opportunities for a husband to provide for his family in ways we might not consider at first.

In conclusion, the Bible is full of farmers whose names we don't know but who we know were faithful. They devoted their lives to God and spent their days tending their crops. It's okay not to

be the big-name speaker traveling all over giving classes, not to be the writer who authors terrific books on Biblical topics, or the missionary out working in other lands. Not all of us are called to do these things. Sometimes, we just need to be the farmer, trusting in God day in and day out, who tends his field and supports his family. Sometimes, it's just the simple acts of service that can help us propel others to greater heights and help us grow into vines bearing good fruit. Sometimes, the small steps are the most important, and submitting to others in love can help everyone grow. It's in the acts of service that we find the

character that Christ asked us to have. As Galatians 5:13 (ESV) says: "*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love.*"

*Josiah Hewitson,
Ann Arbor Ecclesia, MI*

It's okay not to be the big-name speaker traveling all over giving classes, not to be the writer who authors terrific books on Biblical topics, or the missionary out working in other lands. Not all of us are called to do these things.

SPIRITUAL DESERT

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days and years of early motherhood.
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*If I was going to live in a spiritual desert,
I needed to be fed directly from God.*

By Nancy Brinkerhoff

AS we studied the responses from the 2024 *Tidings Moms Survey*, the phrase “spiritual desert” came up again and again. Those early years of motherhood really can feel like being exiled to the wilderness! Fortunately, the Bible has much to say about life in the desert, both naturally and spiritually. So, when we find ourselves there, we might be in good company.

What Is a Desert?

In natural terms, a desert is characterized by what it lacks. There is little to no natural growth and few human systems to provide for human needs. Life outside the desert is full of useful structures—structures we don’t even think much about to meet our basic needs. In Bible times, this would include walled cities with neighbors, wells and nearby farmland. All of these are lacking in the desert. In modern times we have created different structures to meet the same needs — electricity, running water, and Wi-Fi, for example.

Spiritually, we also create useful systems to help address each other’s needs. Our ecclesias meet regularly for study, worship, and fellowship. We have seasonal and yearly events and special activities for specific groups like teens or sisters. They are all helpful structures for civilized, non-wilderness life. But they are missing in the desert of new parenthood.

Suddenly, a young mom finds that the structures she was accustomed to have fallen from under her. Months can go by without a drop of spiritual sustenance. Sunday services can become a sleep-deprived nightmare of dodging dirty looks while shushing little ones if

regular attendance is even possible. Events like study weekends or Bible schools go from enjoyable fellowship opportunities to grueling feats of endurance. (Please, please, please — never tell a mom of a toddler that being at Bible school is a glimpse of God’s Kingdom!) All these lovely structures, so helpful to our brothers and sisters who are not in the wilderness, can be less than useless for life in the desert.

Yet we know that time in the wilderness is a tool our loving God has used for spiritual growth throughout the Bible. Can we benefit from being in the desert?

Life in the Wilderness

Think of the various people who spent time in the wilderness. Moses and the children of Israel wandered forty years in the desert. David spent time in the wilderness both literally and spiritually when he was on the run from Saul. Elijah was sent to a lonely ravine by God, then later retreated to the desert again. In the New Testament, Jesus, Paul, and John the Baptist are all recorded as spending time alone in the desert.

These wilderness stories are instructive. In a surprising number of cases, the Bible records precise details about how people had their needs met while away from typical man-made systems. After the exodus from Egypt, for example, God’s provision of manna is carefully detailed (Exodus 16:14-36). Other familiar narratives describe the supply of quail (Exodus 16:11-13) and the regular provision of water (Exodus 15:22-27, 17:1-7, Numbers 20:2-6). When Elijah is sent to the wilderness, he is also given food directly from

God using birds (1 Kings 17:5-6). Later, when he runs back to the desert to escape Ahab and Jezebel, we are specifically told an angel came to him with bread and water (1 Kings 19:5-6). Jesus' time in the wilderness included fasting (Matthew 4:2), but we are also told how God provided angels (and, for some reason, wild animals, Mark 1:13) to accompany him.

These stories of life in the desert share some common threads. Sometimes, in the wilderness, away from man-made systems, God allows His people to suffer and lack. Other times, He provides for them directly.

There are times when we lack and times when God meets our needs directly. Could these be true of our own stretches in the desert?

A Personal Example

I know this was my story. Like many new moms, I was knocked flat by those days and years of early motherhood. I distinctly remember the moment I realized that if I was going to have any spiritual growth at all in the foreseeable future, I needed to find new ways to make it happen. If I was going to live in a spiritual desert, I needed to be fed directly from God.

For me, this looked like setting aside afternoon nap times for prayer and Bible study. I finally got serious about a prayer journal. When it was hard to relax my mind and body to pray, I got back into knitting to keep my hands busy. I love the memories of those quiet afternoons alone in my rocking chair, knitting and praying or exploring new Bible versions to read.



I began bringing a stroller to meeting on Sundays. If babies or toddlers were too cranky, we would just head outside. I learned to treasure those walks in the sunshine, praying alone while the youngest finally drifted off to sleep, finding a different kind of spiritual peace on a stressful Sunday morning.

Of course, these are just one mom's wilderness survival strategies—specifically, a highly introverted mom with a loving, supportive husband and a fondness for handcrafts. Remember, Elijah didn't receive manna, John the Baptist was not fed by ravens, and only Jesus was met by angels and animals. The ways that God meets you in the desert will be different from mine. But it is certain He can find a way to feed you Himself when you are snatched away from your comfortable, man-made systems.

Desert Reality

But there will still be times when we are lacking. The wilderness narratives of the Bible make that clear. We may be allowed to grow severely parched before God shows us the water. We may have to fast sometimes in the wilderness and simply go without. It is okay to admit that, even with manna direct from heaven, we still struggle in the desert.

One of the sons of Korah experienced time in a spiritual desert.

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? (Psalm 42:1-2).¹

Here, the Psalmist blends spiritual thirst with physical thirst. Sometimes, in the desert, we are just thirsty, and we can't find God.

My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" (Psalm 42:3).

There is something so poignant about this admission. Our times in the desert are so often made worse by the thoughtless words of people around us. Some things haven't changed in 3,000 years.

These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One, with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng. (Psalm 42:4).

In case we missed the metaphor, the Psalmist spells it out. This is not just a physical desert but a spiritual one, too. His (or maybe her?) non-wilderness life included meeting and worshipping with others. Here in the desert, all that is gone.

Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. (Psalm 42:5).

This is life in a spiritual desert—times we lack, and times when we can be personally and directly fed by God.

Allured in the Desert

As a mom considering my own time in the wilderness, I think it may be fitting that perhaps the most beautiful Bible passage about desert life is specifically feminine. In the odd, romantic book of Hosea, God describes Himself as desiring to win back His bride.

Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards... There she will respond as in the days of her youth. (Hosea 2:14-15).

The idea of being allured by the Almighty God is breathtaking enough, but look at the setting—in the wilderness! There, away from the traditional systems of spiritual activity, the bride can focus completely on the Bridegroom. There, He will allure and speak tenderly. And, of course, there, her needs will be provided for, this time with vineyards.

“In that day,” declares the Lord, “you will call me ‘my husband;’ you will no longer call me ‘my master.’” (Hosea 2:16). Somehow, there in the wilderness, a new level of intimacy is possible.

I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord. (Hosea 2:19-20).

Of course, Hosea’s Israel had completely different man-made religious systems, far more broken than ours. But the covenant of betrothal offered to her is the same one we have been amazingly privileged to join (Romans 9:24-26). It just may take some time in the desert.

I will show my love to the one I called ‘Not my loved one,’ I will say to those called “Not my people,” “You are my people;” and they will say, “You are my God.” (Hosea 2:23).

And so, however long your time in a spiritual desert, may you learn to be fed directly from God. May you survive the times of lack without losing your faith. And, perhaps, may you even be allured by Him and hear his tender words yourself, there in the wilderness.

*Nancy Brinkerhoff,
Denver Ecclesia, CO*

1 All Scriptural citations are taken from the New International Version, unless specifically noted.

SHEEPFOLDS AND THORNS

By George Booker

BEFORE Jesus laid down his life at Golgotha, he wore a crown of thorns. It was a mockery of a traditional king's crown, woven from the sharpest thorns that the Roman soldiers could find. The crown of thorns, by itself, is an emotionally moving study. It teaches us that, in God's currency, the twisted, ugly "crown" of pain and suffering and sacrifice is the only crown of real value. As our hymns remind us, conventional crowns of gold, silver, and precious gems are meaningless compared to Christ's crown of thorns. Gems,

and monuments, and crowns will molder into dust, but Christ's crown of thorns will stand forever in the hearts of believers, as the crown of great achievement. It is the symbol of their Savior's victory over sin and death on behalf of all who believe.

What I have learned recently is that there were other "crowns of thorns" in the Bible. They were constructed by the brave shepherds who kept watch over their flocks by night on the rugged hills of the Holy Land. Let me tell you about those "crowns."

But first, let me tell you just a bit about W.M. Thomson and his wonderful book, *The Land and the Book*, published in 1858.¹

W.M. Thomson

Thomson, preacher, educator, traveler, and writer, explored much of the Holy Land again and again from the 1830s-1850s, when it was still a dangerous place for outsiders. At that time, the land was just becoming accessible to Westerners, and very little changed from the days of the prophets and apostles. Thomson wrote an extended diary of his observations in a two-volume work entitled *The Land and the Book*. In the introduction to his great work, he writes:

The land where the Word-made-flesh dwelt with men is, and must ever be, an integral part of the Divine Revelation. Her testimony is essential to the chain of evidences, her aid invaluable in exposition... “The Land and the Book”—with reverence be it said constitute the entire and all-perfect text and should be studied together.

Thomson's words capture the respect and awe believers attach even to the lands of the Bible. Putting aside his personal beliefs, which are scarcely mentioned, his large volumes of conversational discussions about scenes and customs in that land can help any student appreciate more fully the Bible message.

The book was extraordinarily popular in its day. For the next forty years after its publication in America, it sold more copies than any other book except the Bible and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Copies of *The Land and the Book* may still be found, even today, in used bookstores and through other services specializing in out-of-print books.

Thorn-Covered Sheepfolds

Now that you have “met” W.M. Thomson and considered the practically unique position he holds in understanding and explaining the people of God's land and God's book, and their lives and customs, let us consider what he had to say about the sheepfolds constructed by the shepherds in the ancient Middle East:



Owing to the wild wadis² covered with dense forests of oak and underwood,³ the country above us has ever been a favorite range for sheep and goats. Those low, flat buildings out on the sheltered side of the valley are sheepfolds. They are called "marah", and, when the nights are cold, the flocks are shut up in them, but in ordinary weather they are merely kept within the yard. This, you observe, is defended by a wide stone wall, crowned all around with sharp thorns, which the prowling wolf will rarely attempt to scale. The "nimer", however, and "fahed"—the leopard and panther of this country—when pressed with hunger, will overleap this thorny hedge, and with one tremendous bound land among the frightened fold. Then is the time to try the nerve and heart of the faithful shepherd. These humble types of him who leadeth Joseph like a flock (Psalm 80:1) never leave their helpless charges alone, but accompany them by day, and abide with them at night. As spring advances, they will move higher up to other "marahs" and greener ranges; and in the hot months of summer they sleep with their flocks on the cool heights of the mountains, with no other protection than a stout palisade of tangled thornbushes. Nothing can be more romantic, Oriental, and even Biblical than this shepherd life far away among the sublime solitudes of goodly Lebanon.

Shepherds and Thorny Crowns

Whether the primary structure was stones assembled into a wall or dry brush piled together, the enclosures for the sheep were in each case topped off with sharp thorns woven and bound together. This was the ancient equivalent of modern barbed-wire fences, or other security fences with sharp objects at the top, to discourage any intruder—both wild predators (John 10:12; 1 Samuel 17:34) and human thieves and robbers (John 10:1). This structure, properly built, would be secure for the most part, but would also have an opening—the "gate" or "door" of the sheepfold (John 10:2). The protective circle was only closed when the flock was gathered in. Then the shepherd himself, or a watchman he left behind, would settle down to his vigil during the night. In this way, the one who guarded the flock became, literally, the gate or door of the fold.

Therefore, when Jesus told his disciples, *"Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep."*⁴ (John 10:7), he was saying that he was always there, their last and best line of defense, the one who would stand in the way and protect them, laying down his life if necessary (John 10: 11, 15, 17-18). And he was also saying that, because of his Father's oversight, his defense of them was absolutely sure:

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. (John 10:9).

"None Has Been Lost"

These thoughts inevitably carry us also to the garden of Gethsemane. As Jesus and his friends made their way through the city and out toward the Mount of Olives, he said to them:

This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." (Matthew 26:31; Mark 14:27).

He was quoting Zechariah, where the LORD Almighty was speaking:

"Awake, sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!" declares the LORD Almighty. "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones." (Zechariah 13:7).

The context of this rather obscure prophecy touches us to the heart. The man whom the LORD God says is "close to Me" is the subject:

Each will say, 'I am not a prophet. I am a farmer; the land has been my livelihood since my youth. (Zechariah 13:5).

On that day a fountain will be opened... to cleanse them from sin. (Zechariah 13:1).

Our Lord Jesus Christ was on his way to Gethsemane, and Golgotha was waiting not far beyond. Along the way, he would receive a "crown of thorns," a small but important part of what he was to suffer. At last, after more suffering than our limited minds can comprehend, his dead body suffered one more indignity:

One of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. (John 19:34).

William Cowper wrote:

There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners, plunged beneath that
flood

Lose all their guilty stains.⁵

The words had been spoken by Christ, and then they were fulfilled by him also:

I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. (Matthew 26:31).

These words help us to pull the threads together and appreciate the duty of the Good Shepherd. Not only did he lay down his life for the sheep, but even as he engaged the enemy, the "roaring lions" (Psalm 22:13) and the wild "dogs" (Psalm 22:16) that surrounded him and threatened the flock. He watched to be sure that the sheep, his friends, had gotten safely away. He knew they must escape (John 16:32), for they had to tell the story!

More literally, Jesus facilitated their safe departure when he said to those who were arresting him:

I told you that I am he [the one you came for!]... If you are looking for me, then let these men go." (John 18:8).

They went as fast as their legs could carry them. Shepherd and Protector to the end, Jesus stood his ground while they got away, untouched for a time, into the darkness of the garden and then beyond. Reflecting on this scene many years later, the Apostle John wrote his own commentary:

This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: “*I have not lost one of those you gave me.*” (John 18:9).

Jesus had spoken these very words no more than an hour or two earlier, praying to his Father, but also in their hearing, as they followed the path out of the city and up the nearby mountain:

While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction [Judas], so that Scripture would be fulfilled. (John 17:12).

And he had hinted at this sometime earlier in his parable of the Good Shepherd:

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. (John 10:28, 29).

The Good Shepherd

Each evening, when night falls and the flock is safely bedded down, then the shepherd settles himself into the opening of the sheepfold. There he

becomes the door. And the circle of protecting thorns, the crown of thorns, is completed!

The crown of thorns with which we are most familiar is not just a symbol of suffering and sacrifice. Jesus lived out the meaning of that symbol in real time in Gethsemane. Stepping into the breach, the faithful shepherd faced his last, deadliest enemy, holding off that enemy until his followers, his sheep, every one of them, got away safely.

Laying down his life for them, he had completed the mission he had accepted from his Father. And among his last mortal words, the cry “*It is finished!*” (John 19:30; cp. Psalm 22:31) rang out.

It was the cry of a sufferer whose sufferings are over. The cry of a warrior whose last battle has been won. The cry of a runner who has finished the race. And the cry of a shepherd who has saved every one of his friends and whose work will yet save countless others until the end of time.

He wore a crown of thorns as he went to the cross, and then he became a shield of thorns, protecting all those he loves.

*George Booker,
Austin Leander Ecclesia, TX*

¹ Thomson, W.M., *The Land and the Book*, Vol. 1, pp. 299,300. Note: My thanks to Bro. Walter Wooldridge, who suggested this line of thought to me. He had heard a Bible class based on the sheepfolds of the Middle East. He gave me a summary of that class, which led me to check my copy of *The Land and the Book*, by W.M. Thomson, for further corroboration, and then to do a bit more reading and study of my own.

² Wadis: ravines in the Middle East, usually dry but susceptible to sudden flooding during the rainy season.

³ Underwood: underbrush.

⁴ All Scriptural references cited are taken from the New International Version, unless specifically noted.

⁵ Cowper, William, *There is a Fountain*, published in 1772.

PART 5

NOAH: SAVING YOUR FAMILY IN A DARK WORLD

By Dennis Bevans

HOPEFULLY the material from Genesis 7 is fresh on your minds, as we will add some more sevens in Chapter 8. Our focus will be to see examples (or shadows) representing the work of Jesus in the story. Chapter 8 is perfectly designed for that purpose. We will see God's grand scheme of calling out a people for His Name to be redeemed by the precious blood of His Son, manifested in this wonderful account. It keeps our interest because Jesus told us it should (Luke 17:26-27).

The first verse in the chapter adds another connection to the creation account with the word “wind.” The Hebrew here is *ruach* (the same word translated spirit in 1:2). This describes the invisible power of God. When we see the leaves blowing in the trees, we do not see the actual wind but rather the evidence of its impact on the tree. This observation is how God's power works all around us. The word “*assuaged*” means to be still. God did not forget

about the remnant in the ark but rather marked them. The same concept is used to describe the remembering of Abraham regarding the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 19:29. Jesus also picks up on this by connecting the days of Lot and the days of Noah (Luke 17), as both are compared to our day. The last days would be filled with the same fleshly challenges that caused God to judge both populations: violence, self-service, homosexuality, political upheaval, disregard of God and his word, eating, drinking, marrying, buying, planting, building. To make this even more poignant, look at Luke 17:32-33:

Remember Lot's wife. Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.

Lot's wife becomes a very powerful example in this context. We can so easily miss it by thinking she was looking back at the "things" she lost. Her primary loss was not material. To even suggest such is to devalue her suffering, making it easy for us to think her example "does not apply." However, when we consider that she would have lost children for certain, perhaps grandchildren, parents, brothers, and sisters, we understand she lost her family! This reaction was not about her favorite couch or the decorations but rather those she loved. Would we look back and long for the sparing of our own loved ones should God clearly tell us that they were wicked and must be destroyed? It makes her much more relatable, doesn't it? Jesus went one step further on this very topic to make sure we know what is at stake.

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it. (Matthew 10:37-39).

This subject is in the same context. When we think back to Lot's wife, or even Lot and Noah and Mrs. Noah, we need to recall that they lost family to follow the path of God. This topic is not just about our salvation but more importantly about God's glory! It is harder to keep that perspective when it gets so personal, but that is essential to our salvation.

Genesis 8:2 is a reversal of Genesis 7:11, followed by a return of the waters in verse 3, described as continually, which in Hebrew means "going and returning" (think tidal). What is the primary force that affects the tides? Let us focus on the sun as the brightest focal point in our universe. From our vantage point, it is constant. Without the light and warmth of the sun, there would be no life on earth. However, notice that the Genesis record includes something of the lesser light to rule the darkness of the world: the moon. What do we know about the moon? It has no light of its own but is rather a giant reflector in the sky. Seeing this as a reference to Jesus being the reflection of the glory of his Father helps explain his word that if we have seen him, we have "seen the father." (John 14:9) But it goes beyond that relationship.



We want to be the bride that seeks fellowship with these two great lights. As the bride, preparing to be one with Jesus, we need to reflect this same glory. So, with that in mind, let's consider the phases of the moon. While the sun remains constant from our view, the moon waxes and wanes from a full moon all the way to an eclipse. Since it is only a reflector, what gets in the way of it being a constant and perfect reflection (full moon)? The earth! Whereas Jesus was a perfect reflection of his Father's glory, you and I have spiritual ups and downs. Sometimes, we are a nearly full moon, while at other times, we look more like the fingernail shape barely visible in the sky. At our worst, our life can be a virtual eclipse, leaving no room for the Father in our walk. Let us be vigilant in our pursuit to get the world and its *"lust thereof"* out of our way to be a more perfect reflection of God's glory to those among and around us.

Genesis 8:4 gives us another seemingly unnecessary detail that will get our attention. *"And the ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month."* *"Rested"* repeats the echo of Noah's name, and then we get a date. The **seventh** month of the civil calendar becomes the first month of the religious calendar during the Exodus account (refer to the Passover notes in Exodus 12:18 and 13:3-4). This datelines us up with the Passover week, which also becomes the crucifixion week, so our attention is firmly entranced by this reference now.

Let's dispel the Good Friday nonsense that has become so popular in the

Christian world around us. It is concerning that it has even influenced the thinking of brethren in our day based on books, articles, and conversations in our community. It would be wise for us not to argue with Jesus when he says, *"So shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."* (Matthew 12:40) He doesn't say three days or even three light periods, accounting for some astronomical anomaly, as some may suggest. He could have simply referred to a couple of, or a few days. He did not. He directly correlated to Jonah's story and repeated (for emphasis) three days and three nights. No matter how hard you try, there is no way to fit three of each between Friday evening and Sunday morning. Holding on to this traditional error requires us to disregard what the scriptures say in multiple places to keep man's "theory."

From the creation account, we get the model for the Jewish day as the evening and the morning (darkness before light). What I am about to detail is not the only way to get there, but it is the one I am currently holding on to. I acknowledge there are a couple of different ways to arrive at this math, and my opinion has changed before (it likely will again.) However, we must ensure the basic requirements are met, including the timing before the Passover, add three days and three nights, and get to an empty tomb Sunday morning. Passover is on the 14th of Abib, and three days later is the 17th of Abib. This date simply cannot possibly be a coincidence. In addition, some confusion in the gospel record as

to the “*preparation day*” regarding his burial is amplified when considering that the preparation day was for every Sabbath (compare the gospel account in Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, and John 19). The weekly Sabbath was Saturday, but it was not the only Sabbath “*rest*” day under the law. All feast days were considered a sabbath to the LORD. Therefore, if the actual Passover were on Thursday, Friday would be both the day before the weekly Sabbath and the day after the Passover Sabbath. That would make Wednesday the 13th the day of the crucifixion (and also the day of preparation for Passover) so that as our Lord was dying on the tree, the slaughter of the lamb without blemish in every Jewish household was being enacted in real time. They broke the legs of the thieves so they could be taken down before the Passover Sabbath day, which would be the 14th. Friday the 15th becomes the “*preparation day*” before the weekly Sabbath, followed by Saturday the 16th as the weekly Sabbath. Jesus is raised sometime after sundown Saturday but before the light of day Sunday morning, the 17th of Abib. Now we reconcile both the three days, three nights, the preparation day “*contradiction,*” the words of Jesus, **and** (to our topic) the resting date for the ark on the mountains of Ararat, showing one further echo of Christ in the ark!

Back in Genesis, the next verse (Genesis 8:5) tells us the waves are getting smaller over the next two and a half months, revealing the top of the mountains. They were there all along, but their presence was hidden from their sight, making them unseen but present (another echo of our Lord). Satellite views of

snow-covered Mt. Ararat and Little Ararat show they are inactive volcanoes located in eastern Turkey. Mt. Ararat rises over three miles above sea level. Verse 6 elapses another **40** days, and then we have a fascinating interchange involving birds: the raven (verse 7) and the dove (verses 8-12). Knowing we are looking for Jesus in the ark, let’s consider the four bird references. The raven is the first. It is an unclean bird, and so we know it survived, or we would have none today. Only two of each unclean animal was preserved in the ark. When could we consider Jesus unclean? How about when he says, “*Touch me not*” (John 20:17) before his ascension? The next time he appears, he tells Thomas to touch his wounds. This visitation continues until the ascension in Acts. The next “*appearance*” is in the form of the Gentile Roman army (interesting the olive branch tie to the Gentiles) in AD 70. Since then, he has not returned, though we look forward to that return with great anticipation. Notice that there is another seven-day interval between each of these bird events.

The dove is a clean animal, so it could have been the same one or could have been a different one. Not only clean, but the turtledove and young pigeon were only acceptable birds of sacrifice under the Law. They were used in a number of places like Leviticus 14 (leprosy as a type of sin) and also at childbirth with a lamb, or two birds replacing the lamb if the offeror was poor (as in the birth of Jesus). The dove also was the form by which the “*spirit of God descended*” upon Jesus at his baptism in the muddy waters of Jordan and settled on Jesus to



declare him clean. We could do another series on the connection to Jonah (whose name means dove), but we will resist the temptation to digress further.

The dove will not put its feet in mud if it can avoid it, making it a clean bird. It is the common symbol of peace for both Jews and Gentiles. Regarding the olive branch, olives need no cultivation and are not dependent on man! Normally, they have no “berries” until the seventh year, adding to our seven collection.

Genesis 8:13 gives us another day (remember to convert this to the religious calendar). What was the first day of the 7th month on the religious calendar under the law? The feast of trumpets, which includes burnt offerings, demonstrates total dedication to God. According to Leviticus, the animal was to be skinned, and then the insides washed before the body (headfirst to denote our thinking, then feet to represent our walk, then the rest of the insides which show our inner purpose or dedication) was placed on the altar to be totally consumed by God. God was concerned with the cleaning from within and not our outward appearance!

The next command is to go forth, as it is time to move. Having survived the

work of redemption through obedience, Noah and his family continue to follow God's instruction (compare this to our walk) by exiting and “bringing forth” the animals. Drop down to verse 20 for the first mention of an altar in Scripture (It is only inferred in Abel's story). This sacrifice is the first act after they leave the ark! What do we do when we make it through trial? They offered one of every clean beast or fowl (perhaps the 7th)! Think of the labor to properly prepare and offer each. The next verse tells us it was received as a sweet savor, or as the Hebrew intends, a savor of rest (nice tie to Noah's name and another 7). We compare this to our Lord, who, with obedience and sacrifice, was offered on the altar of life.

The final verse reassures us that the seasons and cycles will remain, which is the promise of Chapter 9.

One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. (Ecclesiastes 1:4).

*Dennis Bevans,
Austin Leander Ecclesia, TX*

EDENIC LAW AND THE BOOK OF ROMANS

PART 2

By Richard Morgan

Is it fair that we all share the consequences of Adam's sin? After he and Eve sinned, they were cursed and exiled from Eden's garden. We find ourselves under Adam's curse and outside Eden too, but we weren't the ones responsible. Perhaps you've asked, "If I was there, would I have sinned like Adam and Eve?"

David—A Test Case

To test this supposition, Paul uses a test case example that undergirds his message to the Romans. In verse 3 of the first chapter, he mentions this example: "*Concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh.*"¹ David is a perfect test case to prove Paul's message because he was a man after God's heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22), a truly wonderful testimony about David's character and commitment to God.

While Paul can't time-travel David back to Eden, we do see him sinning in the same way as Adam. In fact, David is both Adam **and** Eve in his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah. Elsewhere Paul writes, "*and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.*" (1 Timothy 2:14). Let's give David the benefit of the doubt that he was deceived by the beauty of Bathsheba. The record states, "*It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful,*" (2 Samuel 11:2) echoing the woman who "*saw that the tree was good for food*" and "*a delight to the eyes*" (Genesis 3:6). However, just as Adam wasn't deceived and knew what he was

doing in partaking of the fruit, David understood perfectly what he was doing when he planned the murder of Uriah.

After his sin, Nathan confronted David with the story of a "*rich man [who] had very many flocks and herds*" (2 Samuel 12:2) who "*took the poor man's lamb.*" (v. 4) Notice David's reaction as his "*anger was greatly kindled against the man.*" (v. 5). Who else was a rich man with very many flocks and herds in David's life? Nabal! I imagine David thinking to himself, "He's just like Nabal, that horrible fellow!" David then brings down his judgment on the man—"*the man who has done this deserves to die.*" (v. 5).

Paul echoes David's words at the end of a long list of sins in Romans 1. He says they "*deserve to die*" (Romans 1:32), just as David said. This was, of course, the judgment in Eden for failing to obey the commandment—"*for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.*" (Genesis 2:17).

However, as soon as David uttered those words, Nathan pointed at him and said, "*You are the man!*" (2 Samuel 12:7), something again echoed by David in the next verse in Romans:

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. (Romans 2:1).

And that's what David did, despite judging the sin of the man in the parable as worthy of death. He was the man and had practiced the very same thing he condemned by taking Bathsheba and killing her husband.

Under the Law of Moses, David deserved death both for adultery (Leviticus 20:10) and murder (Leviticus 24:17). However, after acknowledging his sin, Nathan said to David, *“The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die.”* (2 Samuel 12:13).

Notice what Nathan did not tell David to do: go to the temple and offer a sacrifice in the hope God would forgive him. In fact, no sacrifice under the Law could atone for David’s sin. God simply forgave him, and he was a recipient of His grace and mercy.

One of the interesting aspects of David’s forgiveness is the lack of repentance. David did repent, as his psalms attest, but that came later. He did confess his sin, but God didn’t wait for him to repent; He had put away his sin before the conversation with Nathan. Likewise, a lack of repentance is evident in Eden after Adam and Eve sinned and before God provided the animal skins.

a prime example of the power of the gospel of grace that leads to salvation.

Courtroom Scene

In Romans 1, Paul highlights the sinfulness of the world, using the example of David in Chapter 2. He explains that the Jewish world is just as sinful. He sums it up in Chapter 3 with the words, *“For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.”* (v. 9). Those words form the accusation of a courtroom scene Paul develops through the chapter.

After the accusation of verse 9, we have the evidence listed in verses 10-18, where Paul makes six quotations from the Old Testament, each of which outlines the sinfulness of humankind. Then we have the verdict in verse 19—

“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.”

**No sacrifice under the Law could atone for David’s sin.
God simply forgave him, and he was a recipient of His
grace and mercy.**

Paul explains the enigma in Romans 2:4, writing, *“God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.”* This is an aspect of the righteousness of God—God’s right way of dealing with the problem of sin. What leads to repentance is not the strictness of law or threat of death if you disobey. What works is God’s kindness, and David is

Before we look at the sentence, notice Paul’s mention of the law in verse 19. This is a courtroom where the prosecuting lawyer is the law itself. However, as Paul will go on to say, the defense lawyer, and ultimately the judge, is God. Verse 21 is the turning point of the chapter, where Paul begins by saying, *“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart*

from the law.” (v. 21). In other words, despite the correct verdict of the law, all are guilty, God’s righteousness is revealed apart from it. That was Paul’s opening point in his thesis statement in Chapter 1. The revelation of God’s righteousness is not seen in the strictness of law but in the abundance of grace. If we have faith (v. 22), then we “are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (v. 24). In other words, through the death of Christ, God has provided us with the animal skins as a gracious gift to cover our nakedness.

Indictment

Let’s return to the evidence presented in verses 10 through 18. What is intriguing about the six Old Testament quotations is that five of them are psalms of David. In each psalm, David highlights the sinfulness of man through the various interactions he has had with people like Saul and Doeg. However, each psalm also has an interesting twist. Let’s look at three examples.

The words “*the venom of asps is under their lips*” (v. 13) come from Psalm 140:3 (NKJV): “*The poison of asps is under their lips.*” However, if we carry on reading in the next verse, David goes on to say the following:

Keep me, O Lord, from the hands of the wicked; Preserve me from violent men, Who have purposed to make my steps stumble. The proud have hidden a snare for me, and cords; They have spread a net by the wayside; They have set traps for me. (Psalm 140:4-5 NKJV).

Who was a “*violent man*” who had “*set traps*” for Uriah the Hittite? Here is David’s complaint about the sins of those he encountered, but as Paul says in Romans 2:1, David did “*the very same things,*” and David’s own psalm is a formal accusation against him.

We see the same thing with Paul’s words: “*Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness*” (Romans 3:14) found in Psalm 10:7, another psalm of David. If we carry on reading, David continues:

He sits in ambush in the villages; in hiding places he murders the innocent. His eyes stealthily watch for the helpless; he lurks in ambush like a lion in his thicket; he lurks that he may seize the poor; he seizes the poor when he draws him into his net. The helpless are crushed, sink down, and fall by his might. He says in his heart, “God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it.” (Psalm 10:8-11).

Again, we see words that indict David. He set an ambush for Uriah and murdered the innocent.

Likewise, the words “*There is no fear of God before their eyes*” (Romans 3:18) come from Psalm 36:1. If we carry on reading in the next verse, we have another indictment against David:

For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated. The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit; he has ceased to act wisely and do good. He plots trouble while on his bed; he sets himself in a way that is not good; he does not reject evil. (Psalm 36:2-4).

David was guilty of all these things, and Paul expertly crafted his list of evidence with David as his test case.

God Saves

The one quote that is not a psalm of David comes from Isaiah 59 (see Romans 3:15-17), which is also a courtroom scene. There, the prophet begins with the evidence in verses 1-8 (including the words used by Paul in verses 7 and 8) before there is a guilty plea in verse 12:

For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities: (Isaiah 59:12).

In the rest of the chapter, the prophet surveys this cosmic law court and sees that *“Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands far away.”* (v. 14). How will righteousness manifest itself? The prophet says of God, *“He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede.”* (v. 16). Just like in Romans, the prosecuting lawyer is the law. At first, there is no defense lawyer, as this verse explains, so *“his own arm brought him salvation.”* (v. 16). God steps into the breach and defends the ones found guilty.

Notice how *“his own arm brought salvation”* is coupled with *“and his righteousness upheld him”* in the same verses. That parallelism continues in the next verse—*“He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head.”* Here, once again, is the revelation of God’s righteousness as he saves those guilty of sin.

The chapter ends with the words, *“And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those*

in Jacob who turn from transgression” (v. 20), and it is that redeemer that Paul mentions in Rom. 3:24—the Lord Jesus Christ. But it is only for those who *“turn from transgression.”* The point of this quotation by Paul and his words in Romans 3 is to explain that in Christ, we are justified by faith—vindicated by God despite our sins. Justification means being counted innocent, and with God as our defense lawyer, the verdict is repealed, and we are set free. However, the point is not just to let us off the hook as if God is indifferent to sin. We still need to “turn from transgressions” or repent. But, as Paul said in Chapter 2, God’s kindness in forgiving our sin is meant to lead us to that repentance, and in future chapters in Romans, Paul will explain that the work of salvation in Christ is designed to produce in us a new way of thinking and a new way of life.

Justification

Paul has transitioned from illustrating that *“all have sinned”* (Romans 3:23) to the fact that we are *“justified by his grace as a gift,”* but, in fact, Paul started the chapter by talking about a different kind of justification. This time, it is God who is the defendant in the courtroom. In verse 4, Paul again quotes David concerning God:

That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged. (Romans 3:4).

People judge God and complain that He does not act the right way. For instance, why has God condemned humanity to death because of Adam’s sin (something Paul will develop in chapter 5)? We weren’t guilty of Adam’s sin, so why do we share in the consequence of his sin?

Paul vindicates God by showing how all have sinned. Or, to put it another way, we vindicate or justify God every time we sin, showing that God was right to place us all under condemnation.

The section ends in Chapter 4, where Paul switches from David's example to Abraham's. Once again, Paul quotes David in verses 7-8:

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin. (Romans 4:7-8).

However, there is one more quotation from a psalm of David hidden in Chapter 3, in the pivot verse of the chapter: *“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.”* (v. 20). Those words come from Psalm 143.

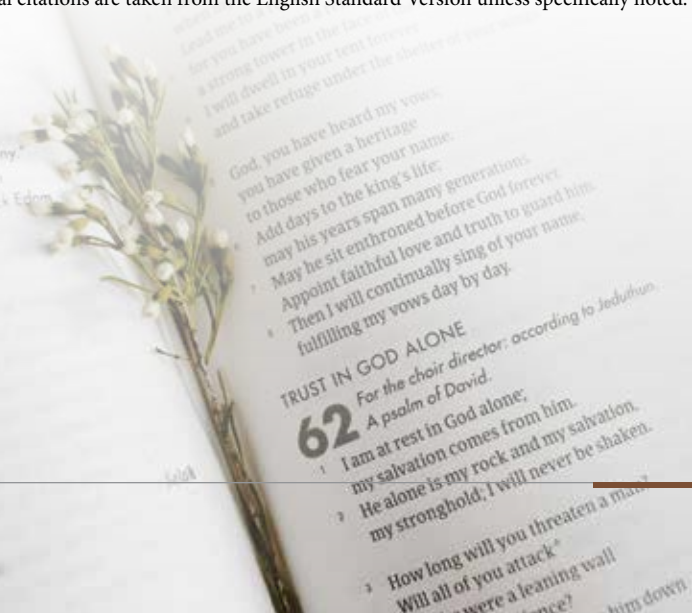
So, the chapter is bracketed by two psalms of David (Psalm 51:4 and Psalm 32:1-2) and the pivot verse in the middle from another psalm of David

(Psalm 143:2). What is interesting about all three psalms is that each one is David's plea for mercy following his sin. Psalm 51 opens with the words, *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love,”* and shows David's faith in God's righteousness revealed in his character of kindness. Similarly, in Psalm 143, David prays that God will *“give ear to me pleas for mercy”* (v. 1) as he again rests in God's kindness and love (v. 8, 12). In Psalm 32:10, after acknowledging his sin, David praises God with the words, *“but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.”*

Paul's expert crafting of his treatise on justification by faith centers on David and teaches us through his example that, despite our sins, we can rely on God's kindness.

*Richard Morgan,
Simi Hills Ecclesia, CA*

1 All Scriptural citations are taken from the English Standard Version unless specifically noted.





NICARAGUA

By Kevin Hunter

MY company has an annual shutdown the week of July 4, which allows me to get away for a bit longer without burning all my vacation time. So, in July, I had an opportunity to visit Nicaragua and Ecuador. I want to share some highlights here.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua has been on my radar for some time now for several reasons:

- As part of “finish the mission” framing of our work, it’s an area on the map of Latin America where we haven’t consistently advertised or worked, and is a gap we need to fill in.
- As a country that has struggled politically and economically for many years, it may be more receptive to the gospel message than the countries that are more “Western” and affluent.
- Nicaragua is situated about halfway between our two strongest ecclesias in Latin America, reachable in a realistic one-day drive from El Salvador and Costa Rica.
- Over the last few years, Bro. Allen, Sis. Dana and I have been talking about possible Latin American projects for Truth Corps, and some sort of activity in Nicaragua with support from the two ecclesias near it could be a possibility—if it’s safe enough.
- In our online advertising framing of “registrants per dollar spent,” Nicaragua has one of the lowest costs of online advertising, and if we wanted to grow the number of students, it is a place we could likely economically do that.

Having said all that, the news on Nicaragua is generally grim, and while it’s a bit of a tourist destination,

mostly for surfing, it's unclear whether it would be a safe enough place to send people, especially groups of relatively "green" young people. So, the goal of the trip was to get to know the country a bit and learn what we could. I was accompanied by Bro. Jaime Mate, the current recording brother of the San Salvador Ecclesia, who I have known for many years. Bro. Jaime and Sis. Karla have also come down to help us in Ecuador a few times.

Bro. Jaime and I spent two days in Managua and two days driving east and west to the towns of Estelí and Granada. Nicaragua is a beautiful country (with a very low population density compared to El Salvador), has a solid highway system, and good roads in town. We felt completely safe everywhere we went. We used a guide for our drives out of town and had long discussions about the political and social situations. Essentially, it boils down to being a typical kleptocracy, where if you don't speak out directly against the government,

you're probably just fine. But there was also definitely a bit of a "Cuba vibe," where it just felt a little off, like people were just a bit on guard.

The odd thing both Bro. Jaime and I separately noticed, was the low number of churches. We couldn't really put our finger on why it felt that way. Generally, when you drive around a Latin American city, you'll see churches everywhere, but that wasn't the case in Nicaragua. So, on our third day there, we used Google Maps to walk around Managua, looking at any churches near the downtown area. While they do exist (There aren't a ton), the ones there weren't particularly big or successful looking. I haven't found anything online indicating that anyone else has noticed or measured that, so we would just have to see if it could be a challenge or an opportunity.

*Kevin Hunter,
CBMA Link for Nicaragua*





ECUADOR

By Kevin Hunter

MY wife, Sis. Rebekah has been in school this summer and couldn't come along this time. So, for the Ecuador leg of my trip, Bro. Rubén Barboza from Argentina joined me. Because my summer plans were somewhat up in the air until about five weeks before the trip, we couldn't organize a full-blown Bible School. But even with the time available, the local brothers and sisters were able to pull together a Friday evening through Sunday afternoon "retreat" at the location where we last held the Bible School in the town of Guayllabamba, about an hour north of town. Throughout the weekend, we had about thirty-five adult brothers and sisters and family and friends,

about ten kids, and about five teens. For the Bible School portion of the trip, we were also supported by Sis. Silvia Fernandez, Sis. Patty Vasquez, her daughter, Sis. Michelle, and Bro. Alejandro Mate from El Salvador. Sis. Michelle and Bro. Alejandro organized classes and activities for the kids and teens and stayed afterward for a couple of days to also do an outing with the teens and young people.

For the adults, I chose the theme of asking the question: "Why am I still a Christadelphian?" This took the angle that I was baptized at seventeen, we were in Ecuador when I was in my thirties, and now I'm in my fifties. We looked at how one's faith shifts, changes, and grows over the years.

Rather than doing classes, I sent everyone an assignment ahead of time with four questions each for five topics. The topics were: The Bible, the God of the Bible, the problem of sin and evil, Jesus, and the Kingdom of God.

For each topic, everyone was asked to:

1. Write a summary in their own words of what their beliefs were regarding the topic.
2. List seven to ten Bible verses on what the Bible said about it.
3. Choose the two to three verses they personally found most powerfully spoke to their own beliefs or were most foundational to their faith.
4. List any extra-biblical reasons for why they believed what they did about the topic (e.g., common sense, historical, archeological, cultural, personal, etc.).

During the actual school, for each topic, I started off with a quick introduction before breaking everyone into groups of four to six people for about thirty minutes. The task was to share with their group what they had written/collected, and then as group share back with everyone else a summary of questions one, three, and four over the next thirty minutes.

The format worked very well, with almost everyone doing a surprising amount of work ahead of time by almost everyone—pages and pages of written text and verses! Everyone also felt the format was much more effective for learning than a standard lecture (I wish they'd told me that at

some point during my last nineteen visits when I used a more standard lecture approach). God willing, we'll aim to implement that style more regularly in coming visits.

During the rest of the week, Bro. Rubén and I visited the brothers and sisters. Sis. Silvia did the same, sometimes overlapping with us. I also conducted three baptismal interviews with support from Sis. Silvia, Sis. Fabiola, and Sis. Lucía (all candidates were women). The first interview was with Sarita Duchi, daughter of Bro. Manuel Duchi and Rita (who is also studying for baptism). Sarita is a little older than Kalen (probably around thirty now), was a regular Sunday School scholar during our time there, and has recently started attending regularly again. Her interview was early in the week, and we were able to arrange the baptism on the last day I was there. Also interviewed, was Belén Duchi (niece of Bro. Manuel) and Bro. Wilson's wife, Sandra. Belén will, God-willing, be baptized in the coming weeks when they can organize a time, and Sandra was earlier in her learning and will be continuing some studies in the coming months.

Overall, the ecclesia is doing well, and our focal point for the coming year is trying to sort out the transportation challenges for the members and friends, and particularly in support of the Sunday School. As an example, Sis. Sarita has to come from the extreme south of Quito with three small children, while the biggest group in the ecclesia lives in the very far north

of the city. Also, the hotel where they currently meet, occasionally schedules other activities in their main conference room on a Sunday, relegating the ecclesia to meeting in a poorly suited dining room area directly outside the conference room. This situation means there is traffic of other people through the meetings and Sunday School activities while they

are in progress. With the economic setbacks suffered by the city during COVID, it may be possible to find a place in the downtown area again. The new North-South subway (which is fantastic!) also opens up some new areas for possible consideration.

*Kevin Hunter,
CBMA Link for Ecuador*



CARIBBEAN YOUTH CAMP

By Tinashe Craig

OUR Our recent Caribbean Camp in Trinidad was held from August 9-17, 2024. It was an unforgettable experience filled with spiritual growth, fellowship, and fun. One of the highlights was meeting new people from all over the Caribbean. It was incredible to bond with fellow believers from places like Australia, Barbados, Canada, Guyana, Jamaica, the US, and Trinidad and Tobago. We shared stories, faith-experiences and built lasting friendships.

The Camp activities were diverse and engaging. One of the most enjoyable moments was swimming and relaxing

at the pool with new friends. It provided a refreshing break and a great opportunity for fellowship in a fun, informal setting.

Worship at the Camp was truly inspiring. We sang praises to God with a mix of traditional hymns and contemporary worship songs. We also learned new ways to express our worship through creative sessions, where we explored different forms of praise, including dance, spoken word, and quiet reflection. The atmosphere was vibrant and Spirit-filled as we came together to worship in unity.



In addition to the spiritual talks led by Bro. Josh Hodge, regarding Samson's life, we had several other exciting activities, such as sports competitions, games night, and a talent night where campers displayed their gifts. These moments fostered fun and relaxation and a strong sense of teamwork and camaraderie among us.

This camp has deepened my faith, strengthened my bond with fellow believers, and reminded me of the joy and beauty of praising God in community. I look forward to continuing these connections and applying what I learned in my daily walk with Christ. I am already counting down to next year's camp!

*Tinashe Craig,
Kilcoy Ecclesia, Guyana*



Thoughts on the Way

The Stone Had Been Moved

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. (John 20:1)

MARY was eager to get to the garden tomb. As the Proverbs observe: *"I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me."* (Proverbs 8:17).¹ **And she did!**

Mary Magdalene was a woman with a questionable past. But whatever it might have been, Jesus had forgiven her sins and had taken her into his family of disciples. For that, she loved him with all her heart.

It is not certain, but in my opinion, Mary Magdalene was quite likely the woman who interrupted a meal to anoint Jesus' feet.

We read of this incident in Luke 7:36-50. It should be no surprise that in a few verses further along, in Luke 8:1-3, Jesus is said to have cured Mary Magdalene of "seven demons" (along with some other women who were also cured). In the New Testament, the word "demon" may refer to either mind or body disease. When so many "demons" are mentioned, this also suggests both mind and body, with

the demons of the mind being her life of promiscuity and the demons of the body being the results of her lifestyle. So it must have been with the greatest of gratitude that Mary Magdalene came to the house where Jesus was visiting, fell down at his feet, and anointed his feet while she cried. He had saved her life, both then and in the world to come.

Now, back to the beginning: "the first day of the week":

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb [of Jesus], and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. (John 20:1).

"The first day of the week" is, literally, "day one of the seven." This refers to the "In the beginning" of God's first creation week (Genesis 1; cp. John 1:1). In God's literal creation, on day one, God had said, *"Let there be light."* Now, once again, in the spiritual

beginning, there was “light” again (see John 1:4). To the disciples, this day (when they understood it later) would mark the beginning of their new lives. This new rising of the “sun,” as well as the rising of Jesus, **the “Son”** would drive away the dark shadows of lost hope and create a new spirit within the disciples:

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:5).

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2).

For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Mary Saw That The Stone Had Been Moved From The Entrance

Was there ever a mountain so “large” as the great stone which sealed Christ's tomb? Truly, as miracles go, no miracle has been or could be so great as the one that caused this “very large” stone to be removed, and thus proclaimed Christ's tomb to be open and be forever empty.

Jesus had told his followers:

Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. (Mark 11:23).

Of course, people who work in construction have difficulty moving literal mountains and must resort to bulldozers and explosives to move these impediments. But seen from a spiritual perspective, isn't the greatest mountain of difficulty, which no builders can ever move, the great mountain of death and the grave?

Even Jesus's disciples could not move such a stone from the mouth of his sepulcher. They were weeping in sorrow and hiding in fear. It was by the faith of Jesus alone, even though he was dead and unconscious in the tomb, which brought his Father to send the angels to roll back the stone.

It may be said that the greatest miracle that Jesus ever performed was that the blood of this absolutely righteous man cried out from the depths of the earth (Revelation 6:9,10), and the Father heard him!

Do we have faith today to move mountains? The answer, I believe, is really another question. Do we have faith that the greatest “mountain” has **already** been moved?

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. (Mark 11:24).

Our faith may be not just a faith in the future but also a faith in the past. We look backward and ask if we really believe that the “mountain” has been moved? If we truly believe that, then it is absolutely sure and certain that **all things** are possible for us, because

our Lord Jesus Christ lives, and makes intercession in heaven on behalf of all who believe in him.

Now, back to John 20:2

So she [Mary Magdalene] came running to Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

Mary Magdalene, seeing the empty tomb, assumed his dead body had been stolen away, and she ran to tell Peter and John. (The position of the stone, moved some distance away from the door, may have convinced Mary that the tomb had been abandoned.) She seems to have had no thought of a resurrection.

At about the same time, some of the other women who were going to the tomb met the angel of glory (Mark 16:1-7), and they also returned to the other disciples, bringing a message of Christ's resurrection.

Matthew 28:2-3 adds some detail:

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.

It appears that the great stone was rolled some distance away, a task one man could not do.

Hearing Mary's report, Peter and the other disciple (very likely the Apostle

John) ran hurriedly to the tomb. The two were running together, and John ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first. Stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb, and he saw the linen wrappings lying there. The facecloth that had been on his head was not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. (John 20:3-10).

The head wrappings were separated from the body wrappings. Also, the whole scene in the tomb was not disorderly but orderly. There had been no hasty action; rather, it looked as if someone had awakened from a night's sleep and laid his bedclothes aside to be dressed in other garments.

Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. [They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.] Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. (John 20:6-10).

How did John believe if he did not understand the Scriptures? John believed in the resurrection of Jesus

based simply on what he saw, not on a full understanding of the Scriptures concerning the resurrection. This insight would only come later.

What did he see that convinced him? He saw the linen burial clothes lying in the tomb. He understood that no man in his right mind would first unwrap a corpse and then carry it away. The presence of the wrappings was the plainest proof that no one had carried away a dead body. Instead, Christ had risen, leaving behind the old grave clothes and putting on new clothes.

The disciples returned home, but Mary Magdalene stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb. (v. 11) The two disciples had gone their way. But Mary, following behind the men, returned the second time to the tomb, still unaware of the angel's appearance to the other women. (Mark 16:2-7) There was no reason she should linger there, except that this was the spot where she had last looked from afar at the body of her teacher and friend.

In the last two days, Mary had shed tears as never before, and now more than ever, they refused to be restrained. If only she might be able to express her love in some last act of devotion to his poor dead body! But even this was denied her, for apparently his body had been stolen away.

To this pathetic figure of sorrow and despair, one of the greatest privileges of all time was soon to come: the first sight of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ! Within moments, the deepest

despair would give way forever to the greatest joy!

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look in the tomb and she saw two angels dressed in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.
(John 20:11-12).

The tomb of the risen Christ must have looked like the Most Holy Place, with its mercy-seat being guarded by the "two angels" as cherubim, where the blood of Jesus Christ, the one true sacrifice, has been poured out. The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." (John 20:13) Apparently, she did not realize those two "men" were actually angels.

At this point, Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there, probably in the shadows, but she did not realize that it was Jesus (v. 14). It may be that, at this early hour, the garden itself was in shadows. Or it may be that Mary was simply preoccupied with her thoughts.

Then Jesus spoke: "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." (v. 15).

Now Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out: "**Rabboni**," (which means "Teacher"). (John 20:16).

Once again, she seems to have expected no help or comfort in response to her appeal, for she is already walking away when just one spoken word— “**Mary**”—stops her in her tracks. The man standing there in the shadows calls her by name, and the thought must have come to her: “He knows my name!”

That voice sounded familiar. Can it be...? She turned around, stared in shock, and then, in a moment, she was at his side, perhaps falling at his feet in shock and then grasping him as if to prove to herself that the impossible had become a fact and all the while incoherent with joy. There was nothing to say except one exultant word: “*Rabbi.*” The wonderful man she had known for only a few years, the man who had saved her life once already, was not dead; he was alive!

When he had saved her from her sad, meaningless existence and healed her diseases, she had anointed his feet with her perfume and tears. When he had died, she had anointed his whole body. Now, once again, she anointed his feet with tears, **but this time, they were tears of joy.**

The silent road from which no traveler returns had yielded back the one she longed to see above all others and how blind she had been not to recognize him sooner. A wild jumble of emotions rushed through her mind, and all the while, she sought added assurance by the evidence of her senses.

My Lord, who dead
and buried lay of late
Made void this tomb
and stood before my face;
And I was first of all
his ransomed race:
At first I knew him not!
nor pondered there
By what strong means
at that unseemly hour
The gardener should
with some uncanny power
Have borne him hence
beyond my reach.
But when he spoke,
calling out my name,
And I beheld my
Savior standing there,
My heart did leap
with sheer and utter joy;
’Twas then, O Lord,
that recognition came:
With tear-dimmed eyes
my precious Lord to greet,
I knelt in the dust
to grasp his feet.

(From an unknown author)

Jesus said to her, “**Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.**” (v. 17). This should probably

be read, more literally, “Do not cling to me... for now.” Jesus had other duties to perform. As the High Priest, he needed to present himself and his wounds as evidence of the completion of his perfect sacrifice on the cross. He must do this in God's very presence, which presumably required his entering into the Most Holy Place or his ascension directly into heaven itself.

After this important task, Jesus must have appeared to his disciples and his closest friends, as described in the New Testament.

We might also suppose there were some few precious minutes for these two, the saved woman with her beloved savior. But then they had to part, for a while, but certainly not forever.

This “going to the Father” was based on the ritual of the Day of Atonement. On that special day each year, the High Priest, after finishing his sacrifice, was required to enter into the actual presence of God, to present the blood of the annual sacrifice, and then to return from the Father's presence with the great blessing for the nation (Leviticus 16). However, this presentation was unique, a once-and-forever task for Jesus:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest [Jesus Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,

and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. (Hebrews 10:11-14).

Now, as they parted, Jesus asked Mary to “go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” The brothers and sisters of Christ must all learn of this wonderful revelation that “Jesus is alive!”

Mary had been totally devoted to her Lord—seemingly to the exclusion of all others. This dedication was her great strength, but it was about to become something of a weakness since he was soon to be taken away from her for a long time.

And so, kindly but firmly, he turned her attention to her fellow believers. She must now learn that all her attention must be toward them and that she must spend the rest of her mortal life in their company, working toward their good. It appears as though, after this tender scene, Mary must turn and walk away, not knowing when she will ever set eyes on her Lord again.

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her. On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side.

“The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.” (vv. 18-20).

We need more than the printed page of the Bible and a good memory to make us wise for salvation. We need a mind opened to give special attention to the message from heaven. We need eyes opened to behold the wondrous things to be found in God's Word and in God's world. In short, we need Christ in our hearts. And when this takes place, we step into a world of light, love, and life by faith. A world in which no shadow of gloom or fear can isolate us from God's love, can only be found in Christ Jesus.

The story of Mary Magdalene can teach us so much. For one thing, we learn that no matter what terrible ditches we may fall into, Christ can

help us find our way out of the mud. We also learn that, as individuals, we should never give up on anyone, no matter their bad deeds. Especially we learn that our Lord Jesus Christ loves us more than we can ever know and that he will be with us as we walk through this world day by day, helping us to live not by fear but by faith. As the Apostle Paul expresses it:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20).

*George Booker,
Austin Leander Ecclesia, TX*

1 All Scriptural citations are taken from the New International Version unless specifically noted.



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