

# Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL



*Spiritual Living  
in a Physical World*

If we cannot reach the pinnacle, we should still climb the mountain.

Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by working out my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful. For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am fleshly, having been sold into bondage under sin. For what I am working out, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want, I agree with the Law, that it is good. So now, no longer am I the one working it out, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the working out of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one working it out, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that in me evil is present—in me who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in my members, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a captive to the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

*Romans 7:13–8:1*

# The Climb

**L**IKE GRAVITY, the relentless undertow of sin is a natural law with which natural flesh must daily contend, even for the devout Christian. Just as gravity works to pull us into the depths of the earth, sin, inaugurated for man in Eden and exploited by Satan as his tool of choice, works to keep us as far away from heaven as possible.

Were not man responsible for its persistent presence on earth, this would be the greatest cosmic joke of all time. But he is. No matter who it was that *created* sin, it was flesh that permitted its entrance into the pristine precincts of Eden.

We can chase our tails debating the question of sin's creation till the Rapture puts us out of our misery, but the truth is, if it is a fact that God created everything out of nothing (and it is), then it must be true that He created sin, or, put better, He created at least the ability—perhaps even proclivity—for man *to* sin. For man was not the first; even some of heaven's angels sinned in advance of him.

It is not “good” that we sin; God never wills it upon us. But we can at least turn our proclivity to give into temptation *toward* good by learning from the scars that it leaves behind—just as the frustrated apostle Paul did in his extended lament on the weakness of his own flesh.

## The Quandary

What are we to do about this? Is there anything we *can* do about it? If indeed we are hard-wired to sin, how is it remotely possible for us to live out the spiritual life God calls us to?

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk in step with the Spirit.

*Galatians 5:24–25*

One answer to this quandary is found in our apprehending the difference between perfection and excellence. We will not attain, nor even experience spiritual perfection so long as we are this side of glory, but we can and should strive always for spiritual *excellence*.

The Christian's eternal state of glorified perfection is beyond his reach in this temporal life. We are not promised it—oh, that we were!—nor is it expected of us. Only one Man in all of history was perfect during His earthly sojourn. Only *He* attained the pinnacle—indeed, was *born* perfect, and that perfection never wavered, even under a fierce barrage of temptation from His foe. No, no man of this earth will ever stand astride that pinnacle in this life.

But if we cannot reach that pinnacle, we should still climb the mountain.

## Beginning

Our relationship with our Maker is based on faith—not works. We do nothing to buy His favor, because His favor has already been purchased at the cross. We cannot add to that; we can only believe that it happened.

Some, however, have committed themselves wholeheartedly to the one-time *event* of salvation while disregarding the *process* of living a life that has been saved (sanctification). Some have confused the error of “salvation by works” with the call to “work out our salvation.”

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

*Philippians 2:12–13*

It is a hollow faith that ends with conversion. It is a shallow relationship that does not seek to please the one through whom salvation has been given. Most of us have been effusively warned against working to *obtain* that relationship, but few of us have been encouraged to work as a *result* of that relationship—and thereby obey the one with whom it is shared.

Excellence begins with obedience. Before even that, however, excellence begins with the *desire* to obey.

## The Debt

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

John 3:16

Evangelical types love to talk about grace. They like to emphasize the doctrine of salvation by *belief* or *faith*—that “whoever believes in Him shall not perish.” But many evangelicals get sick and nervous when you raise the issue of service or works—or, heaven forbid, debt. It’s almost as if they base their religion on the second half of John 3:16 without remembering the first.

There are certain conventions of courtesy and decency we follow in our dealings with each other. When someone invites us over for dinner, we write or telephone our expression of appreciation, and very often reciprocate. When someone gives us a Christmas present, we thank them, and maybe give them a present in return. When someone does something nice for us, we generally like to do something nice for them in turn.

So where did we get the idea that—if for no other reason than out of basic decency—nothing is owed our God for the gift He gave us?

God the Father—the one omnipotent, omniscient God of the universe—loves us so deeply, so intensely, that He chose to nail to a wooden cross His one and only Son as a final blood sacrifice for our sins. There had to be a sacrifice, and since He knew we couldn’t do it ourselves, God had His Son take our place on the cross. His one and only, dearest Son. And it was the earthly brother of Jesus who said:

For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

James 2:26

## A Debt of Gratitude

What does it say about us—as people and as Christians—when we show greater courtesy to the one who gave us a birthday present than to the One who gave us eternal life through the death of His only Son? What does it say about us when we happily take possession of grace, yet turn our backs on gratitude?

We owe our heavenly Father the debt of our lives—our eternal lives. This is not a covenant debt, where if we fail on our side, He will retract His promise. No—and this is what makes our payment of the debt so important, so necessary—God the Father will love us no matter what, because our salvation debt has been paid by Christ. Our debt of *gratitude*, however, is still outstanding. We owe our Fa-

ther the common courtesy of living for Him, out of a full and joyful heart of thanksgiving. We owe Him the very best of which we are capable, nothing less.

The triune Godhead loved us so unspeakably much that They willingly suffered separation and a tortuous death on our behalf. For us. They gave their very best—the very best thing that has ever existed in all of time and before: Jesus—just to save our wretched souls.

Yet still people will ask, *Why? Why should I expend the energy and time to reach toward excellence? After all, we live in a state of grace: we don’t earn our way into heaven. Isn’t all this talk of excellence and hard work just an attempt to make us into something we’re not? After all, God isn’t impressed with flash and glitter—and we’re certainly not supposed to be trying to impress each other.*

God is “impressed” with us, no matter what. He can be impressed by our faithfulness, our devotion and giving heart—or he can be impressed by our sloth, and the cheap price we have placed on the sacrifice of His Son.

The righteous person serves the Lord with joyful excellence and a commitment to both His worship and the needs of His body out of the gratitude of a forgiven heart.

## To Be Like Him

Serving the Lord—for the correct reasons—can be a form of worship. We are called to worship and serve our Lord with excellence—the very best of which we are capable. We do this out of a sense of obedience, indebtedness, and thanksgiving. But how is this accomplished? How do we go about offering excellence to God?

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.

Psalm 51:14–17

All things begin with God—even the service and worship we offer to Him. We begin by approaching Him with humility and an open, broken heart. This establishes our position in relation to His. As we proclaim His lordship, we confess our inability to live without Him; as we magnify Him, we diminish

ourselves; as we establish His high and lofty plane, we comprehend its contrast to our own.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the working out of the good is not.

*Romans 7:18*

### An Origin in Him

Whatever beauty we offer up to God must have its origin in Him. It is only through the blood of Christ and the indwelling Spirit that we even gain access to the throne; we are incapable of manufacturing praise out of our flesh—it must be God Himself who energizes the worship process.

Likewise, striving for excellence in our service devoid of the energizing motivation of the One for whom the service is rendered, is nothing more than “striving after wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:26). It is empty effort, offered for unholy reasons. Look, instead, to the example of Christ, the epitome of excellence.

...who, although existing in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a slave, by being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

*Philippians 2:6–8*

There are those who denounce the pursuit of excellence as nothing more than showing off. But when we understand that true, biblical excellence can only exist in an atmosphere of contrite humility before God, we understand that when we strive for holy excellence we are no more “showing off” than was Jesus, when He debased Himself to become the ultimate servant and sacrifice for man.

Though youths grow weary and tired,  
And choice young men stumble badly,  
Yet those who hope in Yahweh  
Will gain new power;  
They will mount up with wings like eagles;  
They will run and not get tired;  
They will walk and not become weary.

*Isaiah 40:30–31*

### To Soar Like Eagles

Soaring does not happen accidentally. Excellence is not something that just springs from us unattended. We serve our Lord with excellence because we intend to, because we love Him so much that we are compelled to serve Him to the very best of our ability.

The Lord has gifted you with certain abilities; it is your responsibility to identify those abilities and place them in His service. He has not entrusted those abilities to you for them to be squandered or spent lazily. He has entrusted them to you for their quality investment in the work of His kingdom. True biblical excellence is not flash and glitter—it is not “trying to impress people.” True excellence springs from a heart devoted to a God who loved us enough to spend His excellence at the cross.

How, then, can we offer Him anything less than our very best?

The goal of living spiritually in a physical world is not perfection. Our template is Christ Himself, who was indeed perfect in every way, but the goal of the Christian life is to unceasingly strive to become like Him—without ever attaining His level of perfection.

Every step up the mountain of sanctification is to be focused on Christ, loving Him, serving Him with excellence, to the very best of our ability. Our *ultimate* goal, our promised hope, is the moment we stand before our Master face-to-face and hear those precious words, “Well done, good and faithful slave.” ♦

