

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL

**O God,
Have
We
Made
You
Too
Small?**



FOR NOT ONE OF US LIVES FOR HIMSELF, AND NOT ONE DIES FOR HIMSELF; FOR IF WE LIVE, WE LIVE FOR THE LORD, OR IF WE DIE, WE DIE FOR THE LORD; THEREFORE WHETHER WE LIVE OR DIE, WE ARE THE LORD'S. FOR TO THIS END CHRIST DIED AND LIVED AGAIN, THAT HE MIGHT BE LORD BOTH OF THE DEAD AND OF THE LIVING.

Romans 14:7-9

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On the Shelf

ON A SHELF DIRECTLY BEHIND ME AS I sit at my desk is a copy of *Webster's New World Dictionary* (Second College Edition, 1980). Alongside it is a copy of *The Chicago Manual of Style: The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors, and Publishers* (14th Edition, 1993). These and other reference books are within arm's reach of where I do my work because more often than not they supply immediate and succinct answers to common, recurring questions that arise during the process of writing, editing and publishing. These reference books are valuable, necessary—some even cherished; I could not fulfill my calling without them. Yet, as valuable as they are, not one of them have I read cover-to-cover. They are just there on the shelf, available to me for when I need them.



The relationship I have with the reference books on the shelf behind me is the same relationship most people have with God. For them, He is just there, waiting and available to them whenever He is needed. When they need a quick answer to a problem, a shoulder to cry on, or someone to whom they can safely vent their rage, they reach back to the handy shelf where they keep God. Save for that, they keep Him out of sight, and out of mind.

While it is true that God is personal, condescending and available, He cannot be kept on a shelf—

Thus says the Lord,
 "Heaven is My throne and the earth is My
 footstool.
 Where then is a house you could build for Me?
 And where is a place that I may rest?"
Isaiah 66:1

—neither will He be ignored.

"Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion,

O Lord, and You exalt Yourself as head over all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone."

1 Chronicles 29:11-12

Those who prefer to keep God tucked away on a shelf have a skewed notion of the relationship:

He is not a utility; He is sovereign Lord.
 He is not in *our* hands; we are in *His*.

Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were born
 Or You gave birth to the earth and the world,
 Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.

Psalms 90:1-2



There comes a point in every person's life—every person, without exception—when this truth is either gloriously or painfully confirmed. The God of heaven will not be set aside, ignored or denied. He will not be treated as simply a handy resource for quick and painless absolution, for the way out of a bad situation, for wish fulfillment.

Those who come to this realization early, enjoy a full and rich life in which their Lord is a constant companion, a gracious and merciful Father. They revel in the privilege of being part of His life, as they glory in His condescension into theirs.

Those who come to this later, may enjoy the same, but have along with it the burden of regret for all those wasted years in which their God was little more than a quick reference on the shelf.

Those who never come to this in life—those who never knew God at all, or even took Him down from the shelf—will be made painfully aware in death that the God they spent their life pointedly ignoring is indeed sovereign, and that His Son, Jesus Christ, is indeed Lord of all.

In Case of Emergency

LINDA AND I CARRY IN OUR RESPECTIVE wallets small cards labeled, “In Case of Emergency.” In the unfortunate circumstance of one or both of us being rendered unconscious, incapacitated or dead, these cards point the first responders to our attorney and our veterinarian. Once our attorney has been contacted, a sequence of necessary events will be initiated; once our vet has been contacted, she will see to the care of our feline family.

Those two emergency cards are just the tip of an entire iceberg of contingencies that had to be considered and decisions that had to be made. The process took many months. But once all of this was set in place and the wallet cards printed, we could forget all about the intricate details behind them. It was done. It was all taken care of.



This is a fairly accurate picture of how many people who claim to know Him see their relationship with God. More to the point, it is how they see *Him*. He is something—yes, a *thing*—to pull out in case of emergency. He is kept safely tucked away in a back pocket or purse, out of sight and out of mind, always there just in case He is needed for the dire straits in which we suddenly discover ourselves.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:14-16

An unfortunate lyric from a Sandy Patty song captures this short-sighted philosophy:

*When my plans have fallen through
And when my strength is nearly gone
When there's nothing left to do but just depend
on You*

And the power of Your name.

(from *In the Name of the Lord*, written by:
Gloria Gaither, Phillip J. McHugh,
Sandi Patti,)

That is, *After all I have planned has failed to pan out, after I have exhausted every ounce of fleshly, temporal strength I can muster, after I have run out of all other options—then, and only then, will I turn to my God for help.*

That is not God’s perspective, and that is not the picture we get from His word.

Glory in His holy name;
Let the heart of those who seek the Lord be
glad.
Seek the Lord and His strength;
Seek His face continually.

Psalms 105:3-4



on Prayer

IN THAT CLASSIC CHRISTMAS FAVORITE, *It's a Wonderful Life*, we find George Bailey sitting in a bar and in a desperate situation. Through no fault of his own the Bailey Bros. Building and Loan Association has misplaced \$8,000, and this on the day the bank examiner is there to check the company's books. Not only is he in danger of going to jail, but he feels that his entire life has been a waste. Not one of his plans has worked out; his many attempts to leave his hometown have been thwarted; and instead of being a wealthy and successful architect in New York, he is stuck managing his late father's "penny ante building and loan" from his father's old "shabby little office." His seemingly worthless life now in shambles, he reaches out to his last hope.

O God. O God. Dear Father in heaven, I'm not a praying man, but, if You're up there and You can hear me, show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope, and I... Show me the way, O God.

We can all agree that George Bailey reached out in the right direction, but why did he wait until then? Why is God only his *last* hope? My guess is that George Bailey—an admittedly fictional character—goes to church on Sundays. I think he would consider himself a Christian. If so, why is he "not a praying man"? If he believes in God, why does he preface his plea for help with, "if You're up there" and "[if] You can hear me"? Is George not sure? The God that George Bailey claims to believe in seems to be a very small God, who may or may not be available to hear the prayers of those who call upon Him.

Unfortunately, the fictional George Bailey is not alone.



The Lord God is not just in His heaven, He is ever attentive to His people. Physically and metaphysically He may be an unfathomable distance from us, but spiritually God is closer to each one of us than our dearest friend, our own

kin, our own husband or wife. He knows us inside and out, better than any doctor, surgeon, or psychoanalyst.

O 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, O 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.

Psalm 139:1-6

Did the sovereign God have this sort of intimate relationship only with David, one of His favorites, the once shepherd boy become king, become root and founder of Christ's never-ending kingdom? Does King David speak of a unique relationship only he enjoyed with sovereign God? Near the end of his life, David told his son, Solomon,

"As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you forever."

1 Chronicles 28:9

The human mind cannot comprehend the vast and seamless, universal condescension of God and His Christ. It cannot comprehend a God so immense He can speak with everyone on earth at the same time. Because of the sacrifice of the Son, through the gift of believer's prayer man can enjoy a level of intimacy with a holy God nearly as sweet as in the days Adam and Eve walked the pathways of Eden with their Creator.



What kind of a husband would I be if I never spoke with my wife? What kind of a friend would I be if I never took the call of a friend? What kind of a servant would I be if I never listened to the voice of my Master?

For the one who knows the Father through His Son, there are no limits on prayer, no restrictions. Every believer is free to pour out his or her heart to a loving, attentive Father. There is no right or wrong time; He hears us and responds any time, day or night. There is no right or wrong method of communication; He hears and understands our wordless groans as well as our rehearsed soliloquies.

Our praying is to be more than just a brief laundry list of concerns prefaced by “Dear God” and closed with the obligatory “Amen.” Prayer is far more than that. The sweetest prayer is like an involuntary, reflexive impulse, a muttering, a simple conversation with a dear Friend, a quiet “I love you, Lord,” or “Thank You, my God for being so good to me.” Prayer is to be the extravagant outpouring of an overflowing heart, a heart that rejoices over a beautiful sunset, that staggers back in awe before a triumphant mountain peak—because that heart knows its Maker.

Chlorophyll

EVERY YEAR, DURING AUTUMN, the deciduous trees transition from their luxurious gowns of green, through brilliant Joseph-robos that dazzle the eye, to drying, faded brown smocks and, eventually, an almost embarrassed nakedness.

All summer long the tree leaves have played false with us. We have seen their predominant green as their true color, attributing the transient earth hues of autumn only to the fading of their life before falling to the ground to die and be mashed under the cold weight of snow.

Not commonly known, however, is that it is the colors of fall that are the true ones. The brilliant reds, warm oranges, and rich musky browns are the true colors of the leaves. For most of the year, the presence of chlorophyll—which absorbs red, violet and blue light, but reflects green—masks the true color of each leaf. It is only in the autumn of the year, when the chlorophyll fades, that the true color is revealed.



And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see

the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

2 Corinthians 4:3-4

The spiritual “chlorophyll” of this age—Satan himself—has shielded the true revelation of God from those who do not recognize Jesus as Christ, while that same truth is revealed and illuminated by the Spirit who comes to dwell upon the occasion of our trusting in Him. The nemesis of God blinds the hearts and minds of those who do not yet know God, so that all they see is the deceitful brilliance of this angel of light. The true colors of God—the eternal, unchanging truth of His nature, His character and personality—are never seen at all.

But even with the resident Spirit, the believer can be temporarily blinded by the Father of Lies. Even with the words of God in our hands and the Holy Spirit’s ready counsel in our ear, we can be fooled into believing the pretty “greens” that shield us from the truth of our God.

There remains a part of us always tuned to his lies, for we will not be completely remade into Christ’s image until the day our feet rise above this temporal plane. Until that day, there will always be at least a small part of us that

gives ear to the one who wishes us no good, the one who seeks only the best for himself—the one who never seeks the best even for those who have sworn allegiance to him.

The believer may not have sworn that oath, but that only means that Satan will try all the harder to veil our gaze as we search for God amid the false colors of the forest.

Finding the real God in the tangled weeds of this age is not an occupation for the faint of heart—nor for the lazy. Take it for granted, let down for just a moment, and the world will rush in, painting glorious pictures out of colors that should not be believed. Satan, and the blinded oafs who don't realize they belong to him, will sweetly hope to convince you that they are in sole possession of the truth—that surely we may pick and choose among the many gods available, that only a fool would settle for just one.

We needn't pay any attention to them. The gods of this world are made of papier mache. Like dying leaves falling from a tree, they are blown about by the capricious wind, casting about according to the whims of those poor souls who bow before them.



When we think too much of ourselves, it is easy to think God too small. When we become consumed with our small and transient trials, the result is that we fill our world with self. The more room taken up by self, the less room remains for God. Contrarily,

While we are looking at God, we do not see ourselves—blessed riddance.

A. W. Tozer

From the days of the first man, mankind has been preoccupied with self. And from those early days, his blindness to the truth has been encouraged by the devil.

The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with

her, and he ate.

Genesis 3:4-6

God intimately revealed Himself to Adam and Eve more fully than He has to anyone since. They communed with Him in ways that more completely illumined the truth of Deity than has ever been revealed to man. But even after that, they voluntarily listened to the wiles of the serpent and turned a blind eye to the truth of their Maker. Then, as always happens with humanity, the sin of selfishness was handed down to the next generation.

Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

Genesis 4:4-9

Preoccupation with self casts a veil over our eyes that blinds us to the things of God. But the opposite can also be true. Our blindness toward the things of God causes us to draw inward, and to become preoccupied with self. And Satan has a hand in both circumstances.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Romans 1:21,25 NIV

Jesus Christ, of course, came to lead us in a superior direction.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He anointed Me to preach the
gospel to the poor.

He has sent Me to proclaim release to the
 captives,
 And recovery of sight to the blind,
 To set free those who are oppressed,
 To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.”
Luke 4:18-19



God’s immensity 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 who 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. 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.

The common belief is that all other senses of a physically blind person become more acute because of the absence of sight. But when we are blind to the things of God, *all* our senses become dull.

His Immensity

TO THE QUESTION WE POSE TO OUR God, “Have we made You too small?” we hear Him thunder back the answer, “Yes!”

It is virtually impossible for us *not* to make Him small in our aspect, since we know Him only through fleshly senses that labor under the inexorable pull of earth-bound gravity. How can we help but render God smaller than He is, since our scope of knowledge and imagination cannot hope to encompass His blinding power and majesty?

Beyond that, however, we habitually go out of our way to make Him even smaller out of our proclivity to not worship any thing or any one other than ourselves.

Self-centeredness and grasping selfishness are the sad legacy from our first parents. They knew God personally, visually, intimately, yet still made personal choices that diminished Him in their perception. We are made of the same stuff, and our self-centeredness lies at the root of our skewed and dismissive perception of a holy, omnipotent, and omniscient God.

If we consider God little more than a handy reference for answering life’s obstacles and quandaries, then we will leave Him, gathering dust, on the shelf. In doing so, we are tacitly making Him of smaller importance than ourselves.

If we tuck God away in our back pocket or purse, comfortably forgetting about Him until we find ourselves in dire straits, then we effectively minimize into nothingness any worthwhile contributions He can make in our daily lives. When we relegate Him to such menial subservience, we have stepped off the path of sanctification, we have removed ourselves from His highway of holiness.

A highway will be there, a roadway,
 And it will be called the Highway of Holiness.
 The unclean will not travel on it,
 But it will be for him who walks that way,
 And fools will not wander on it.

Isaiah 35:8

If we claim to be His, but so seldom spend time in communion with God that we are not even sure He is hearing our prayer when we *do* get around to speaking with Him, then we have made His word less important than our own, His thoughts inferior to our own, His input so inconsequential to our daily life that His presence is never missed.

If we have rendered ourselves so spiritually blind from immersion in the culture and ways of the fallen society in which we dwell; if God has truly become invisible to our senses, and our

calloused heart no longer feels His presence, His Breath, His counsel; if we see truth where there is none, but reject the truth of His word, then our soul is in danger, because there is a real possibility we never knew Him in the first place.

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’”

Matthew 7:21-23

Human self-centeredness is the root of it all: The larger and more important we consider ourselves, the smaller we make our God in our aspect.

The largest, the most important, the predominant component of our life is to be our relationship with Father God, through His Son, Jesus the Christ.

His immensity is to be so overpowering, of such overwhelming influence, that our every sense is tenderly attuned to Him, our every action is guided by His counsel, and our easiest and most joyful experience is on our knees in worship before His throne. ♦

The natural life in each of us is something self-centred, something that wants to be petted and admired, to take advantage of other lives, to exploit the whole universe. And especially it wants to be left to itself: to keep well away from anything better or stronger or higher than it, anything that might make it feel small. It is afraid of the light and air of the spiritual world, just as people who have been brought up to be dirty are afraid of a bath. And in a sense it is quite right. It knows that as the spiritual life gets hold of it, all its self-centredness and self-will are going to be killed, and it is ready to fight tooth and nail to avoid that.

The proper good of a creature is to surrender itself to its Creator—to enact intellectually, volitionally, and emotionally that relationship which is given in the mere fact of its being a creature... In the world as we now know it, the problem is how to recover this self-surrender. We are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved: we are, as Newman said, rebels who must lay down our arms... To surrender a self-will inflamed and swollen with years of usurpation is a kind of death... Hence the necessity to die daily: however often we think we have broken the rebellious self we shall still find it alive.

C. S. Lewis

And He was saying to them all, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.”

Luke 9:23-24