

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S. LAMPEL

Taking God

Seriously

part two



"I have been crucified with Christ,
and it is no longer I who live,
but Christ lives in me.
And the life which I now live in the flesh
I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me
and gave Himself up for me."

Galatians 2:20

Knowing Who We Are

THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A TIME, since the founding of these United States, when the American Christian should be more at odds with the culture in which he dwells. There has never been a time during the last 240-plus years when American society, in the aggregate, was either as indifferent to or actively aligned against the God and Savior of the believer as it is now.

On December 23, 1776, during the Revolutionary War, the patriot Thomas Paine wrote, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” We might echo that sentiment: These are times that test the faith of believers.

But even within that faith, just as there are Americans ignorant of this nation’s history, and what it means to be one of its citizens, there are Christians ignorant of what it means to be a citizen of God’s kingdom in Christ Jesus. So how can they know they are to be different from non-Christians when they don’t bother to educate themselves about their faith? How can they stand against the evils of these times when they don’t recognize them as evil?

For if they are overcome, having both escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and having again been entangled in them, then the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them.

2 Peter 2:20–21

While there is indeed something supernatural in one becoming a Christian, the process of being a Christian requires some effort. Oh, the Spirit is there, counseling, translating, encouraging; the Divine is still involved. But we mature in Christ by passing through the fire of the desert. We grow in Christ by striving to live as Him, in obedience to God. And the only way we can do this is to know Him—and know our history.

An American’s history begins with this nation’s founding documents, and the remarkable men who wrote them, men who imagined a new and unique nation in which all people would be “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”—a nation in which power would not flow down from a king or queen, or even from the government, but would flow up from the people themselves.

Just so, a Christian’s documented history begins with Genesis 1:1; his spiritual history begins the moment his name was added, some time “before the foundation of the world,” to God’s Book of Life.

To know who we are in Christ, we must scour the pages of our documented history: God’s written word. There we discover our heritage, our lineage; we learn that we had a spiritual beginning before there was time; we learn God’s definition of holiness, and what it takes, in human terms, to satisfy His wrath. And there we learn, too, how and why He sacrificed His own Son as the only means by

which that wrath could be extinguished for the believer.

Part of our determination to take God seriously should be a determined effort to know our history. God wrote that history. It is His story even more than ours. It is the story of His Son. And above all else, it is the story of Their illogical yet transcendent, enduring love for everyone who calls Jesus Lord.

God's Diary

GOD'S WORD, THE BIBLE, IS NOT WRITTEN AT A LEVEL FOR FIVE-YEAR-OLDS; it is not written in "Dick and Jane" vernacular. It does contain many easily digestible truths, nuggets of gold that can be understood by just about anyone. "Love your neighbor as yourself," and the proverb, "A gentle answer turns away wrath / But a harsh word stirs up anger" are universally understood. But these represent just the few nuggets that work their way up to the surface from the deep, cavernous mine that remains below ground. Here and there are simple and clear pieces of gold that a passerby may inadvertently discover and pick up for himself. He puts it in his pocket and continues on his way, blithely unaware of the mountains of precious metal buried beneath his feet. To mine this gold requires some effort, some diligence, and, not least, faith.

You see, the Bible is not for everyone. Like a teenage girl's personal diary that only opens with a small key kept hidden close to her heart, the fullness of God's word opens only to those in possession of its key.

"And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate, that He may be with you forever; the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him. You know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.

"These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you."

John 14:16-17, 25-26

The Bible is, in a manner of speaking, God's personal diary. In it are recorded His history of creation, the accounts of His dearest people, His deepest thoughts and aspirations, His poetry and songs, His best wishes for those He loves, and the account of His Son from page one to the last. But most of this is indigestible nonsense to those without the unlocking key of the Spirit.

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

1 Corinthians 1:18

And here is the tragedy: There are those in possession of the key, who never bother to use it. They never go beyond the scattered, more obvious nuggets sitting on the surface; they never open the deep mine of truth lying beneath. And, as Paul writes to the Corinthians, by not using the key that will open to them the deep mysteries of His word, they are missing out on the very "power of God." As a result, their growth—their spiritual growth—remains stunted, their knowledge and understanding of Christ emaciated and fragile.

WITH HIS WORD, the Lord God Almighty has entrusted to each of His children His most intimate, mysterious, profound revelations. If you are a believer, if you have the Holy Spirit dwelling inside you, those revelations are explicitly and personally for you.

Just as Father God is willing to condescend to our lives, involving Himself in the nuts and bolts of everything about us, so He wants His children to invest themselves in the workings, the subtle shadings, the sometimes mysterious details of His word. By doing this the Christian better understands that the Bible—just like God Himself—is to be taken as a unified whole.

More than that, we are to let loose the power of the Spirit to translate, to interpret, to convict our spirit when our life is at odds with the precepts of His word.

The Motives of the Heart

THROUGHOUT THE GOSPEL ACCOUNTS Christ repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the heart—the internal over the external. Man places greater weight on the actions, the behavior, that which is visible, but God looks at the heart, and gives it greater weight than that which can be seen.

Now it happened, when they entered, he looked at Eliab and thought, “Surely the anointed of Yahweh is before Him.” But Yahweh said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but Yahweh looks at the heart.”

1 Samuel 16:6–7

Heart-condition plays a critical role in Jesus’ fulfillment of the commandments regarding murder and adultery. In His kingdom it is not enough that we refrain from literally, physically taking the life of another individual; we are not to permit in our lives the simmering resentments that effectively “murder” the integrity of the body of Christ.

Similarly, in Christ’s kingdom it is not enough that we refrain from physically cheating on our spouse; we are not to countenance even those things that tempt us to do so.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. But if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.”

Matthew 5:27–30

In Jewish sources, the original command against adultery was treated primarily as a law against theft, for the act of adultery ostensibly stole another man’s wife—that is, at that time, his property. But Jesus makes clear that the commandment against adultery was not at all about property rights, but purity.

In God’s economy, marriage is to be the earthly picture of Christ’s love for His church; repeatedly in Scripture Jesus is portrayed as the groom, and the church His bride. And His dedicated, sacrificial love for it is the standard by which a man is to love his wife.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she would be holy and blameless.

Ephesians 5:25–27

Not surprisingly, then, Scripture portrays those in the church who love the world more than God as having betrayed the marriage bed.

You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity toward God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world sets himself as an enemy of God.

James 4:4

Why should we take God seriously? Because He takes us seriously. Jesus loves us with a single-minded devotion; He is passionately in love with His bride, and He desires that she remain spotless and pure, passionate only for Him. When we take Him for granted, when we entertain passions for others in His place, He feels the disappointment and pain of the betrayal as any loving man would.

Meaning

GOD—AND BY THAT I MEAN THE FULLNESS OF THE DIVINE GODHEAD: FATHER, SON AND SPIRIT—is not just real, but unique, personal, intimate, involved. Since the very genesis of man, when He sunk His own hands into the mud of Eden to shape and fashion Adam, God has been intimately involved in the earthly lives of His chosen people.

In return, He commands—yes, *commands*—that those who call upon His name be involved intimately in His life. Far too many Christians consider their faith to be in the same category as playing golf, or eating at a nice restaurant, or visiting the grandkids: something one does regularly, but not every day. Most of us do not live on the golf course; most of us do not eat every meal at an expensive restaurant; and most of us, no matter how much we love them, do not live every day with our grandkids.

But God expects more. He expects His children to live with Him, to live *in* Him. Life in Christ is not a sterile philosophical discussion bandied about by pointy-head intellectuals, but a top to bottom, inside and out life-change: “In Him we live and move and have our being.”

The morality and ethics of the culture in which we now dwell are soft and pliable—and grossly unserious. Nothing means anything, while anything goes. It is a plastic world: cheap, brittle, easily broken and easily thrown away. The more modern man strives to bring meaning to life, the less life means.

If everything is anything, then nothing means anything.

The Christian who does not take God seriously falls prey to the emptiness and futility of this existence. Even as he claims his faith, he drifts inexorably away from it. One reason God expects more than this from His children is that He knows that every moment we are not living with Him, our faith is being eroded by the fallen culture in which we dwell. In time the believer’s faith becomes as plastic and brittle and meaningless as the sulfurous world in which he dwells.

This world will never reinforce our faith; it will only undermine it.

The Christian who daily, earnestly takes God seriously, does not live this way. In a plastic world built on shifting sand, he stands on a rock. He unapologetically embraces words and concepts, morality and ethics that the world finds abhorrent. Most of all he embraces faith.

This fortitude does not come from flesh, from self, but from his time spent with God: from his knowledge of God’s word, from the mystical union of his spirit to the Holy Spirit living within, and from the rock—his obedience to the Lord—on which he stands.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and does them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain descended, and the rivers came, and the winds blew and fell against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. And everyone hearing these words of Mine and not doing them, may be compared to a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain descended, and the rivers came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.”

Matthew 7:24-27

Our modern culture is one built on a foundation of excuses. Those who do not behave as they should are always ready with a handy rationalization to excuse away their failure.

I was having a bad day.

It's too hot.

It's too cold.

My boss yelled at me.

My alarm didn't go off.

It's not my fault!

When Christians are unserious about their walk with the Lord, they too can try to excuse away their failures, their sin.

Everybody does it.

It's different for men; they have these natural needs.

I'm too busy for that.

God doesn't understand the pressures of this modern world.

I live under grace; Jesus will love me anyway.

For Christians who are taking God seriously, there are no longer any excuses. Failure means we have sinned, and sin must be confessed to our Lord. Beyond just taking responsibility for our errant behavior, even when we do what is

right and things go well we do not take the credit. The glory, the praise, the credit always go to Him—the One who purchased us at the cross.

For Christians who are taking God seriously, His written word is the road map for their life. There is no argument with it, no negotiation, no excuses. He said it, and that's that. He is the Master and we are the slaves.

Or do you not know that your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 6:19–20

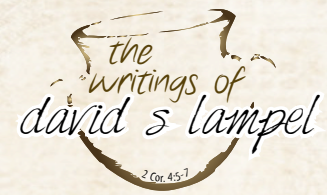
For Christians who are taking God seriously, there is no space, no line of demarcation between earthly life and spiritual life. For they know that “life in Christ” means literally that: their lives have been subsumed into His, and His life has graciously moved into theirs. They are truly *in Christ*. Thus for them there is no longer secular and spiritual.

All is now spiritual. ♦

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit from itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

John 15:4–5





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