



Reflections by the Pond

ARTS OF DAVID S. LAMPEL

Ruminations

Gentle Reader,

For many years I have kept in my files an old yellowed clipping, from 1978, of the Shoe comic strip by Jeff MacNelly, about a motley crew of newspapermen, all of whom are birds. In this strip, a young gofer steps into the office of a wizened old journalist who is gazing out his office window. The youngster remarks, "You're staring out the window again. A writer should be pounding the keyboard..." The old newspaperman turns back from the window and replies, "Wrong. Typists pound keyboards... Writers stare out windows."

This writer spends probably too much time staring out his window, gazing out over the pond and the surrounding stretch of timber as his mind wanders thither and yon, contemplating and meditating, cogitating upon the many vagaries of life in Christ. Especially during these early days of autumnal bliss, when the trees are changing their apparel and time itself seems to slow, ruminations percolate lazily.

Some thoughts collected in such moments grow into multi-page articles for this monthly journal, while some thoughts barely fill a thimble. Herewith, respectfully offered, are a few that fall into the space between.

DSL

Issue #834, October 2019.

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ru·mi·nate (rōō mu nāt') *vt., vi.* [*< L. ruminatus, pp. of ruminare*] **1.** to chew (the cud), as a cow does **2.** to turn (something) over in the mind; meditate (on) —**SYN.** see **PONDER** —**rumination** *n.* —**ruminative** *adj.* —**ruminatively** *adv.* —**ruminator** *n.*

SOMEONE ONCE WROTE TO ME, in the context of an extended discussion on the sovereignty of God/predestination/election, “My only problem is accepting that all sin is God’s doing.” Well now, that is a weighted sentence, and one that is a reminder that after a while one can start chasing one’s tail on this topic—sort of like, “Which came first: the chicken or the egg.”

James tells us flat-out: “...God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone” (James 1:13b). Even so, we cannot deny that God built the system in which all this operates. Consider the first four words of Genesis; they are foundational to everything that follows: “In the beginning...” —that is, go back as far as you like, before man, before the world we know, before the universe, back even further as far as you like and there was—“...God.” In the beginning God. We don’t even really need the verb that follows, for the first four words tell us who is responsible for everything that came after “the beginning.”

James tells us that God does not tempt us to sin; I accept that as theological truth. Nevertheless, sin exists, and God created the system under which it operates. He created the angel—perhaps *the* angel, once of highest rank in all of heaven—who was ultimately kicked out of heaven and given the name Satan. Does *he* tempt us to sin? You bet. Then too, does God use sinful unbelievers to accomplish His sovereign will? Of course: the king of Egypt, King Cyrus of Persia, et al.

James’ statement and “sin is God’s doing” can coexist without negating the other. God created

Satan and He created each of us—all in which so much sin dwells. Was He surprised by the sin that resulted in these creations? No, He is omniscient. So is sin God’s doing? I would say yes, since He created everything that came after “the beginning.” But does this mean He *wants* us to sin? Does it mean He *tempts* us to sin all the more? No to both. But God will sometimes use the sin that has its root in Satan and the rebellion of Adam and Eve to accomplish His righteous will.

For me, life is too short to spend much of my time agonizing over such things. The God I worship, the God who graciously chose to save me, is sovereign over all.

All.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has become His counselor? or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.



Romans 11:33-36

In the Beginning, God...

Witness In-house

IN NO OTHER GROUP OF LIKE-MINDED INDIVIDUALS are the consequences of witness and mimicry so potentially devastating as they are in the body of Christ. In the church we often speak of our Christian witness to the unregenerate, the unsaved, but not often enough do we consider the importance of our witness to each other.



photo by Maurice Tabard

As in any family, there are members of different ages, at varying levels of spiritual maturity. But we need not restrict ourselves to the real but narrow comparison of “strong” to “weak,” as if the issue is based on the comparison of Billy Graham to a freshly baptized ten-year-old. For in matters of faith and our daily walk with Christ, every one of us is strong in some areas and weak in others. I remember once sitting across the desk of an interim pastor who, by way of illustration and commiseration, revealed that his “weakness” was gambling. Here was a venerable man of cloth, well along in years, who was sufficiently mature in his faith to withstand most temptations to sin—except for gambling.

There’s No Going Back

A LINE FROM *THE RETURN OF THE KING*, the third installment of Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, caught my ear the other day as we were watching it for the umpteenth time. Throughout their journey Samwise Gamgee has been the encouraging optimist for his companion Frodo Baggins, carefully rationing their food so as to have enough for the return journey. But as they trudge deeper into Mordor, closer to Mt. Doom, and Frodo wrenches the last few drops of their water onto his parched tongue, even the exhausted Sam has to admit, “I don’t think there will be a return journey, Mr. Frodo.”

Although Frodo and Sam do indeed make it back home to Hobbiton, for the Christian there is no “return journey,” no going back. Oh, some of us may try from time to time to return to our old ways, but our ultimate path has been set by our purchase by the blood of Christ, and our election by God the Father.

The Corinthians were trying to have it both

Given the situation, we all have the potential for strength—and we all have the potential for weakness. So we all must be on-guard for *each other*, protecting the integrity of the church, as well as the faith of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Not only are we to love and help each other, we are also to guard against leading each other astray.

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

Romans 12:4-13

ways. They were believers, but still liked to dabble in the ways of the unregenerate society from whence they had come. For example, some of them were thoroughly impressed by the charismatic, eloquent philosophers spouting their Greco-Roman “wisdom” philosophies. The Corinthians were lending an ear to those who considered the cross of the gospel to be nothing but foolishness. But the apostle Paul reminded them of who and what they were: the called.

Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who

(continued)

are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

1 Corinthians 1:20-25

Then too, the Corinthians were, probably for social or business reasons, sitting down to banquets held in one or more of the city's pagan temples, consuming food that had almost certainly been offered first to idols. Their attitude was, *Hey, we know that idols represent non-existent gods, so there's no harm in eating the meat that's been sacrificed to them.* But Paul's reply to them was, *No, there's more to it than that.*

But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose

sake Christ died. And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.

1 Corinthians 8:9-13

There is to be no going back for the Christian. Every believer has stepped out from darkness to walk now in the light of Christ. We are not to dabble in the things we left behind, for to do so causes harm, first, to us and our walk, and second, to the integrity of the body of Christ, the church.

We cannot have it both ways. We must decide. Will we belong to and live for Christ, or will we belong to the world?

You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?

Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

James 4:4

FAITH IS NOT REAL FAITH if it cannot weather life's inconvenient occurrences. In recent months the Christian community has been informed that first this and then that supposedly well-known (I confess my ignorance of both) individual has (trumpet fanfare, please) "lost his faith" (how did we ever *survive* before social media?).

Let us bravely step outside the poisonous ether of Twitter, et al, and make something clear. God's word—pertinent since we are talking about *Christian* faith—clearly states that a child of God cannot lose his or her faith.

The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, "How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me. But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

John 10:24-30

Nonetheless we are often told that in a certain well-known Christian's life something occurred, or

a series of somethings occurred, that caused this believer to walk away from, denounce, lose, reject, be disappointed by his or her "faith"—taken to mean his or her trust in Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Nonsense.

There are only two rational, textual possibilities: either the individual never *was* a born-again Christian—hence had no faith to lose—or the individual is, *and still is*, a born-again Christian whose personal faith-system has been temporarily bruised. If the latter, Father God and the Son will make sure that that believer will never lose that which has been given them by God.

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

Romans 8:28-30

Our faith in Christ Jesus is, along with everything else in this life, a gift from God, and He never asks for His gifts to be returned.

The Inconvenient Occurrence

Just Another Pretty Face

IT IS EASY, EVEN CUSTOMARY to think of Satan as having a ghastly, horrific, even repulsive visage. He is, after all, the acme of evil, and one would think that consummate evil would inevitably bleed through to the surface. But the quality that makes him particularly, in fact uniquely, dangerous is his seemingly harmless countenance.

One of my favorite depictions of the Devil was by the actor Donald Pleasence in the 1965 picture, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, in which he plays The Dark Hermit, aka Satan, as just another face in the crowd, a blandly ordinary but ubiquitous middle-aged gentleman in a sea of blandly ordinary faces.

Angels can do that, you know, and Satan once was preeminent in the angelic ranks.



photo by Tabard

Thus says the Lord God,
 "You had the seal of perfection,
 Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
 You were in Eden, the garden of God;
 Every precious stone was your covering:
 The ruby, the topaz and the diamond;
 The beryl, the onyx and the jasper;
 The lapis lazuli, the turquoise and the emerald;
 And the gold, the workmanship of your settings
 and sockets,
 Was in you.
 On the day that you were created
 They were prepared.
 You were the anointed cherub who covers,
 And I placed you there.

You were on the holy mountain of God;
 You walked in the midst of the stones of fire."
Ezekiel 28:12b-14

Just like those humans he first corrupted in the Garden, Satan was "blameless...until unrighteousness was found in [him]" (Ezekiel 28:15). Even now, however, after practicing his evil for countless millennia, he has lost none of his outward beauty.

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds.

2 Corinthians 11:13-15

Gazing out over the pond in these early autumnal days, the first and most beautiful colors in the trees are from something not of the tree at all, but a common parasite. Its vibrant fall colors that attract the eye mask its deceit, for poison oak vine rises up from the ground and sucks its sustenance from its host. And just like its first cousin, poison ivy, the removal and handling of this ubiquitous parasite can easily result in painful itching and rash. It is no friend to anyone, tree or human.

Our foe is beautiful as well—beautifully evil.
 Beware the pretty face speaking lies.

The Yearning

AT THE MOMENT OF REGENERATION the believer is imbued with a familial hunger for God and His ways. But over time the world, working in concert with the Christian's natural bent, heaps on layers of insulation that become, as it were, an appetite suppressant for the things of God. The enticing gewgaws with which we surround ourselves add layer upon layer of pleasant insulation between God's Spirit and the new spirit within us struggling to grow beyond infancy.

The purest reason for Christians to avoid the build up of layers between themselves and God is not for any earthly gain, or even the acquisition of heavenly righteousness, but for the sole reason that their new spirit in Christ cries out for His presence.

By the late 1930s Nazi Germany had been rearming itself for some time and was now intensifying its efforts, all in violation of the Treaty of Versailles signed after World War I. Almost alone Winston Churchill, a member of Parliament but not presently in the Government, tried to rally the powers that be in Great Britain for that nation to take seriously the impending threat from Germany. With the benefit of hindsight one questions the sanity of those in the British government so lethargic in their response to “the gathering storm,” which is also the title of the first volume of Churchill’s memoirs, covering the period from the end of World War I to 1940, when he became Prime Minister. Throughout this period Churchill was an incessant, nagging voice doing everything possible to awaken his country to the imminent threat of Adolf Hitler and his legions.

In some respects the Christian’s “Churchill” is the apostle Paul. Near the end of his letter to the Ephesians he rallies the troops to their defenses against the evil one, the devil. He shakes believers then and today by the shoulders: *You can’t do it on your own*, he insists. *You will require everything in the Lord’s armory to do battle against the enemy, who is unceasing in his campaign against your soul.*

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

TO MANY, THE CALL TO LIVE “OTHER-WORLDLY” flies in the face of all logical considerations. To them it sounds as if they are being told to live outside reality—to live with their head in the clouds. But living according to the eternal kingdom-world places our feet on a foundation much more solid than anything manufactured by this world. There is no greater reality than the reality of Christ’s kingdom.

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints...

Ephesians 6:10-18

Even so, most of us go about our daily lives spiritually naked, bearing no protective armor or tactical weapons, choosing instead to meet the enemy with nothing but our own wits and bare hands.

That is a recipe for sure defeat.

In many respects we are worse off than Britain’s isle in 1939, for it had the Channel separating it from Europe. From land Hitler would have to first conquer and possess France before he could land troops on England’s shore. He could bomb England from the air, but in 1939 he could not conquer it.

But there is no similar physical barrier between the believer and his archenemy. We dwell in his domain; the Lord God may have created this world, but for the moment Satan is in charge here.

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.

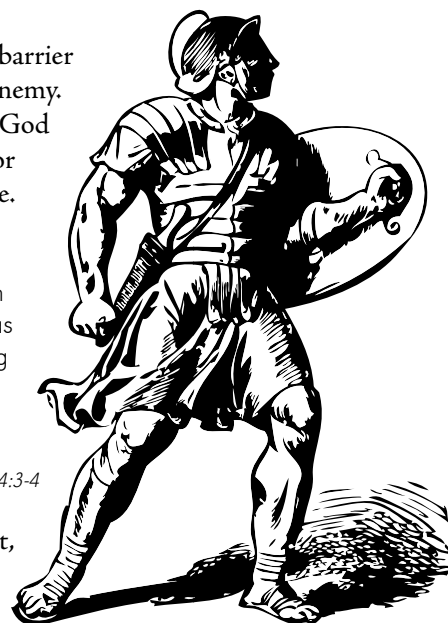
2 Corinthians 4:3-4

The enemy may not be omnipotent, but he is strong. There is no way he can conquer and repossess a believer’s soul, but he is capable of doing incredible damage, both to the individual and his witness for Christ.

We cannot meet him on our own, but must, each day, strap on the full armor of God. Only then—by the *Lord’s* might—can the flaming arrows of the evil one be rendered harmless.

Living other-worldly means that while our feet may be planted on this temporal plane, our heart and soul reside with the Lord. It means that while our body is fed by this world’s food, our spirit is fed from above. It means that when we are forced to choose between kingdoms, we choose the only one that will last forever.

Willful Neglect



Living Other-worldly

All in All

I MUST CONFESS that when asked once if I was a “Calvinist,” I hadn’t a clue whether I was a Calvinist, an Arminian, or a prehensile turnip. So I turned to the books to find out.

Come to find out, I *am* something closely related to a Calvinist: a Reformist. Who would have guessed? While I wait for my membership card to arrive in the mail, permit me to pass along the evidence for such.

According to the *New Dictionary of Theology*, the *centrality of God* is a central theme of “Reformed theology.” Its position is that “human self-knowledge is attained only in the light of the knowledge of God,” and that “we are able to recognize who we are only when confronted by the supreme majesty and transcendent holiness of the living God as He makes Himself known to us in His word, by His Spirit.” According to Reformed theology, “salvation in its entirety is the work of

God.” Most pointedly, “the whole of personal and corporate life is to be subjected to God. Reformed theology has consistently sought to order the whole of life according to the requirements of God in Scripture.”

You have my permission to refer to me as a Reformist, a Calvinist, an aging Baptist, or a card-carrying prehensile turnip. All I care about is that God, through Christ, is at the center of everything we know and hope to know.

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Romans 11:36

For the God-seeking Christian, everything points to God. God is all in all, and if we choose to seek Him every morning when we rise, we will find Him wherever we look.

**A Contemplation
of
the Source**

IN THE WORDS OF OUR LANGUAGE, the Son of God—who would be called, on earth and thereafter, Jesus—existed with God before there was an earth, before there was a universe, before there was what we could call “time.” Jesus was a member of God: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

John 1:1-2

God had no beginning. There has never been a moment when God wasn’t. So the *Son* of God never came into existence after a period of time when He was *not* in existence. He always has been. Likewise, since God is spirit, that means that the Son of God and, of course, the Holy Spirit are spirit as well. That is their *type*. We are flesh-kind; they are spirit-kind.

“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John 4:24

At some moment back in the furthest reaches of time, the triune God decided that He would both create man and love him. The raw material of man’s creation would be earth’s soil, but the raw material of God’s love for him would come solely from His heart. God’s heart-generated love would be expressed in, of all things, flesh. For God to commune with man, the sin of man would require atonement—a blood sacrifice—and only God Himself could supply the one, spotless, perfect Lamb that would atone for man’s sin. God would send down to earth the Son to become that sacrifice.

Thus the circle would be complete. Flesh for flesh. Jesus never could cease being God, but, for a while, He would also become flesh.

*Lord of all being, throned a-far,
Thy glory flames from sun and star;
Center and soul of every sphere,
Yet to each loving heart how near!*

*Sun of our life, Thy quickening ray
Sheds on our path the glow of day;
Star of our hope, Thy softened light
Cheers the long watches of the night.*

*Grant us Thy truth to make us free,
And kindling hearts that burn for Thee;
Till all Thy living altars claim
One holy light, one heavenly flame.*

Oliver Wendell Holmes