



an intimate dialogue



A
SERIES
IN THE
PSALMS



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In the Morning



Give ear to my words, O Lord,
Consider my groaning.
Heed the sound of my cry for help, my King and my
God,
For to You I pray.
In the morning, O Lord, You will hear my voice;
In the morning I will order my prayer to You and
eagerly watch.

For You are not a God who takes pleasure in
wickedness;
No evil dwells with You.
The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes;
You hate all who do iniquity.
You destroy those who speak falsehood;
The Lord abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit.
But as for me, by Your abundant lovingkindness I will
enter Your house,
At Your holy temple I will bow in reverence for You.

O Lord, lead me in Your righteousness because of my
foes;

Make Your way straight before me.
There is nothing reliable in what they say;
Their inward part is destruction itself.
Their throat is an open grave;
They flatter with their tongue.
Hold them guilty, O God;
By their own devices let them fall!
In the multitude of their transgressions thrust them out,
For they are rebellious against You.

But let all who take refuge in You be glad,
Let them ever sing for joy;
And may You shelter them,
That those who love Your name may exult in You.
For it is You who blesses the righteous man, O Lord,
You surround him with favor as with a shield.

Psalms 5:1-12

tHIS COUNTRY DOMICILE includes five cats. The four females dwell comfortably indoors, while their brother resides out in the garage. But don't cry for Thornton. He loves his garage, and, for an outdoor cat, he has a pretty good life. This winter his thickly blanketed basket is in a curtained alcove, to reduce drafts, and comes complete with a heating pad. While the blizzard howls on the other side of the garage door, he remains cozy and warm in his heated bed.

In warmer seasons the first thing Thornton does upon rising in the morning is head outside to make his rounds surveying his territory. He begins with a circuit around the house, poking his nose under the deck, sniffing around the wood pile, and checking the condition of all the doors. Has a strange cat passed by, rudely leaving its mark where it doesn't belong, so close to his family's dwelling? After this, he widens his circuit to include the north orchard, the gardens, the barn and nearby timber, and a close inspection around the edges of the pond.

Thornton's purpose during his morning jaunt is to determine who visited during the night—friend or foe?—and to make his plans for the remainder of the day. Will he while away the day in thoughtful repose, or will he have to take action against a foe who encroached on his territory? Will he do a little hunting, or will he find a soft spot for a well-deserved nap?

groanings

When we rise in the morning we may not go prowling around our territory like Thornton. But in those early morning hours we often retrace in our minds what occurred the day before, and contemplate what challenges await us in the new day. In the morning we take stock of where we have been, what our condition is at the moment, and what obstacles, trials or fears

lie before us. And for many of us that process begins on our knees.

Please hear me, O Lord, and make sense out of my stumbling words. Move closer, my King; incline your ear, my God, to hear better my cry. For my prayer is to You—the only One who can help. O God, at break of dawn You are already attentive to my needs; even as I rise, I am putting in place my thoughts of You, and listening for Your reply.

Every morning we rise to a challenge, for, as believers, we dwell in hostile territory. But we never rise alone. We have a God, a King, a *Father* who cares, and who is able to translate our groanings into the language of heaven.

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Romans 8:26-27

the path

If there is a cry for help, there is also the assurance that help is present and real. If we voice a complaint about those who stand against us in the approaching day, there is also the confidence that God will meet out justice upon them.

You find no pleasure in evil things, You do not even permit it to visit. Those who live a life of lies and murder You loathe—in fact, You send them off to perish in a desert crafted from their own deceit. But while You have shut the door to evil, O God, You have invited me in—not by merit, but by Your great and limitless love for me. Therefore I will come in and wor-

*ship You, my terrible and gracious God.
O Lord, You know the way through those who lie in
wait to ambush me. Your way is the only way—the
way of goodness and truth. That is the path I choose;
take me down it.*

enemies

Even with this confidence in our God, however, there are mornings when we can't shake the tremulous stirrings within our soul. For we have dealt with these foes before. They seem to take pleasure in making our lives miserable—and they very often succeed. We know it is a blasphemous thought, but there are times when our enemies appear stronger than our faithful Protector. We know them well, and we want to make sure God knows what we are up against.

I can't believe a word they say. They are evil and corrupt to the core. Death and corruption spew from their throat while their smooth tongue oozes flattering lies. They are guilty, O God: pronounce judgment on them! Let their own evil plottings define their end.

In our anxiety and irrational fear we cry out to our God to meet out justice upon these who are being so unfair to one of His children.

Push them off the cliff, God! Banish them, for they have rebelled against Your righteousness.

the shield

But even within the fevered clutches of this early hour entreaty, His truth reaches our anxious heart. He reaches down to calm our fears, to remind us of who He is—and how much stronger He is than *any* challenge we might face.

But, unlike my foes, may those who trust in You and seek Your protection be encouraged. May those who call upon Your name jump for joy! For everything good in our lives comes from You, O Lord. I need not concern myself about my enemies, for You have accepted me as Yours, so I am surrounded by Your strong shield.

Enveloped in His comforting embrace we find strength for the new day. Rising to our feet, we know now that we have nothing to fear. Challenges will indeed come; the enemy has not yet been vanquished. But we will face them with the Lord at our side.

His strong, impenetrable shield will never leave us.

Forgetting

A Psalm; a Song at the Dedication of the House. A Psalm of David.

I will extol You, O Lord, for You have lifted me up,
And have not let my enemies rejoice over me.
O Lord my God,
I cried to You for help, and You healed me.
O Lord, You have brought up my soul from Sheol;
You have kept me alive, that I would not go down to the pit.
Sing praise to the Lord, you His godly ones,
And give thanks to His holy name.
For His anger is but for a moment,
His favor is for a lifetime;
Weeping may last for the night,
But a shout of joy comes in the morning.

Now as for me, I said in my prosperity,
"I will never be moved."
O Lord, by Your favor You have made my mountain to stand strong;



You hid Your face, I was dismayed.
To You, O Lord, I called,
And to the Lord I made supplication:
"What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise You? Will it declare Your faithfulness?"

"Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me;
O Lord, be my helper."
You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;
You have loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness,
That my soul may sing praise to You and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever.

Psalm 30:1-12

eVERY YEAR, AS AUTUMN begins its slide into cooler temperatures, it is time to prepare the wood that will be burned in our fireplaces during the fast-approaching winter. There is often more wood that *should* be burned than we will need. Natural attrition of the trees in our timber means there are more dead or fallen trees than we can consume in one season. At such times I call my friend Rich to come help with the tree felling, and have him (he of the voracious wood-burning furnace) take home half of the sectioned wood.

This last autumn found me with a large number of dead trees to cut down. As Rich and I addressed each one, I outdid myself in my lumberjacking prowess. One after another I dropped the trees precisely where I intended. As I approached the last tree—larger than the previous—I was feeling pretty cocksure. No sweat. Let me just make my first cut here, my second cut here and...

The large tree fell precisely where it shouldn't, leaned comfortably at a forty-five degree angle, caught in the branches of neighboring trees. Oh, we finally got the errant tree down and sectioned up, but with much greater effort and time. How much easier it would have been had I not been so impressed with myself.

his man

King David had a similar problem.

Now as for me, I said in my prosperity,
"I will never be moved."

O Lord, by Your favor You have made my mountain to stand strong...

It was not because David lived a life of unadulterated righteousness that he was called by God (through the prophet Samuel) "a man after His own heart." The shepherd-turned-king missed the mark many times as he strove to serve his God. His sins—

some egregious—were many. But one of the character traits that set David apart, and earned him the holy appellation, was his willingness to quickly admit wrong and—even in the throes of God's painful discipline—give praise and thanksgiving for His gracious forgiveness.

remembering

I am grateful that you have saved me, so that I have You as Lord over me, high and lifted up, rather than having my enemies "lord it over" me. When I needed You, You not only heard me, but answered, and did what I asked. You lowered down Your ladder, so that I might escape the horrors of death, then You sustained me, so that I would not have to return.

Like David, we should never forget that we belong to the Lord. No matter how we have failed Him, no matter how stained we have become by our transgressions against Him, the Father is always ready to reach down into our rebellion to restore us. He waits—and waits—longing for us to acknowledge Him and confess our wrong. Then He is quick to respond.

And what should be our response to God's forgiving grace?

O God, I remember all these things You have done for me, so I make beautiful music to You, and lift up my hands to You in reverent worship. In comparison to God's longsuffering, extravagant love toward me, his discipline is so brief that it is gone before I can blink my eye. The tears I shed over my sin, or my unpleasant circumstances, are wiped away at breaking of dawn.

the offense

Just what had David done that was so wrong?

I thought myself so strong, so wealthy, so secure that I was convinced nothing could stand against me. I said to Jehovah, because I have been so good, because You like me so much, You have girded about my kingdom—my Jerusalem—and it will never fall.

Oh, here is the root of so many of our ills. Life in God's family is good, it is solid and rewarding. He is generous with us, pouring into our lives blessing upon blessing from His boundless, bottomless warehouse of riches.

But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:18-19

But then, as is the way of all flesh, we forget that our exalted position is the product of *His* grace—not ours. And in a moment, we play out the faithful old proverb:

Pride goes before destruction,
And a haughty spirit before a fall.

Proverbs 16:18 NKJV

repentance

And what is the "fall"? It is desolation. It is the aching absence of God's favor.

But then I came to my senses; I realized You were no

longer with me, and the terror of that moment was too awful to bear.

Echoing the words of Christ on the cross—"My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?"—the child of God cries out to Him in his misery.

I called out to You, God. I threw myself upon Your mercy, praying that You would reach down to me and show me kindness. What will You gain, my God, if my praise is silenced into the rubbish and ashes of Sheol? How, then, can I stand up and proclaim Your truth to those needing to hear? Have mercy on me, Lord! Reach down into the depths of my despair and wrap me again in Your protective arms.

release

With confession and repentance comes quick forgiveness, for the Lord is eager to restore His child to the sweet communion they once enjoyed.

You have changed everything, O God! You have converted my funereal aspect into a Spirit-dance, my wailing into a beautiful song. You have torn away my suffocating sorrow, and replaced it with Your comforting joy. You, O Lord, have done this so that that fullness of my life would no longer be mute in my self-absorption, but instead sing glory to You. More than that, O God, I will happily worship and praise You beyond time itself.

a Self-imposed Remove

For the choir director. A Maskil of the sons of Korah.
As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So my soul pants for You, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God;
When shall I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"
These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me.
For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in
procession to the house of God,
With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude
keeping festival.
Why are you in despair, O my soul?
And why have you become disturbed within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him
For the help of His presence.
O my God, my soul is in despair within me;
Therefore I remember You from the land of the Jordan
And the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls;
All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me.
The Lord will command His lovingkindness in the daytime;
And His song will be with me in the night,
A prayer to the God of my life.
I will say to God my rock, "Why have You forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the
enemy?"
As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me,
While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"
Why are you in despair, O my soul?



And why have you become disturbed within me?
Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him,
The help of my countenance and my God.
Vindicate me, O God, and plead my case against an ungodly
nation;
O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man!
For You are the God of my strength; why have You
rejected me?
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the
enemy?
O send out Your light and Your truth, let them lead me;
Let them bring me to Your holy hill
And to Your dwelling places.
Then I will go to the altar of God,
To God my exceeding joy;
And upon the lyre I shall praise You, O God, my God.
Why are you in despair, O my soul?
And why are you disturbed within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him,
The help of my countenance and my God.

Psalms 42:1-43:5

eVEN CALLOW YOUTH can miss home and hearth. Even the exotic allure of world travel can fade when compared to family, and friends, and normalcy.

Thirty-seven years ago a fresh-faced, wet-behind-the-ears Midwesterner found himself pining for home. His current "home" was a gray, metal, decidedly un-homey cruiser on station off the coast of Vietnam. Surrounded by the ship's hostile natives, the monotony of unrelenting boredom, and mile after mile of featureless sea, the teenager discovered heretofore unplumbed depths of homesickness and despair.

Every few weeks the tedium of this alien, factory-like prison was relieved, for a few days, by the exotic sights and fleshly blandishments of a nearby port of call. The young man took in the dazzling sights, found amusing diversions, and, for a while, forgot the pain of his homesickness. In the end, however, the synthetic distractions only deepened his longing for the organic normalcy of family and home.

going our own way

The exiled Jew of Psalms 42-43 pined not just for the normalcy of home, but for the presence of his God. Having been taken away, by force, from Jerusalem and temple worship—from all that was comfortable and customary—he longed for a cool drink of Jehovah to relieve his spirit-thirst.

As the thirsting deer longs for the life-restoring stream, so I long for You, O God. I am in a drought, and all of my being thirsts for You—the One from whom all life flows. When, O God, will I see Your face again? Missing You, I have cried myself to sleep, and wept throughout the day, while everyone around me has mocked my longing, saying, "So where is this God of yours?" These thoughts break my heart; my soul aches to worship again in Your house. For I recall the joy of

the procession as we all came to worship You, the loud "Hosannas!" we would sing during the pilgrimage.

This eloquent, ancient yearning, however, cannot translate into Christ-life without adaptation. For the believer cannot be separated from his "temple" against his will.

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

1 Corinthians 3:16

Since our very person is our place of worship, no one else can remove us from God's presence. No one else can physically prevent that spiritual union. But we can. We can forget Him, forget the sweet communion of our spirit with His. Worse, we can intentionally go our own way, shutting off the sound of His voice—until we come back, for a while, to our senses.

But then I ask myself: "Why am I so depressed? Why is this tearing me apart?" I still have You! There will come a day when I will once again bow down and lift my hands to adore You in Your temple. I will once again praise You for Your salvation.

in the wilderness

The cold truth for the believer is that time spent absent from God is time spent in the wilderness. Without His guiding presence we flail about, chase down rabbit trails, and begin to question His commitment to our situation. We are the ones who have severed—if temporarily—the relationship, yet we now accuse Him of abandoning us to the terrors of our self-imposed desolation.

Yet I still despair, O God. I remember how You were at the Jordan. But even the natural world—Your

creation!—conspires against me. Wave after wave has swamped me, left me gasping for air. You are in control, O God, and I can depend on Your love and kindness throughout each day, and my nights will be filled with Your praise.

I will say to my God, "You once protected me, giving me a strong footing high above my enemies. Why are You now oblivious to my plight? Now because of those enemies I am covered in ashes of mourning. Why?" Day after day, those who hedge me in with their hate, stripping away my dignity, taunt me, saying, "So where is your God now?"

Because the Spirit never leaves the Christian, even one who has stopped listening to His counsel may be snapped back to reality.

Then again I ask myself: "Why am I so depressed? Why is this tearing me apart?" I still have You! There will come a day when I will once again bow down and lift my hands to adore You in Your temple. I will once again praise You for Your salvation.

returning home

Then, invariably, when trials or temptations return, or old enemies reinvigorate their efforts against us, we again pay the price of not walking steadily with our God. We accuse all of heaven of turning against

us—or at least forgetting our plight—and we crumple under the burdensome weight of doubt and disbelief.

We cry out to the Lord: all we want is to return home, to the safety and transport of His presence. All we want is to return to the Joy.

Pronounce me innocent, O God; on behalf of my innocence, wrestle with those who do not know You. Give me the means to escape those who are treacherous and do evil. For You are my place of safety, my stronghold—why then have You turned against me?! I am still covered in the ashes of mourning. Why? O my God, appoint Your servants—illumination and truth—to draw me back home to the place where You dwell: Your sacred mountain. Once I am there, I will kneel before Your altar, where I will worship You with overwhelming joy. I will sing to You, and lift my hands in praise, My God.

And one last time we reprimand ourselves for our short-sightedness—our temporary insanity in choosing, if even for a little while, the temporal over the eternal.

So then, why am I so depressed? Why am I letting this tear me apart? I still have You! There will come a day when I will once again bow down and lift my hands to adore You in Your temple. I will once again praise You for Your salvation.

This is my Father's World

For the choir director. A Psalm of David. A Song.
There will be silence before You, and praise in Zion, O God,
And to You the vow will be performed.
O You who hear prayer,
To You all men come.
Iniquities prevail against me;
As for our transgressions, You forgive them.
How blessed is the one whom You choose and bring near
to You
To dwell in Your courts.
We will be satisfied with the goodness of Your house,
Your holy temple.
By awesome deeds You answer us in righteousness, O
God of our salvation,
You who are the trust of all the ends of the earth and of
the farthest sea;
Who establishes the mountains by His strength,
Being girded with might;
Who stills the roaring of the seas,
The roaring of their waves,
And the tumult of the peoples.
They who dwell in the ends of the earth stand in awe of Your
signs;
You make the dawn and the sunset shout for joy.
You visit the earth and cause it to overflow;
You greatly enrich it;



The stream of God is full of water;
You prepare their grain, for thus You prepare the earth.
You water its furrows abundantly,
You settle its ridges,
You soften it with showers,
You bless its growth.
You have crowned the year with Your bounty,
And Your paths drip with fatness.
The pastures of the wilderness drip,
And the hills gird themselves with rejoicing.
The meadows are clothed with flocks
And the valleys are covered with grain;
They shout for joy, yes, they sing.

Psalm 65:1-13

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG LAD the commonly used term was "conservation." It focused on practical ideas like crop rotation, contour tillage, and the planting of trees and grasses to minimize soil erosion. Later this commonsense practice evolved into a more detailed and sophisticated system of "ecology." Now these two relatively benign concepts have morphed into a rabid "environmentalism"—a protectionism of everything "natural," with a concomitant loathing of any and all human impacts upon the "pristine" environment, which, of course, has brought us to its most fanatical and ridiculous incarnation: the cult of man-made global warming.

James Lovelock, in his 1979 book *Gaia*, writes, "...the biosphere is a self-regulating entity with the capacity to keep our planet healthy by controlling the chemical and physical environment." Others have described the [Gaia hypothesis] as the idea that Earth itself acts like a single organism.

Lovelock believes, for example, that Gaia is at work to keep the oxygen content of the atmosphere high and within the range that all oxygen-breathing animals require. Lovelock believes that life regulates the surface temperature of Earth, too.

Brig Klyce, at
<http://www.panspermia.org/gaia>

Some have taken this imaginative philosophy even further, to a form of neo-paganism in which the physical globe on which we live is literally worshipped as a "mother goddess."

Many Neopagans actively worship Gaia. Beliefs regarding Gaia vary, ranging from the common Wiccan belief that Gaia is the Earth (or in some cases the spiritual embodiment of the earth, or the Goddess of the Earth), to the broader Neopagan belief that Gaia is the goddess of all creation, a Mother Goddess from which all other gods spring. Gaia is sometimes thought to

embody the planets and the Earth, and sometimes thought to embody the entire universe.

Wikipedia

As the Bible teacher Chuck Swindoll might say, there is a Greek term for all this: *hog-wash*.

credit due

Even the most casual student of God's word understands that this world is not the supreme mother goddess, but is the creation of the one God Almighty, who is supreme over everything that exists. He not only calls the shots in and on this globe, but He has placed it all here for man to manage and use.

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Genesis 1:26-28

First, as Creator and Lord of all, our God is worthy of our worship and praise.

O God, I stand in silent reverence before Your throne, my heart sings quiet praise. Whatever I have promised You, I will do. And when I do speak, You graciously understand my hymn of praise and need. This is why all flesh comes to You. There are times when my sin overpowers me; I cannot prevail against it. It wins. But when I come to You—as do all men—You forgive my transgressions. I did not choose You, but in Your grace You selected me and drew me to You. You accepted me into Your family, and blessed me with more than I could ever deserve. More than that, You

have given me the honor of worshipping You in Your temple.

from his hand

God answers our prayers and our worship with the tangible majesty of His extraordinary deeds. Some of His works we casually refer to as “nature,” while others we call “acts of God”—even “miracles.” But whatever we call them, they *all* are from His hand.

When we pray to You, O God, you answer with the righteous strength of Your hand. Because of Your awesome power and deliverance, we take refuge in You—everyone to the very limits of the land, and to every distant shore. By Your might, O Lord, You stood up the mountains, and when the seas pile up and roar, Your word hushes their destructive force. In the same way, O God, You hush the noise of the nations. Even those who live as far away as possible quake with reverent fear at the evidence of Your might. To the east, where morning begins, and to the west, where evening ends, there is unbridled joy.

the river

Does the mother goddess Gaia send the rain that feeds the earth’s inhabitants? No, the psalmist as-

ures us that God is the source: The river is God’s river, and

He prepares the grain and the soil.

He waters the crops.

He sends the soft showers.

He causes everything to grow.

You attend to our needs here on earth by opening the source of our life-giving showers—Your overflowing, heavenly river. With it You increase our annual yield—our grain stands tall! You soften with rain the sharp ridges we have cut into the soil, and thus you feed us by Your blessings. You have encompassed our entire year with good things from Your hand. And the tracks You have left behind are filled to overflowing with abundance. The pleasant openness of the land, where cattle have made their home, as well as the surrounding hills—all exult in Your bounty. You have dressed the meadows with plump sheep, and the valleys with grain. Your world, O God, shouts Your name, O indeed, it sings Your praise.

Possessions

part one



A Psalm of Asaph.

Truly God is good to Israel,
To such as are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
My steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the boastful,
When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For there are no pangs in their death,
But their strength is firm.
They are not in trouble as other men,
Nor are they plagued like other men.
Therefore pride serves as their necklace;
Violence covers them like a garment.
Their eyes bulge with abundance;
They have more than heart could wish.
They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression;
They speak loftily.
They set their mouth against the heavens,
And their tongue walks through the earth.

Therefore his people return here,
And waters of a full cup are drained by them.
And they say, "How does God know?
And is there knowledge in the Most High?"
Behold, these are the ungodly,
Who are always at ease;
They increase in riches.

Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain,
And washed my hands in innocence.
For all day long I have been plagued,
And chastened every morning.

Psalm 73:1-14 nkjv

mY GRADE SCHOOL, Franklin School, was located on Main Street, just through the block on which I lived. The normal way for me to get to school each day was to go out the back door, cross our back yard, “cut through” Wigand’s back yard, down their drive, and cross Main Street to the school yard. The return trip was the same, but reversed, and never took more than two minutes for the entire journey. Mom could always expect me home just a few minutes after the school bell rang.

One day after school a classmate, one of the Nelson boys, invited me to join him catching crawdads down at Linn Creek, instead of going right home. The creek (or “crick,” as we called them in those days) ran east and west along the backside of the football field and track that was behind Franklin School, then angled north to define the boundaries of the park that was our summer playground. The creek was a tiny tributary, shallow, muddy, and smelled not unlike the sewer that crossed its path—but the Mississippi never held more fascination for Tom Sawyer than did Linn Creek for us.

I knew it was wrong. I knew I’d get into trouble for it. And I did it anyway. Instead of going right home after school that day, I went down to the creek with the Nelson boy. We caught crawdads, looked for garter snakes and frogs, and generally got wet and muddy and had a wonderful time.

The Nelson boys had parents who didn’t really care where they were or when they got home from school. I envied their freedom, their ability to search out adventures without the burden of overprotective parents. It seemed like they could get away with murder. When we eventually decided to leave the creek they probably headed off to some other adventure.

I went home to my sure execution.

I was one half-hour—all of thirty minutes—late getting home from school, and my mom was beside

herself. Where have you been? What happened to you? Are you hurt? Boy, did I get a licking that day. And I learned the rather painful lesson that no matter how much the creek beckoned, I was always to come right home after school.

envy

The Nelson boys seemed to have so much freedom—they could go where they wished, do what they wished, and never had to answer to any discipline. I, on the other hand, had more restrictions, more rules—and a burning sensation in my posterior. How was *this* fair? I mean, I was a pretty good kid. I didn’t cuss or sass back at my parents. Every Sunday I attended church and Sunday School. I even sang in the children’s choir. I was a good kid—so why was I getting the short end of this harmless after-school adventure?

Asaph expressed a similar level of frustration in one of his psalms.

I know You are good to Your people, O God. I know You are good to those whose hearts are innocent. As for me, however, well, I came this close to falling flat on my face. You see, I envied those in the limelight—those who think so much of themselves. I know their hearts are not innocent, yet they seem to have everything they desire. Even their deaths seem to be easy.

Even on their last bed they remain strong and well-fed. Their body has not wasted away. They enjoy lives of ease, and are never stressed by worry or anxiety. Nobody lays a hand on them. Because of this, they swell with pride—they wear it like a bright, shiny necklace—and they openly wear like a cloak that which they have gained through violence. They have everything they want—even anything they can conjure in their wildest imaginings. They have become so

gorged with plenty, their eyes bulge out. They are not afraid to blaspheme, and openly talk about how they will take advantage of everyone. They look down on everyone when they speak. They think themselves so high and mighty that they consider their words to be straight from the heavens, and with those words they march through the land telling everyone what to do.

demigods

As considered through the clouded prism of this world's perspective, it would seem that we have every reason to be envious of the wicked, the powerful elite, the spoiled rotten. They enjoy all the advantages of life, but few of the disadvantages.

When the rest of us are queued up, they get to cut in line in front of us. They are lousy parents, but their kids have everything they want, while our kids go without. They get all the breaks, the promotions at work, while we plod along in impoverished anonymity.

Worse, these spoiled brats hold only a sneering disdain for God. Even as they, arrogant demigods, attract drooling sycophants to themselves, their behavior mocks the true God and infects the weak-minded with a distorted, cancerous view of holiness.

Because of this, many are drawn to their power and influence, seeking to share in some of the leftovers. They are sure they are getting away with it. "If there is a God, He doesn't know or care what we are doing. Anyway, He isn't so smart after all." Their words and

behavior demonstrate that these people are wicked, and do not know You at all. In spite of this, they haven't a care in the world. They enjoy lives of comfort and opulence.

remaining true

It is enough to discourage even the strongest believer. What's the point? Where is the percentage in being a faithful disciple of God if the scalawags and ne're-do-wells keep getting away with murder?

Why should we bother remaining true to the Lord if He is not going to do a better job of taking care of us—or at least evening the proverbial playing field for us?

Oh, woe is me! Why have I bothered to keep my heart open to You? What has it served me to keep my hands clean, to use my power only for Your good? It has accomplished nothing for me. For I have been "beaten up" over this from dawn to dusk, and slapped down at break of every day.

the answer

What is the answer for those times when we see the wicked gain while the righteous lose?

In the face of such apparent inequity, how can we subscribe to Solomon's proverb?

Do not let your heart envy sinners,
But live in the fear of the Lord always.

Proverbs 23:17

Possessions

part two



If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
Behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of
Your children.
When I thought how to understand this,
It was too painful for me—
Until I went into the sanctuary of God;
Then I understood their end.

Surely You set them in slippery places;
You cast them down to destruction.
Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment!
They are utterly consumed with terrors.
As a dream when one awakes,
So, Lord, when You awake,
You shall despise their image.

Thus my heart was grieved,
And I was vexed in my mind.
I was so foolish and ignorant;
I was like a beast before You.
Nevertheless I am continually with You;
You hold me by my right hand.

You will guide me with Your counsel,
And afterward receive me to glory.

Whom have I in heaven but You?
And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.
My flesh and my heart fail;
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion
forever.
For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish;
You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry.
But it is good for me to draw near to God;
I have put my trust in the Lord God,
That I may declare all Your works.

Psalms 73:15-28 NKJV

fOR THE INFRACTION OF SPENDING a half-hour down by the creek with one of the Nelson boys, and thus arriving home late from school, I received a rather thorough spanking. Through the pain I envied the freedom afforded my schoolmates. *They* weren't being punished for being late. *Their* parents didn't ride such close herd on their time and activities. Nevertheless, I learned the lesson of the spanking—that I was never to do the same thing again.

As young as I was, I learned another, even more valuable lesson that day. I learned that of the two sets of parents—the Nelsons and the Lampels—mine loved me more. The Nelson boys seemed to have so much freedom—they could go where they wished, do what they wished, and never had to answer to any discipline. I, on the other hand, had more restrictions, more rules—and a burning sensation in my posterior—but I had something they didn't: the deep and caring love of my mom and dad.

a higher perspective

For just a fleeting moment I was envious of those who appeared to get away with their transgressions. The psalmist, Asaph, experienced the same emotion.

For I was envious of the boastful,
When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For there are no pangs in their death,
But their strength is firm.

Psalms 73:3-4 NKJV

Asaph mulled it over, tried to reconcile for himself the seeming inequities of life.

I came this close to keeping score, and recounting all these inequities. But if I had, I would have been unfaithful to this generation of Your people. So, in my closet I mulled over all this in my mind, weaving together all the evidence that has been so troubling to me. Alas, my conclusion gained me nothing; I was still

worried—even pained—over the unfairness of it all.

But there was something he had not yet tried. Mired in the slough of despond, he had up till now been operating under his own steam, on his own intellect and reason—which is why none of it made sense to him. He remained confounded until he sought a different—a *higher*—perspective.

Ah, until, that is, I came into Your presence—into Your most holy place. Then I got it! Everything fell into place for me! Informed by Your perspective (instead of my own), I understood what lay in the future for them. Now I see: You have placed the wicked where their footing is precarious; the flattery of fools has become their undoing, and now they are sliding helplessly into ruin. Look how they are so quickly ruined! In terrible horror they are snatched away to their doom! Oh holy and terrible Lord, when You stir Yourself to judgment, You treat them as if they are nothing—like shadowy apparitions from a forgotten dream.

impermanence

Living with earthly vision is, for the believer, akin to living as a blind and senseless beast. Our spirit becomes numbed by the plodding futility of day followed by monotonous day. As one of God's own we are made for better things. We have been made anew, reconfigured for a higher perspective, one that sees and understands that we are surrounded by impermanence, by transient follies that will inevitably be burned up as chaff.

When I came near to forgetting You—when my very being had turned sour, and I was skewered upon my own bitterness—I was little better than a thick-headed

bovine, brutish and ignorant; yes, like a wordless cow in Your presence. Even in my stupidity, however, I have not left Your side, for You have taken possession of me—You hold onto my hand. By Your word and will, O God, You take charge of my life, and when this life is o'er, You will draw me into the glory that is Yours.

a more precious possession

The Nelson boys enjoyed liberties not afforded me. On the surface they seemed to have it made. They could do as they wished, go where they wanted, and stay out as late as they cared to. But at the end of the day, when they got home what awaited them was a cold supper and disinterested, apathetic parents. Their freedom came at a horrible price.

As a boy I had more restrictions placed on me, less freedom. But when I got home what awaited me was a hot, carefully prepared supper, and parents who loved me, and cared about my well-being. Even at such a young age I realized that when I took a higher perspective it was clear that the Nelson boys were impoverished, while I was rich beyond measure.

Even so, the believer need not waste time or energy envying those who seem to get away with murder while they spurn God and His ways. When we

acquire the Lord's perspective we see that, compared to them, we have a Parent who not only loves us and protects us, but who—in His time—will meet out justice upon those who reject Him.

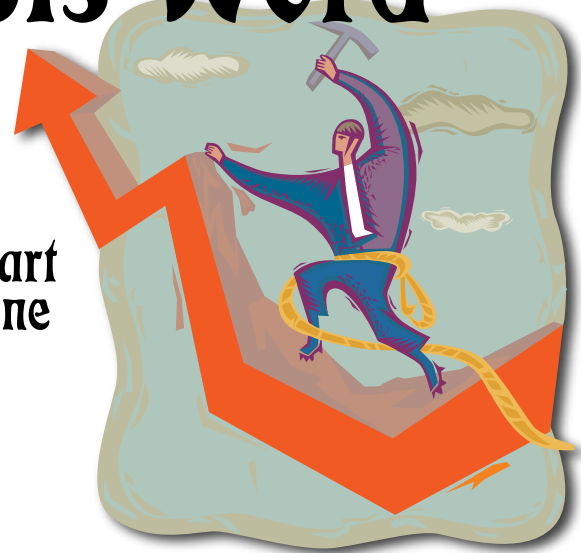
But transgressors will be altogether destroyed;
The posterity of the wicked will be cut off.
But the salvation of the righteous is from the Lord;
He is their strength in time of trouble.
The Lord helps them and delivers them;
He delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
Because they take refuge in Him.

Psalms 37:38-40

O God, I need not envy others, for as high as the high heavens, and as low as the soil upon which I walk, You, Lord, are my most precious possession, and the one delight of my heart. Why should I concern myself about what others do to me. I am made of flesh, and flesh is impermanent; it will waste away to dust. My hope is in You, O God, my Rock and my eternal dwelling place. The wicked—those who have kept You at a distance—will keep wandering into their own desert, and perish. You have not held back Your wrath, but exterminate all who have gone whoring, instead of remaining true to You. But I will. I will draw near to God—my rock, my hope, my place of safety. Sheltered by the Lord God, I will recount all He has done for good.

Living by His Word

part
one



You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:14-17

tHE NATION CALLED the United States of America does not have as its foundation any one political party, one or more ethnic tribes, or a ruling family. Its people do not swear allegiance to a king or queen. At his (or her) inauguration, the president does not swear to uphold a state religion, a family name, or a sovereign lord. He does not pledge to defend his home state, the nation's capital, or Wall Street, but to preserve and defend the words handwritten on a very old parchment:

I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.

There are countries that have been formed based on a religion, an ethnic group or tribe, or that form themselves around a person of royalty, or some other dynamic, charismatic leader.

But the United States has been formed around, and is governed by, one foundational *document*—The Constitution. Its Preamble, six Articles, and twenty-seven Amendments are the basis for the design of our government and for all our laws. Our constitution defines and explains who we are as a nation. It defines the rights of its citizens, and *limits* the rights of those who govern.

The Constitution of the United States is a unique and profound document. For the citizen, its precepts are, quite literally, words to live by.

The Christian's "constitution" is God's word: the Bible. In its sixty-six "articles" (it has no amendments) are God's instructions for knowing Him, and living close to Him. Psalm 119 is a hymn to the veracity, the faithfulness, the truth, the effectiveness—the utter *practicality* of God's holy word. This longest chapter in the Bible explains how God's word contains, for the believer, truly "words to live by."

remembering

How can a young man keep his way pure?
By keeping it according to Your word.
With all my heart I have sought You;
Do not let me wander from Your commandments.
Your word I have treasured in my heart,
That I may not sin against You.
I will meditate on Your precepts
And regard Your ways.
I shall delight in Your statutes;
I shall not forget Your word.

Psalms 119:9-11,15-16

Compost feeds a garden with good things, so that it is better able to fend off the bad. Just so, a life that is not nurtured with righteous things is incapable of weeding out sin.

There are still those who believe that people are essentially good—that everyone is born innocent, and any bad or evil qualities are learned, or imposed by someone else. If that be the case, permit me to pose just one question: Would you like to live with a teenager who had never received any parental discipline?

What happens to children who receive no other training than the behavior with which they were born—who are, essentially, left to raise themselves? They grow up to be adults who are selfish, arrogant, and self-centered.

The best instruction for any child—or adult, for that matter—comes from God's word, which is rich in Spiritual nutrients that make it difficult for bad things to grow—and easier for good things to take root.

A heart filled with self has little room left for God, but a heart filled with the things of God has little room left in which sin can take root and spread.

O Lord, how can I keep my daily walk innocent and holy? By encircling it with the protection of Your very word. I have followed after You with the intensity of the center of my being. Do not let me go astray from those things You have commanded. Your word is a precious treasure to me, and I have kept it resonating in my heart so that I would remain true to You. To help me remember, I speak aloud the holy words You have revealed to us, and I look with pleasure and joy upon the path You have set before me. I take pleasure in the words of Your covenant with us. In so doing, I will not forget what You have said to us.

in the weeping

My soul cleaves to the dust;
Revive me according to Your word.
My soul weeps because of grief;
Strengthen me according to Your word.
Remove the false way from me,
And graciously grant me Your law.
I cling to Your testimonies;
O Lord, do not put me to shame!

Psalms 119:25,28,29,31

Our lives can consist, for the most part, of one benign event after another. We go about our daily business healthy and strong, vigorous, filled with confidence. But one day some force happens along and drops its load on our life. We're suddenly brought low under the crushing weight of tragedy or loss, despair—even unspeakable sin. We are, after all, only dust.

How we respond to these untimely encumbrances speaks volumes about who we are—and from whom we have gained our character. Even Christians may be listening to the wrong voices; even believers may be giving allegiance to the wrong authorities which will—either immediately or eventually—undermine

our ability to stand.

There is only one Voice that instills in us the strength of character and profitable dependency to ensure that when the storm blast hits, we will still be standing. There is only one Voice that strengthens with love, builds up with reproof, and encourages with mercy.

That Voice is the Lord's.

O God, I feel as low as a worm. I have made the dust my home. Make me to live again, as You have promised in Your word. I am poured out; my soul has melted from my sorrow. Make me stand again, as Your word has promised. I am weary of all the lies of this place; I am tired of listening to them. O God, turn off my inclination to give them heed, and replace it with an inclination for Your law. I will hold fast to Your promises. They will be my hope—my life! O Lord, let me not be disappointed.

the witness

May Your lovingkindnesses also come to me, O Lord,
Your salvation according to Your word;
So I will have an answer for him who reproaches me,
For I trust in Your word.
And do not take the word of truth utterly out of my
mouth,
For I wait for Your ordinances.
I will also speak of Your testimonies before kings
And shall not be ashamed.

Psalms 119:41-43,46

God doesn't ask us never to have questions. His word and ways can stand up to our interrogation. But some believers try to keep their feet in two camps at once—what James referred to as a "double-minded" man.

Jesus, too, spoke against those running hot and cold with the things of God. He said,

“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me, scatters.”

Luke 11:23

The true witness of the believer is his or her constancy. Standing alone, or beside other believers, the Christian is always to stand for the things of God.

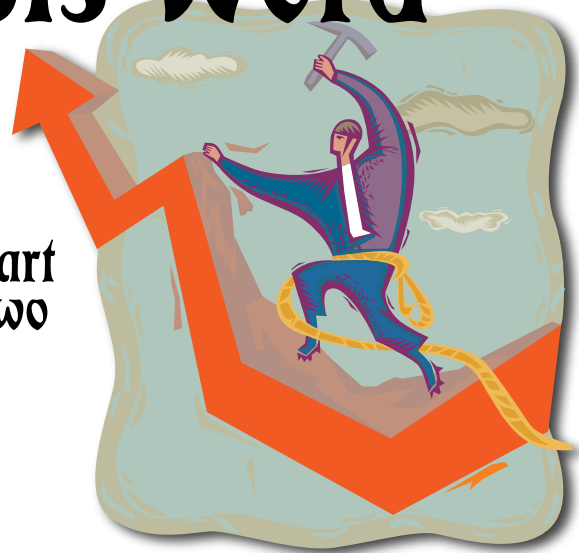
Every day of our lives we are challenged to stand for Christ. We go to the grocery store, shop for new clothes, get gas for the car, visit with a neighbor over

the back fence. In every situation Christ calls on us to remain true to Him.

O Lord, I pray for Your mercy, for You to help me as You have promised—so that when someone tries to shoot holes in my faith, I will be confident in Your holy word. Please God, never remove my privilege of sharing Your truth with others. May I always be worthy of this honor and burden, for I find my hope in Your laws. Even when I speak of You to rulers and leaders, I will do so boldly and confidently, without embarrassment.

Living by His Word

part
two



Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

1 Peter 2:1-3

PSALM 119 IS A SUCCINCT, compact handbook outlining the value of God's word to a believer's life. It expresses poetically how utterly practical Scripture is to a life. More than that, it expresses the deep, abiding love we should have for His written word.

the sweetness

O how I love Your law!

It is my meditation all the day.

How sweet are Your words to my taste!

Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Psalms 119:97,103

For most of us, spring is the sweet season—the season of the year in which the fresh air is fragrant with the presence of new grass, budding fruit trees, peonies, tulips, lilies of the valley, and lilacs. It is the time of revitalizing rains, cool days bathed in intense sunshine, and the sharp aroma of fresh-cut grass.

After the long and drab months of winter, spring is the time of newness, and explosive growth, when living things change from one day to the next as quickly as a young child changes in the eyes of a doting auntie. Last year's acorns littering the land sprout and take root, on their way to becoming mature trees some day. Even the weather itself is young in the spring, moving quickly from sunshine to thunderstorm, then back again. If autumn is the time of old men and checkers, spring is the time of youth and baseball.

Just so, if the words of this age are acrid and bitter to the taste, God's words to man are gentle and sweet. Scripture is filled to overflowing with His goodness, His kindness and encouragement, His eternal promises. Like the taste of honey after biting into rotted fruit, so are God's holy words after the dark cynicism of this age.

How I love having Your instructions for my life. How I love living by them! I love Your law so much that even throughout the day I find myself thinking about it, pondering its meaning, embracing its truth. Your words, Lord, are sweet going in and going out. They are so pleasant to me, the more I ingest them, the more I wish to share them with others.

light of understanding

The unfolding of Your words gives light;

It gives understanding to the simple.

Make Your face shine upon Your servant,

And teach me Your statutes.

Psalms 119:130,135

God's glory does not change based on our perception of Him. The truth of God is that He is (in the true sense of the word) great—He is grand and glorious.

There are gods that wish us to remain blind to the truth about them. They revel in deceit, and present themselves to us as angels of light when in truth they are vermin of darkness. They know that the more light they shed upon themselves, the more they will be revealed for the evil they are.

But the Lord God of heaven desires that our eyes be kept fully open. He has nothing to hide. He knows that the more we see Him as He is—the more fully we comprehend His truth—the closer will be our communion with Him. And that is His true desire.

O God, when I open Your book and Your words reveal the very wonder and depth of Your mind, I am left glowing—in awe of who You are and what You have said to me. In Your ways I am still young, inexperienced, but Your words teach me how to tell right from wrong. Because I belong to You, I look upward, for the

light of Your face to be my beacon and guide. May it prod my complacency and illumine those things You have prescribed for my life.

loving

I rejoice at Your word,
As one who finds great spoil.
I hate and despise falsehood,
But I love Your law.
Those who love Your law have great peace,
And nothing causes them to stumble.
My soul keeps Your testimonies,
And I love them exceedingly.

Psalms 119:162-163,165,167

If we feel like a stranger on this earth, the remedy for our discomfort will not be found in anything of this earth. Our solace, our peace, will be found in the things of God—those things which not only instruct and counsel, but envelop us in His love and protection.

God's word reminds us of His ongoing commitment to us, of His justice, grace and mercy. His word describes the righteousness and holiness of our heavenly Father, bringing conviction as well as comfort. His word will answer the questions that nag at us from those who have no portion of His grace. His word will enlighten, encourage, and strengthen.

To be truly filled with His righteousness, we must hunger for it.

When I open Your book of promises my day suddenly becomes brighter, and my heart fills with joy—just like someone who has discovered and laid hold of abundant treasure. I loathe deception and deceit, but, O God, I adore Your true and faithful law. Your law makes those who love it complete, and they are not

easily tripped up by falsehood. With my whole being I guard Your testimonies, and my love for them is intense—complete.

living to praise

Let my lips utter praise,
For You teach me Your statutes.
Let my tongue sing of Your word,
For all Your commandments are righteousness.
Let my soul live that it may praise You,
And let Your ordinances help me.

Psalms 119:171-172,175

When the French explorer, filmmaker and environmentalist Jacques Cousteau died in 1997, the statement about his death from the Cousteau Foundation included, "Jacques-Yves Cousteau has rejoined the World of Silence," which is a reference to one of his most noted documentaries, "The Silent World".

That announcement from his foundation, well-meaning and poetic as it might have been, was a sharp reminder that, at least in the eyes of those who knew him, Cousteau is not enjoying the same eternity to which I look forward.

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever." And the four living creatures kept saying, "Amen." And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Revelation 5:11-14

As much as I enjoy the peace and quietude of life

in our country home, I had better get used to some loud, foot stompin', window shattering, joyous worship and praise—because that is precisely how I will be spending eternity. Eternity with God will not be a sterile, hushed existence reminiscent of monks in their isolated cells. Frankly, I believe it will be more like a rock concert held in Yankee Stadium.

At the center of it all will be the Lord God sitting upon His throne, and surrounding that throne will be thousands and millions and billions of saints and angels lifting up their voices in loud adoration and praise:

“Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and

because of Your will they existed, and were created.”

Revelation 4:11

Hallelujah! Amen!

The more I learn from Your prescriptions for living, the more my speech becomes a flowing river of praise to You, O Lord. Your Law, Your promises are right and true, and with my tongue I will sing their praise. Grant me a long life, O Lord, that I may spend it singing Your praise. May the rest of my life be lived according to the help of Your judgments.

a Determined Purity



I will sing of lovingkindness and justice,
To You, O Lord, I will sing praises.

I will give heed to the blameless way.
When will You come to me?

I will walk within my house in the integrity of my heart.

I will set no worthless thing before my eyes;
I hate the work of those who fall away;
It shall not fasten its grip on me.

A perverse heart shall depart from me;
I will know no evil.

Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will
destroy;

No one who has a haughty look and an arrogant heart
will I endure.

My eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land, that they

may dwell with me;

He who walks in a blameless way is the one who will
minister to me.

He who practices deceit shall not dwell within my
house;

He who speaks falsehood shall not maintain his position
before me.

Every morning I will destroy all the wicked of the land,
So as to cut off from the city of the Lord all those who do
iniquity.

Psalms 101:1-8

ONE DAY THE FARMER who owns the land south of our property—a hillside dense with old oak and hickory trees that descends for about a quarter mile to a creek—decided to open it up for bow and shotgun hunters. He cut wide swathes through the timber, winding a crude road up the hill, around by our back gate, then winding it back down toward the creek. He cut out small cul-de-sacs for hunters to park their pickup trucks. He tore out stumps, and mowed the new pathways for easier access. All this took place within spitting distance of our south fence, just beyond the pond.

We are not hunters, nor do we enjoy hearing the percussive report of a shotgun taking a life. But since this happy hunting ground was being created on someone else's property, there was little we could do about it.

So I did the one thing I could. I set out with hammer and nails and a stack of shiny new metal signs to post around the perimeter of our land. And most I deployed at the south fence, affixing to the trees on our side glaring red and black declarations that this was "Private Property: No Trespassing" and that we would permit "No Hunting." I did everything I could to make it crystal clear that the killing would stop at the fence. It would go no further.

no further

I have been known to be utterly fearless (read: foolhardy) when it comes to hunters encroaching on our land. Upon spying a shotgun-toting hunter daring to set foot where he shouldn't, I have been known to be unthinkingly fearless. It is not so much bravery as blind primal rage. My own safety doesn't even occur to me (much to the distress of my better half).

Years ago I was dressing in my upstairs bathroom when I noticed a car slowing on the road that borders our front field. To my alarm, the driver braked,

pointed a shotgun or rifle through his window, and fired at something in our field—and in the direction of our house. This driver not only ignored the "No Hunting" sign posted right in front of him, but broke the law by firing from his car. Barely dressed, I ran from the house, crossed the front lawn, and screamed at the gun-toting miscreant who had gotten out of his car to retrieve that at which he had just shot. I can happily report that he did not turn the gun on me, but quickly returned to his car and drove off.

I may be fearless against the seasonal hunter, but against what else do I demonstrate such uncompromising conviction? To what else do I stand at the border of my property and declare, "You will go no further!"

This is what King David was saying when he penned Psalm 101 just before he ascended the throne. In eight succinct verses he erects a bold "No Trespassing" sign against sin. Too wise to deny its existence, he nonetheless stands tall at the border of his home, his land, his administration and declares, "You will go no further!"

beginning with praise

David begins his litany of vows with praise to their recipient. So should we all.

Before anything else, O Lord, I will sing praise to You. When I ascribe to You mercy and wise judgment, my heart will make beautiful music in Your name.

Let us henceforth practice the habit of beginning our times with God in praise. No matter the reason for our prayer—be it contrition, intercession, confession, entreaty, or vow—let us begin by acknowledging His singular qualities, His preeminence over our lives.

Then let us examine *ourselves* before we address the evil that lies in wait beyond our border.

Piety must begin at home. Our first duties are those within our own abode. We must have a perfect heart at home, or we cannot keep a perfect way abroad. Notice that these words are a part of a song, and that there is no music like the harmony of a gracious life, no psalm so sweet as the daily practice of holiness. Reader, how fares it with your family? Do you sing in the choir and sin in the chamber? Are you a saint abroad and a devil at home? For shame! What we are at home, that we are indeed.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

I vow to know the morally sound path and to walk in it. When can I expect You to join me? Meanwhile, even inside my private home I will behave with moral integrity.

confronting evil

When the hunters came closer to our property, I determined to do everything in my power to keep them on the other side of the fence. But do I practice the same level of determination when it comes to the insidious infiltration of my *moral* enemy? Do I shut the gate and stand immovable against the evil that dwells all around my family?

But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

1 Timothy 6:11-12

At the beginning of his administration, King David resolved to stand firm against corrupting evil.

I vow, as well, that I will not place before my eyes

anything that might harm my walk in Your righteousness. I despise the behavior of those who have swerved off Your path. I vow that I will not permit their ways to become a part of me.

I will not keep company with those who have a twisted heart. I will not learn evil.

I will cut off anyone who slanders a brother. I will not be a party to gossip. I will not put up with those who think they are better than everyone else.

renewal

David knew the way of all flesh. He knew that today's promise can become tomorrow's regret. He knew that it was not enough for the godly to defensively avoid sin; they must *offensively* seek out righteousness.

Instead, I will spend time with those who build up rather than tear down. I choose the counsel of those who walk in the way of righteousness.

I will not invite the duplicitous into my house, around my family. Those who deal falsely, those who are liars, will forfeit their standing in my sight.

At the beginning of every day I will cut off the ungodly voice, so that those who would bring only trouble will have no influence on my life.

The wickedness of earth-bound flesh lies all around us. The believer dwells in enemy territory. Every morning we must renew our vow; every morning we must recommit ourselves to stand firm against the corrupting influence of evil.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a

workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these *things*, he will

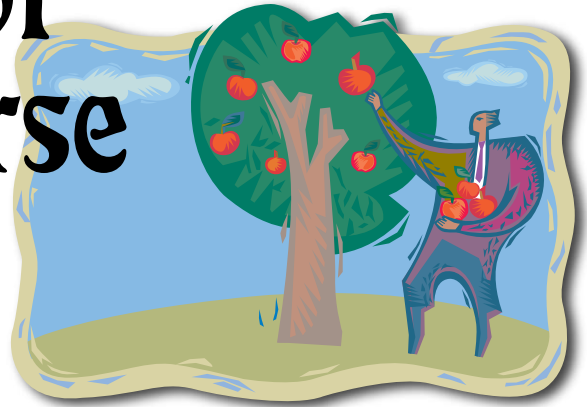
be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.

Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love *and* peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels.

2 Timothy 2:15,20-23

a Hymn of Remorse

part
one



Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Your compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.
Against You, You only, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight,
So that You are justified when You speak
And blameless when You judge.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.
Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being,
And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.
Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Make me to hear joy and gladness,
Let the bones which You have broken rejoice.
Hide Your face from my sins
And blot out all my iniquities.

Psalms 51:1-9

WHILE IT MAY BE TRUE that few of us have experienced the leaden remorse and guilt that come after committing the first-cousin sins of adultery and murder (for adultery surely “murders” the bright and promising innocence of what was heretofore an unsullied union), we “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). From the days of Eden until The Day of Christ’s return, sin will be part of the human condition.

The pope has sinned. Billy Graham has sinned. Mother Teresa sinned. The apostle Paul sinned. The (“beloved”) apostle John sinned. And King David, the “man after [God’s] own heart,” sinned. Egregiously.

Then it happened in the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle, that David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and they destroyed the sons of Ammon and besieged Rabbah. But David stayed at Jerusalem.

Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king’s house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance. So David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, “Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said, “I am pregnant.”

2 Samuel 11:1-5

There are days when one might wonder why God ever invented sex, for its abuse permeates every facet of society. Like a hideous swamp fever, the illicit use of sex rises from the earth’s bowels to entice, to ensnare, to destroy anyone in its path. It has brought down the everyday man, as well as the high and mighty. It has infected and crushed the pious, it has devastated families, churches—whole nations. That which was created by God for the holy union and delight of man and woman has been adulterated,

subjugating the spirits of the profligate, and inflicting untold misery on the innocent.

evil

Even so, David did not stop there.

Now in the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. He had written in the letter, saying, “Place Uriah in the front line of the fiercest battle and withdraw from him, so that he may be struck down and die.” So it was as Joab kept watch on the city, that he put Uriah at the place where he knew there were valiant men. The men of the city went out and fought against Joab, and some of the people among David’s servants fell; and Uriah the Hittite also died.

2 Samuel 11:14-17

Now David had added homicide to his sin of adultery, and “the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the Lord.” (11:27)

remorse

The eloquent Psalm 51 is King David’s hymn of remorse after this sad and detestable episode. In it his confession is true; it is authentic down to the bone. But along with David’s expression of guilt, in its stanzas is, as well, the bright hope of God’s restoring grace. Here is not just the whimpering of a chastened cur, but confident faith in a forgiving Lord, and loving Father.

First, however, David must come before his God in abject contrition, confessing his horrible transgression and asking for his Lord’s forgiveness.

O God, I plead for You to deal kindly with me, by the standard of Your goodness. From the abundance of Your tender love for me—as tender as a mother for the child within her—please wipe out every trace of my rebellion against You.

Take me down to the banks of Your river and beat me

on a rock to wash me completely, from head to toe, of my perversity. Make me clean again after my hateful offense.

In David's confession we have the pattern set. There is no point in lying to God, for He knows everything we have done. The beginning point of confession is to agree with Him that it is necessary.

I would not lie to You. I know full well what I have done. Ever since, I have replayed it, over and over again, in my mind. And the awful scene haunts me.

You, O God, have set the rules. You have determined right from wrong, and by Your judgment I have sinned against You. By Your reckoning I have done what is evil. Therefore I stand before You; I am at Your mercy. Do with me what You will, because Your judgments are faithful and true.

heritage

A relationship with God is a delicate balance between rejoicing in who we are in Him, and acknowledging our heritage of depravity. Even in Christ, we enjoy a sanctified position of brotherhood with Him. But it does us no good to forget that from whence we came—alas, that in which we must still dwell.

In contrast to Your holiness, I began life in pain, in fear, in iniquity. Sin is part of my DNA—as it was part of my mother's.

Even so, You, O God, want me to be truthful with You; You are pleased when I throw open to Your examination every hidden closet of my life. This is why I am confessing my sin to You, openly and honestly. And as You deal with what You find deep within, I will gain wisdom, and a deeper knowledge of Your way.

forgetting

A plea for restoration is another component of confession. For the faithful believer desires more than forgiveness—he wants to be restored to a more spiritually healthy state.

Lord, if You purify me, then I will surely be clean. When You wash me, I will come out whiter than the cleanest snow.

O my God, I remember the unfettered joy and gladness of the praise-procession to Your temple. I want to know that again. Out of Your righteous chastening may I again rejoice in Your presence.

Look no longer upon what I did. By Your grace, remove from Your memory the sins I have committed against You.

O Lord, I am ashamed to seek Thy Face
As tho' I loved Thee as Thy saints love Thee:
Yet turn from those Thy lovers, look on me,
Disgrace me not with uttermost disgrace;
But pour on me ungracious, pour Thy grace
To purge my heart and bid my will go free,
Till I too taste Thy hidden Sweetness, see

Thy hidden Beauty in the holy place.
O Thou Who callest sinners to repent,
Call me Thy sinner unto penitence,
For many sins grant me the greater love:
Set me above the waterfloods, above
Devil and shifting world and fleshly sense,
Thy Mercy's all-amazing monument.

Christina Rossetti

a Hymn of Remorse

part
two



Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation
And sustain me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,
And sinners will be converted to You.
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,

the God of my salvation;
Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
That my mouth may declare Your praise.
For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;
You are not pleased with burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
A broken and a contrite heart, O God,
You will not despise.

Psalms 51:10-17

WE ALL WANT A SECOND CHANCE. We all would like to have “do-overs.” We all would like to be able to roll back the clock, to have the opportunity to expunge our record of the really stupid things we have done.

God’s version of this is called “grace.”

Grace was not invented for the Lord Jesus. God’s longsuffering and forgiveness had been demonstrated, in myriad ways, long before the Son of God became man and gave Himself as the one and final sacrifice for our sins.

As powerful and eternal as God’s kind of grace is, however, it is not cast from the same insipid, malleable mold used by today’s societal mores. For even in His forgiveness and forgetting God teaches through the inevitable scars.

confrontation

One day I stupidly began cutting through a length of reinforcing bar with a hacksaw without protecting with a leather glove the hand holding it. It took only seconds for the saw to skip out of its shallow groove to cut a brand new groove deep into my thumb. The doctor stitched me up, and my thumb eventually healed. But a scar remains—as well as the memory of the pain I needlessly inflicted on myself.

Shortly after David’s great sins of adultery and murder, he is paid a visit by the prophet Nathan, who poses the following to the king:

“There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor.
The rich man had a great many flocks and herds.
But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb
Which he bought and nourished;
And it grew up together with him and his children.
It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom,
And was like a daughter to him.

Now a traveler came to the rich man,
And he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd,
To prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him;
Rather he took the poor man’s ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.”

His discernment numbed by the callus of his rebellion, David (thinking that Nathan was giving him a news report, rather than a life-lesson in parable form), returns a heated response.

Then David’s anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion.”

What follows is one of Scripture’s most dramatic—even operatic—moments.

Nathan then said to David, “You are the man!”

Nathan the prophet then proceeds to detail the “scars” that would be left on David as a result of his sin—lingering effects that would impact not just his life, but generations to come, starting with the death of the child born out of his adultery. Even so, after David confesses his guilt,

Nathan said to David, “The Lord also has taken away your sin; you shall not die.”

2 Samuel 12: 1b-4,5-6,7a,13b

God forgave David’s sin. The record (if not the aftereffects) was expunged.

a restored communion

As it is with followers of Christ Jesus, sin had not irreparably severed David’s relationship with God. That is grace. But the sin had done injury, for the moment at least, to that relationship. That, too, is grace—God’s version of grace. And because he was a “man after God’s own heart,” David did not com-

plain, for he knew he deserved far worse than that. Instead, he immediately set to repairing his relationship with God. The second half of Psalm 51 expresses his yearning to revive the sweet communion with his Lord that his sin had short-circuited.

Let us begin again, O God. Fashion for me a new heart, a pure heart. And repair my broken spirit; make it strong again, and aligned with Yours.

I could not bear it if I never again saw Your face. I could not live if You removed from me Your Spirit.

O God, I long to once again know the deep gladness, the inexpressible joy of living in Your arms. Please, by Your grace, let me know it again. And let me once again rest upon—and be uplifted by—Your Spirit.

gratitude

Confession followed by God's forgiveness invariably quickens gratitude in the believer's heart, and David the king now becomes David the evangelist. He longs to tell others about the righteousness and grace of His forgiving God.

When You do this, Lord, I will pay my vows by sharing Your way of life with those who have rejected it. My purpose? That they will turn away from their wrong-headed sin, and turn back to You.

I ask again for Your forgiveness. Remove from me the millstone of guilt I carry over the innocent blood I have shed. When You do, I will go about the land joyfully declaring Your righteousness.

O God, grant me freedom of speech, so that I might stand boldly in the public square and announce Your praise.

realignment

As he nears the end of his hymn, David shows that the experience through which he has just passed has changed not only his heart, but his outlook. With revived communion comes a realigned perspective. His craving inward gaze has been replaced by a deeper, more accurate insight into what God desires in his life: a servant's heart that is broken and obedient before his Lord.

I understand now that this—my obedience, my heartfelt praise—will be more pleasing to You than the blood of a thousand bulls sacrificed upon the altar. If it were not so, then I would sacrifice ten thousand bulls to You. But You, O Lord, are not satisfied by burnt offerings.

Instead of the stench of burning flesh, You, O Lord, are pleased by the sacrifice of a spirit that has been broken by repentance, and a heart that is crushed over its sin. Yes, Lord, the sacrifice that is acceptable to You is true, authentic sorrow over committed sin.

*Now I have found the ground wherein
Sure my soul's anchor may remain,
The wounds of Jesus, for my sin
Before the world's foundation slain;
Whose mercy shall unshaken stay,
When heaven and earth are fled away.*

*Father, Thine everlasting grace
Our scanty thought surpasses far:
Thy heart still melts with tenderness.
Thy arms of love still open are,
Returning sinners to receive,
That mercy they may taste and live.*

*O Love, Thou bottomless abyss,
My sins are swallowed up in Thee!
Covered is my unrighteousness,
Nor spot of guilt remains on me,
While Jesus' blood, through earth and skies,
Mercy, free, boundless mercy, cries.*

*With faith I plunge me in this sea;
Here is my hope, my joy, my rest;
Hither, when hell assails, I flee,
I look into my Saviour's breast;
Away, sad doubt, and anxious fear!
Mercy is all that's written there.*

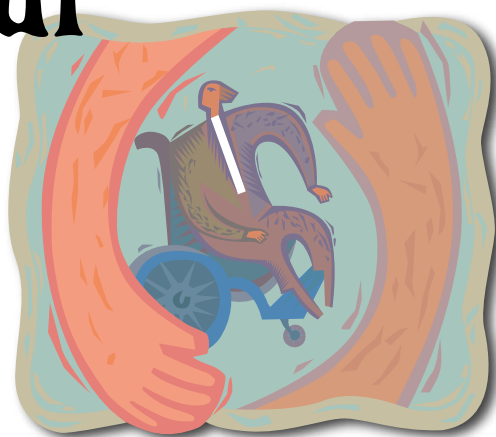
*Though waves and storms go o'er my head,
Though strength, and health, and friends be gone,
Though joys be withered all and dead,
Though every comfort be withdrawn,
On this my steadfast soul relies,—
Father, Thy mercy never dies.*

*Fixed on this ground will I remain,
Though my heart fail, and flesh decay;
This anchor shall my soul sustain,
When earth's foundations melt away;
Mercy's full power I then shall prove,
Loved with an everlasting love.*

Johann Andreas Rothe

Inside & Out

○ LORD, You have searched me and known *me*.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You understand my thought from afar.
You scrutinize my path and my lying down,
And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.
Even before there is a word on my tongue,
Behold, ○ LORD, You know it all.
You have enclosed me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is too high, I cannot attain to it.
Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.
If I take the wings of the dawn,
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
Even there Your hand will lead me,
And Your right hand will lay hold of me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,
And the light around me will be night,"
Even the darkness is not dark to You,
And the night is as bright as the day.
Darkness and light are alike to *You*.
For You formed my inward parts;
You wove me in my mother's womb.
I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;



Wonderful are Your works,
And my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;
Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Your book were all written
The days that were ordained *for me*,
When as yet there was not one of them.
How precious also are Your thoughts to me, ○ God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.
When I awake, I am still with You.

Search me, ○ God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

Psalms 139:1-18, 23-24

tHE HABIT OF YOUTH (at least, that is, the youth of my generation) dictated that when presented with a body of water larger than a bucket or backyard swimming pool, one would immediately begin collecting any small, smooth stones lying in the vicinity. Each stone would, in turn, be grasped by its edges between thumb and forefinger, then spun out on a low trajectory across the surface of the water—the object being to see how many times one could skip the stone, glanced off the surface, before it would run out of momentum and sink.

As with most such youthful occupations, competition made the process more interesting, and two young boys could while away a fair portion of a hot summer afternoon skipping stones across the surface of a lake. The prize? Well, the champ didn't win much of anything; the prestige was fleeting, quickly forgotten even before the next activity. But it was something to do.

This is the picture of the relationship most Christians choose to have with God. Made uncomfortable by anything deeper, they skip lightly across the surface of Deity, glancing off here and there, picking up little snippets of knowledge, keeping whatever is pleasant, but throwing away the rest.

As a result, we don't know our God very well. We stumble through our days laboring under well-meaning but ill-conceived notions about Him, clinging to hazy images picked up originally in the Sunday School of decades past, or from the bilge spouted by well-meaning but ignorant guests being interviewed outside the latest celebrity funeral. When something pleasant happens, we pronounce our God to be good and loving. But when something unpleasant transpires, we're left bewildered: How could a loving God have let this happen?

intimacy

If what illustrates our relationship with God is skipping stones across the surface of a pond, then what illustrates *His* relationship with us is a huge boulder cannon-balling straight down through the surface, deeper, ever deeper, until it snuggles with all its weight into the soft mud and sand of the bottom.

David's Psalm 139 describes the intimacy with which the Lord God knows each one of those who call on His name. It describes a level of knowledge impossible for humans—defying the limits of matter, time, and space. It is at once supernaturally invasive, and warmly reassuring. It is familial. It is personal.

It is holy.

O Lord, You have examined me inside and out. You know when I am at rest, as well as when I am up and about. More than that, You know my very thoughts. Your knowledge of me is so complete, so intimate, that You sift through my steps—and are well aware of what transpires in my bed. O yes, Lord, You are intimately familiar with all my ways. Even before I speak a word, You know the word that will follow after it! You have hedged me about, and have girded me with Your power. Ah, Lord God, this is all too much for me. I am too low, too small to grasp it.

Lord of all

What is truly remarkable, from the perspective of flesh, is that the God who is so personal as to know our every action, our every thought, our every word, is the same God who spans all time and distance.

Even if I wanted to, where could I go to get away from Your Spirit, Your face? For You are everywhere, Lord! If I could reach the farthest star, I would find You

there. If I lay down in the deepest bowels of hell, Lord, I would find You there. If I rise into the wings of the morning sun, or dwell on a solitary island far beyond the horizon—no matter where I go Your strong hand will carry me and sustain me.

The God who positioned every star in space, and who set the orbits of every planet and moon, is the same God who carefully molded the embryo, and fashioned the bones and flesh that comprise each human body.

You made me, Lord, even the hidden parts deep within. You knitted me together even before I saw the light of day. So I will give thanks to You, because no one but You could have fashioned something so mysteriously wonderful as the human body. In fact, all Your works are wonderful—I know that now. Just as Adam came from the soil, so I have come from a secret place—the mysterious womb of my mother. Even there, my forming bones were not hidden from You. You saw me when I was but an embryo, and before even that—before I was anything on this earth, You had recorded all the days I would have.

within and without

Man can know God. He can have a relationship with Him. But mere flesh cannot comprehend God's immensity. It can only bow down in submissive worship before Him, and give Him leave to work His will—within and without.

I cannot understand Your thoughts, for they are too profound—and too many—but they are precious to me. I cannot comprehend their number—more than the grains of the sand of the sea. Given that, I am amazed that every morning when I awaken, I am still Yours.

I belong to You, God. Penetrate to the very core of my being and look into my heart. Test everything there; examine my disturbing thoughts and motives. Look in every closet and cupboard to see if any wickedness—any lingering idols—still reside. Then take my hand and lead me down Your eternal path.

this booklet

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bio

We are David and Linda Lampel, and we live in a large country house in the rural area outside Winterset. Our home is surrounded by fields of corn and soybeans, and by dense woods that are home to deer, raccoons, possums, wild turkeys, and myriad birds of all shapes and colors.

The tranquility and beauty of this place contribute to what we do. In fact, we believe that the Lord brought us to this home because He knew that here we would best be equipped to serve Him and others.

Both of us work at home—Dave with his writing, and Linda (now retired) with her needlework and crocheting projects that are given to charities. Now that she has been unshackled from the business world, Linda has expanded our gardens, and has returned to baking all our bread—and spending more time with our family of five cats. The Lord has given us a good life, and we are most grateful to Him—especially for our 37 years together as husband and wife.

our calling

Acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus Christ, by means of the gifts and skills given by Him, we are called to write and make available, free of charge,

- Christian plays, musicals, worship resources, and instructional books: COMMITTED TO THE EXPOSITION OF GOD'S WORD THROUGH THE DRAMATIC ARTS;
- Christian devotionals in e-mail, print, and booklet form: ENCOURAGING BELIEVERS TO KNOW GOD AND HIS WAYS, AND TO ENJOY A MORE INTIMATE COMMUNION WITH HIM.

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