

HOW DOES GOD SPEAK? | JESUS' MOST FAMOUS SERMON | THE DEATH PENALTY

new identity

MAGAZINE

God in focus. World in scope.

How to Get the Most Out of Your Bible Study

MAKING YOUR BIBLE
READING MORE VALUABLE

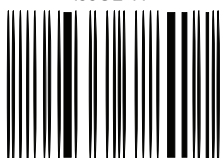
Happiness & Blessing

ENCOURAGEMENT AND
JOY IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

The Be-er vs. the Do-er

BUILDING A BALANCED
LIFE OF BUSYNESS, REST,
WORSHIP AND PRAISE

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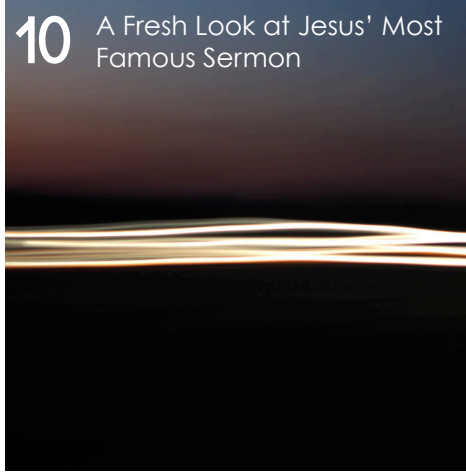
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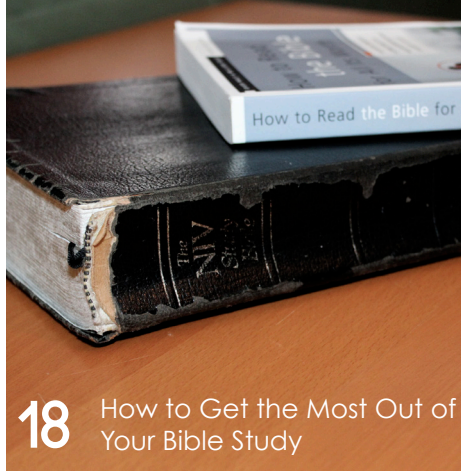
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WITH EACH NEW ISSUE OF *NEW Identity Magazine* I always learn new things and grow in knowledge and in my love of God. It's my hope that you will learn and grow as well through the transparency, honesty and hard work of each of the authors and through God's inspiration. I pray that God will reveal new insights to you as you read through this issue. It's fascinating for me to read different Christian perspectives on capital punishment in *Spotlight: In Perspective - The Death Penalty* by Wendy Van Eyck. Delbert Teachout provides some helpful tips in *How To Get The Most Out of Your Bible Study* and Kevin Neece introduces us to a modern-day monk. These are just a few of the many wonderful articles throughout the pages of this issue. I hope you will be inspired, learn and grow as much as I have—and even more.

Cailin

CAILIN BRIODY HENSON
Editor-in-Chief

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The Rebelution

The Rebelution is a counter-cultural youth movement among Christian young people from around the world, who are rejecting media-saturated youth culture and returning to biblical and historical levels of character and competence. The battle cry of The Rebelution is just three words, but it's an explosive concept: Do Hard Things. The Rebelution is made up of three fundamental parts: character, competence and collaboration. The Rebelution emphasizes networking, exhorting, and encouraging one another, and has become a community of young people mutually committed to doing hard things for the glory of God. For more information and resources, visit www.therebelution.com —Rachel Gooneratne



The Laussane Younger Leaders

The Laussane Younger Leaders is a group with the Lausanne Movement which is committed to mobilizing young leaders to collaborate for world evangelization. The Lausanne Movement stemmed from Dr. Billy Graham's vision to "unite all evangelicals in the common task of the total evangelization of the world." After several international gatherings of evangelicals, a conference of thousands of people from 150 nations met in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974 for discussion, fellowship, worship, and prayer. The current Lausanne Movement grew from the conversations and commitments at the conference to the group that it is now promoting unity, service, and world evangelization.

The Lausanne Younger Leaders team works to bridge generationally and globally the breadth of the Lausanne Movement. The group's ministry is to work on the formation of regional Younger Leader Teams and Networks, facilitating younger leader involvement in Lausanne Working Groups, connecting global younger leaders in an interactive Internet hub, facilitating mentoring relationships, communicating information, stories, and opportunities for younger leaders around the world. To get involved, visit www.lausanne.org/en/about/younger-leaders, email youngerleaders@lausanne.org



Community Voice Mail

Community Voice Mail (CVM) provides voice mailboxes to phoneless people, enabling them to communicate with potential employers, landlords and human service providers in King County in the state of Washington. CVM currently distributes over 2,000 personalized voice mailboxes through more than 100 different human service agencies and programs throughout King County. CVM provides people in need with a personal, 7-digit phone number. CVM sounds just like an answering machine or phone company voicemail, allowing users to leave a personal and professional greeting for callers. A CVM phone number looks like any other number, and does not signal the user's economic status. For more information on Community Voice Mail or how to get a similar program started in your region, visit www.solid-ground.org/Programs/Housing/CVM/Pages/default or email cvm@solid-ground.org



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For new believers and those interested in what Christians think about the world we live in.

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MISSION STATEMENT

New Identity Magazine's mission as a publication is to help people find their new identity in Christ by presenting interesting topics from multiple Christian perspectives. Through this, *New Identity Magazine* hopes to generate communication and understanding to unite people that have different perspectives and encourage thought provoking discussion and commonality through Christ. By using scriptures of the Holy Bible as the source, the Word that binds Christians together, and highlighting different insights into their intention and application, *New Identity Magazine* aims to help readers live a more stimulating, inclusive, and passionate life with God. In addition, *New Identity Magazine* is a publication that encourages learning, wisdom, creative expression, and showcases the cultural and world aspects of life and following God.

Our goal is to represent true-to-life followers of Christ that wonder, dream and have a willingness to learn about varying viewpoints. We desire to dissolve the rules, categories and stereotypes placed on Christians and non-Christians, shed God's light into the areas that may be forgotten or rarely talked about but are vital in many people's lives, and provide coverage of topics often overlooked by the mainstream media or in religious circles.

REFERENCING THE BIBLE:

There are many Bible translations out there. Just a few are the New International Version, The Message, and the New Living Translation. You'll see these referenced as NIV, NLT, The Message etc. When we reference a Bible verse, such as John 3:16, 'John' is the book in the Bible. There are 66 books total. 3 is the chapter in the book and 16 is the verse in the chapter.

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Playground Pardon

a story of repentance

*How grace replaces punishment and
results in a changed heart.*



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figured I had two options: hide in the bathroom until recess was over, or run. My stomach twisted as I pictured the scene.

"Did you kick that boy in the head?" *The teacher on recess duty stomped across the playground pointing an accusing finger.*

Devin fell playing basketball and I was convinced the only thing truly wounded was his six-year-old boy-pride. Plus, I was trying to impress my friends.

"Apologize! Then go to your classroom."

Instead, I entered my classroom with my head down and sobbed my confession to Mrs. Shearer, my teacher. I steeled myself for sure punishment, but Mrs. Shearer looked at me with kindness.

"Thank you for telling me," she said. "I can see how upset you are and I know you won't do it again." I looked up. *Where's my punishment?* I wondered. She nudged her chin toward my desk. I puffed out a breath and sat down. Mrs. Shearer's mercy was a soothing balm. It was also a cure: my days of bullying ended there.

I was only six, but that experience was life-altering. In our infancy of faith, Christians are asked to make a similar life-altering choice; we are asked to turn away from our life of indulgence, depravity and dependence on self (in other words, "sin"), and turn to dependence on God.

Who Sins?

Everyone sins. Everyone has failed in some way, falling impossibly short of God's high standard of conduct (Romans 3:23). Sound daunting? It is. This is one reason God's son Jesus took the punishment of the world's misbehavior—past, present *and* future—by dying on the cross.

The other reason, the central, motivating reason, is because God loves you. His love for you is so wrenching, it caused him to give up the most valuable thing to him (his son) to protect from destruction, the most valuable elements of what it means to be human: your life, your spirit and your ability to experience the most loving relationship in all of eternity. My pastor once explained it like this:

"When Jesus died, he took all your sins and put them on like a skin. In return, he gives you his clean, unblemished skin so when God looks at you, he sees the pure and blameless perfection of his Son."

This means if you've recognized your sinfulness and admitted it to Jesus; if you've asked for his forgiveness; and if you've committed to walk away from your old ways, then you're eternally forgiven (Romans 10:13) and able to recognize and experience God's love. You have sinned, but that doesn't change how God has always felt about you.

If I'm Already Forgiven, Why Repent?

This is where things get tricky. You are forgiven, but the problem is your selfish nature has not gone away. And as you mature, so does your understanding of sin. These days, I might not physically kick people when they're down, but my sins are more nuanced, ingrained and buried under two-plus decades of living.


Too often, my reaction in sin is to swing to the opposite (and no less sinful) extreme. Shortly after my "playground pardon," I promised God I would be perfect. I now look back on this and laugh at its impossibility. Yet this moment marked an enduring struggle with perfectionism: a sin that essentially declares I don't need God. I can save myself, heal myself, redeem myself. When I pose as "perfect" it is difficult to admit my sins to anyone, let alone God. When we repent such sins, the barrier to closeness with God is lifted.

What Are the Benefits of Confession?

The Bible has much to say about our continual need for confession. The book of James says to "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (5:16). And Hebrews says to not miss out on the grace of God by letting bitterness grow between you (12:15). God knew we would need instructions for how to live and maintain our relationships unhindered.

I was recently faced with a big time-sensitive decision. I felt alone in my thoughts and as if my prayers were landing in God's "spam" box, so I asked a wise friend to help me sift through the confusion. "Why all this *now*?" I asked. "Why *this* timing?" She asked if I was angry. I nodded and wiped a tear. She asked if I was angry with God. I nodded again and she suggested I confess my anger to God right then and ask him to forgive me. After a short, simple, tearful prayer my tension and anxiety drained. I felt calm and peaceful.

Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend, authors of *Boundaries and How to Have that Difficult Conversation You've Been Avoiding*, suggest that the more parts of ourselves we reveal in our relationships (strengths, weakness, successes and failures), the greater the quality of the relationship. The same is true in our relationship with God. He does not like to see us suffer the pain of disconnection.

Confession, then, is not for God's sake, it's for ours. It brings the less desirable parts of ourselves into our relationship with God where they can be healed with the light of mercy and grace, continually setting us free from the silent, subtle undertow of sin and relational separation. 

DISCOVERING AUTHENTIC TRANSFORMATION

You have a destiny.

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KIMBERLY DAVIDSON

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Ring...ring...ring. Wow! It's God! God called me!

Is that what Christians mean when they say, "I've been called by God" or "I'm seeking my calling?" Clearly, God Almighty doesn't call us on our phones. "God called me" is a popular phrase in our community. So, what does it mean?

When we speak of "our calling," most of the time we think we are being asked to *do something*, such as change careers, go to the mission field, go back to school, or have a child. What I can tell you as a Bible teacher and spiritual development coach is once we accept the call to be a Christian, a supernatural transformation process begins—resulting in a call to *do something*.

The good news is every believer can experience a unique freedom and a new identity through the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:1). The truth is: You have a destiny. You've been called—so answer!

The Bible says in Romans 8:29, “For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” (NLT) That is God’s *principal* call on our lives. He desires we work constantly to live holy, righteous lives, which is called “sanctification.” This doesn’t mean we become Jesus, but as his creation we can mirror many facets of his image.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified...” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-4).

“Sanctify” means to make holy or set apart; to conform to the likeness of Jesus Christ (see Eph. 4:24; Heb. 12:10). Early twentieth century minister and teacher, Oswald Chambers, wrote, “We are not here to be God’s showroom, we are here to exhibit one thing—the absolute captivity of our lives to Jesus Christ.”

We are told throughout our lives that we are a product of our past, which is true. Our biological makeup and distinct personalities come from our ancestral line. Our thinking processes, our behaviors, every flaw, what we like and don’t like, is a result of our upbringing and social environment. Therefore, you can say what we are today is the result of a previous condition. Yet, when we become a Christian, Jesus tells us our thinking must be renewed and our behavior must be based on becoming more like him. Salvation is just the beginning. Spiritual growth must come next.

Our call and primary motive as a believer in Jesus Christ is to be conformed to his likeness. We are products of God’s kingdom today and not our past, which means we have the ability to live with joy, passion and purpose. The Bible says, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

In the Bible, the result of the relationships Christ formed were usually a positive personality change in the people he knew. The formation of a close, trusting relationship with Jesus had a great effect on their self-esteem. We see this clearly in the lives of the disciples. They were ordinary men whose lives were transformed by the power of God. I like the paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 5:17 in The Message translation, “Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it!”

There is a saying that goes, “When I change the way I look at things, the things I look at change.” We have a choice to either live with the attitude that imitating Christ is impossible or not. We can tell ourselves, “I’ve got so much baggage from my past that I’ll never be able to live like Jesus,” or we can tell ourselves, “I’ve had some bad breaks, but Jesus is living in me now. He’s working in and with me to get rid of that old garbage. I choose to see myself as a new creation—just with some rough edges.”

Authentic transformation requires a long-term commitment, a solid partnership with God, the willingness to grow through pain and hardship, and the fortitude to live a countercultural life. As we are slowly transformed into the image of Christ, the old self shrinks. As our behavior changes, our brain chemistry changes for the better. Science now proves what the Bible has said all along; God designed us with the ability to change our own brains. We actually can “rewire” our brain which means we can change our thinking (called plasticity or neuroplasticity). It refers to the actual rewiring of the structure of the brain for a new type of use through developmental and damage repair.

God transforms our lives by renewing our minds, which he does through his truth—the Word of God (John 17:17) contained in the Holy Bible. His desire is that our minds and hearts are changed in such a way that our old negative values, beliefs and practices of the old life, the old mindset and old thinking patterns are rewired. This is a learned behavior. It is a discipline. Any one of us can cultivate it.

Paul, a classic example of a transformed person, said that the only thing that matters is being transformed by God into a new creation. The apostle said, “It doesn’t matter whether we have been circumcised or not [a Jewish custom]. What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation” (Galatians 6:15, NLT). Jesus defined the destination of the journey (our call) when he taught his followers that the most important exhortations from God were to love God and his people with all of their heart, mind, strength, and soul (Mark 12:30-31). Sanctification is the process that enables us to gradually die to sin, self, and society in order to fully and profoundly love God and other people.

Ask yourself:

Am I willing to look at the things that are hindering me from my call as a believer?

Do I have an attitude of willingness to expose and examine obstacles of my old life—spiritually, physically, emotionally and relationally?

Christ came and he gives us an incredible gift: transformation into new creations with a new nature. Give God permission to tenderly begin his conversion process. Give him permission to clean out all the old yucky cobwebs of your heart and mind. Let his grace permeate your life. Pray as David did, “Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you.

Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life. Rescue me from my enemies, LORD, for I hide myself in you. Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground” (Psalm 143:8-10, NIV).

Thank God for beginning his amazing transformation process and promising you an incredible future! 🙏

“We are products of
God’s kingdom today
and not our past, which
means we have the
ability to live with joy,
passion and purpose.”

A FRESH LOOK AT *Jesus' Most Famous Sermon*

*The Beatitudes are a blessing, not a list of
unattainable ideals.*



NATHAN RUTAN

Nathan Rutan is a recent graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. In his spare time Nathan enjoys keeping up on technology, spending time with his family, exercising and working on a math-less theory of gravitation which he developed on a napkin many years ago.

Have you ever read through the first portion of Matthew 5 and felt like it sounded more like a list of your failings rather than a list of blessings? Perhaps you feel that the first section of Matthew 5, usually titled the “Beatitudes,” is nothing more than a list of impossibly high standards, maybe something monks could achieve through years of torturous penance, but certainly not attainable for the vast majority of everyday folks like you and me. If that’s the way you have read Matthew 5 in the past, it may be beneficial to give it a fresh look. And if this is the first time you are giving this scripture a look, then this is a perfect opportunity to start viewing it differently from the beginning.

Perhaps one of the first things that you’ll notice about Matthew 5:3-11 is that this section of scripture not only seems like a list of impossible standards, but it also seems like a list of various paradoxes. How can one be blessed when they mourn or when they’re persecuted? How can one expect to inherit the Earth by being meek? Isn’t it the strong that usually get all the land? And what about this idea of hungering and thirsting for righteousness? In spite of the idea that, again, this seems like something only monks are expected to do on a regular basis, how is it that someone can be expected to be filled by being encouraged in their state of need?

These types of questions have gripped the minds of countless readers for millennia as they have wrestled with the words of Christ. Sadly, most people speak well of this portion of Scripture but simply skip its application in everyday life. But what if there was another way of reading these passages, a way in which to incorporate this portion of Jesus’ teaching more deeply into everyday life?

The Origin of the Word Beatitudes

First of all, let me just clear up where the term “Beatitudes” originates. I’ve heard on occasion some references to this term as the “be-attitudes,” or in other words, the “attitudes” we should “be” having. While this makes for a good sermon, the term actually comes from the Latin word “*beatus*” or “blessed.” In addition, the Latin term is a translation of the Greek word

“*makarios*,” and this is the term that is used in the original Greek version of Matthew 5 and Luke 6 among other places in the New Testament.

Now, another bit of business that we need to deal with is the fact that the portion of scripture called the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 is not alone in the biblical text but has a companion section in the book of Luke. While Matthew 5 is the larger section of “Beatitudes,” containing nine statements with the structure of “Blessed are you...” or “Blessed are those...” Luke 6 contains a similar portion with four of these “Blessed are you...” statements. Furthermore, one of the first things you’ll notice when comparing these two sections in Matthew and Luke is the fact that Luke explicitly says “Blessed are you who are poor...” and also “Blessed are you who are hungry now...” whereas Matthew says “Blessed are the poor in *spirit*...” and “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *righteousness*...”

Indeed, there are many more items that we could discuss concerning both the similarities and differences between Matthew’s and Luke’s versions of the Beatitudes, such as the way that Luke addresses his audience in the second person, whereas Matthew uses the more indirect third person. In addition, Matthew stresses more the Kingdom of God and Luke seems more focused on the present. And, although we could spend much time on these issues, I would like to set these to the side and for the sake of this article and focus more on the Matthean version of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5. Also, while we focus on Matthew 5, our question in this article will be the intent of these nine sayings and whether they are simply unattainable ideals, or whether they are something ordinary folks like you and me can practice everyday.

What Do They Mean?

For many years, indeed many centuries, the Beatitudes and the “Sermon on the Mount” of which the Beatitudes are the first portion, have been interpreted idealistically. That is, they have been thought to be a list of lofty states that one might achieve which would then unlock the blessings described. For example, if one could become poor enough in spirit, or meek enough, or go around with enough of a sorrowful attitude, one would then reap the blessings pronounced for those particular “virtues.” This interpretation has come under much scrutiny in the past few decades. Owing to some recent advances in the way that the Gospels have been read and translated, it is thought by a growing number of scholars that the Beatitudes and their blessings are pointing more toward a prophetic interpretation, which keeps in mind the coming reign of the Kingdom of God.

Indeed, if one were to read the Beatitudes against the background of a prophetic view of the coming Kingdom of God, one then begins to see that these are not ideals that someone can simply adopt, but rather they are pronouncements of blessing for those that happen to be in that state when held against both the passing away of the world and the coming reign of the Kingdom of God. Whew, that was a mouthful. In other words, Jesus is saying “Those that are poor in spirit now should rejoice because

the Kingdom of God is arriving!" and also, "Those that mourn, or hunger and thirst for righteousness now, because they are not of this present world, should rejoice and know that they are blessed because the Kingdom of God is coming and they will be filled and they will be happy!"

The difference here is between what might be called an interpretation of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount as either "wisdom teachings" or "prophetic teachings." If these were simply wisdom teachings, much like the proverbs of a wise man, they would emphasize the idea that living by certain ideals brings about certain rewards. However, if these are prophetic teachings they would emphasize the rescuing and delivering action of God. Let's take a closer look at the idea of the Beatitudes as "prophetic teachings."

The Beatitudes as Prophetic Teachings

A scholar named Robert Guelich noted that the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 are quite similar to the structure of Isaiah 61. Indeed, when the Beatitudes of Matthew 5 are placed next to Isaiah 61, the similarities are too close to ignore. Take a look at the following table put together by a scholar named Glen Stassen:

As you can see, the similarities in both content and structure between Isaiah 61 and Matthew 5 are unmistakable. Now, keeping in mind the similarities with the prophetic passage of scripture in Isaiah 61, it becomes easier to see why we can read the Beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-11 as prophetic teachings pointing to the deliverance of God rather than simply wisdom teachings calling for the adoption of some particular list of virtues. With this

Isaiah 61	Matthew 5
61:1,2 good news to the oppressed...the year of the LORD's favor	5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
61:1,2 to bind up the brokenhearted...to comfort all who mourn	5:4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted
61:7 They will inherit a double portion in their land.	5:5 Blessed are the humble, for they shall inherit the earth.
61:3 They will be called oaks of righteousness	5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
61:11 So the LORD God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.	5:10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted for... righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"If [the Beatitudes] were simply wisdom teachings, much like the proverbs of a wise man, they would emphasize the idea that living by certain ideals brings about certain rewards. However, if these are prophetic teachings they would emphasize the rescuing and delivering action of God."

understanding of the Beatitudes we are taught that we can expect blessing by our sharing in the Kingdom of God, and that our present troubles are to be interpreted in some ways as a prophetic sign pointing to the coming Kingdom.

In conclusion, with the previous interpretation in mind, do you feel that your understanding of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 might have changed, or that a new way of reading this text has been made available to you? Does this portion of scripture still seem like a list of impossible virtues to adopt, a set of paradoxes, or do you get the sense that just being a member of the body of Christ you are already sharing in this list of blessings? Personally, I find this reading of the Sermon on the Mount refreshing as this helps me to see that I am currently sharing and participating in the blessings of the Kingdom of God as it has been inaugurated in Christ. I find then, that the blessings in the Beatitudes are something with which to rejoice, rather than a depressing list of my personal failings.



IN PERSPECTIVE

Showcasing today's touchy subjects.

THE DEATH PENALTY

Exploring biblical arguments for and against capital punishment.



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WENDY VAN EYCK

Wendy Van Eyck blogs about her journey at www.halfformedwish.blogspot.com and is currently earning her keep as Head of Production of a 24-hour Christian Music Channel in Johannesburg, South Africa.



What crimes warrant the death penalty? If any? Does the Bible provide any guidelines?

The death penalty

Along with politics, sex and money, the death penalty is a taboo topic. Capital punishment, often referred to as the death penalty, originally comes from the Latin term, *capitalis* which means "regarding the head." Therefore a capital crime was originally one where the head was severed from the body. Today we use the term capital punishment to refer to the practice of putting

someone to death as punishment for a specific crime after they are found guilty in a legal court of law. Crimes that can result in the death penalty are known as capital crimes in the United States. Most countries reserve the death penalty for serious crimes such as premeditated murder. Some countries also view treason, some types of fraud, adultery and rape as crimes worthy of receiving the death penalty.

In December 2010, Amnesty International was aware of at least 2,024 new death sentences that were handed down and 17,833 people who were under sentence of death worldwide. Amnesty International estimate 527 people were executed either by beheading, electrocution, hanging, lethal injection or shooting. This number does not include the thousands of executions which Amnesty International believe occur each year in China as the Chinese government does not publish these. Amnesty International ranks countries with the highest rates of execution, after China (estimates are over 5000 executions occur a year), comes Iran (at least 252 executions occurred in 2010), North Korea (with upwards of 60), Yemen (with no fewer than 53) and then the United States of America with 46.

Not all countries are pro death penalty. In recent years more and more countries have rejected it for various reasons. By 1977, 16 countries had abolished the death penalty. Amnesty International reports that, 33 years later, 96 countries abolished the death penalty and two-thirds of the countries in the world have abolished the death penalty in practice if not in law. The African country of Gabon removed the death penalty from its legislation in 2010. Lebanon, Mali, Mongolia and South Korea have bills abolishing the death penalty pending in Parliament. This leaves 58 countries where the death penalty still exists and as of 2010, 23 of these countries carried out an execution in the last year.

Christians and the death penalty

While many nations are divided about whether or not the death penalty should be used so are many Christians. For much of Christian history, churches accepted that capital punishment was a necessary part of society. During the reign of Pope Innocent III from 1198 to 1216 proposed that, "The secular power can, without mortal sin, exercise judgment of blood, provided that it punishes with justice, not out of hatred, with prudence, not precipitation." In 1566, the Roman Catechism stated that the power of life and death had been entrusted by God to civil authorities and that using this power does not amount to murder but rather a supreme obedience of God's commands. The law of the Vatican City included the death penalty for anyone who tried to assassinate the Pope up until 1969. A Pew Forum poll taken in 2008 found that public support for capital punishment in churches dropped to 62 percent from a high of 80 percent in 1994. The Church is further divided on this issue and interestingly enough along racial lines. White evangelicals are still the death penalty's strongest supporters, with 74 percent approval, but that was down from 82 percent in 1996. While according to the Pew Forum poll, black Protestants oppose the death penalty by 51 percent. This may be because as of 2008, African Americans made

up 13 percent of the US population but they constituted nearly 42 percent of death row inmates. A 2010 study by Lake Research Partners on behalf of the Death Penalty Information Center indicated that Catholics were more disturbed about the problems of capital punishment and more supportive of alternative sentences than the general population. Only 24% of Catholics—compared to 33% of the general population—supported the death penalty when respondents were given a range of alternative punishments for murder.

The Old & New Testament

With all the controversy inside the Church about whether or not the death penalty is right, it's worthwhile studying what the Bible has to say. In Genesis 9:6 we read that "whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" clearly proclaiming that the punishment for committing murder is to die. Throughout the Old Testament the principle of taking equal revenge for a wrong doing is practiced. The Old Testament specifies 36 offences that could result in the death penalty. These include murder (Exodus 21:12-14), attacking or cursing a parent (Exodus 21:15, 17), kidnapping (Exodus 21:16), failure to confine a dangerous animal resulting in death (Exodus 21:28-29), incest and adultery (Leviticus 20:10-12) and even doing work on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14). These commands were given by God for people to follow.

The New Testament does not have any specific teachings about capital punishment but it does contain what is possibly one of the most famous executions in history, that of Jesus being crucified on the cross. In the New Testament, the Old Testament ideas of punishment are not the focus. Jesus' message of forgiveness, love and redemption is the focal point. This does not make the ideas of punishment unimportant. In Matthew 5:38-41 Jesus clearly rejected the idea of an eye for eye, saying that, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth' but I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament seems to teach that it is right of the state to execute law breakers. Perhaps two of the most notable biblical references in regards to the death penalty in the New Testament deal with the right of the state to exact capital punishment rather than its moral implications. Jesus tells Pilate in John 19:11 when he has the power to decide whether Jesus is crucified or not that God has given Pilate the power to make this decision. However, the death of Jesus is not a paradigm for capital punishment in general. On one hand, each of the Gospels indicate that Jesus' death was the unjust killing of an innocent man. Second, Jesus says elsewhere in John that no one takes his life from him, but he lays it down on his own accord. Third, many manuscripts (such as John 8) contain the story of the woman caught in adultery, to which Jesus says to let the sinless one cast the first stone. Another interesting passage is found Romans 13:4 where Paul writes that the magistrate who holds authority "does not bear the sword in vain; for he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer." But the assumption here is that the

church is distinct from these earthly rulers, the command being to fear the magistrate, not necessarily affirm their decisions for capital punishment. In addition, in light of how Romans 12:17-21 (NIV) says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." These ideas are contrary to the acting out of the death penalty.

Retribution

Retribution is probably one of the most popular arguments for the death penalty as it fits well with most people's inherent sense of justice. Working on the premise that only guilty people deserve to be punished, but all guilty people deserve to be punished in proportion to the severity of the crime, this argument states that real justice requires people to suffer appropriately for the crime they've committed. The idea of retribution may come from as far back as Adam and Eve. After disobeying God's laws in the Garden of Eden, the sentence of natural death was pronounced against them by God. Trevor Harbottle, who is for the death penalty used the recent killings in Norway where 76 people died as an example of where he felt retribution could be applied, and went on to say that executing such a person sends a message that, "we do not approve of your action, or anyone else who takes such an action, and the lives of those you murdered were sacred." But how do notions of retribution associate with Christian theology? If we consider that one person, Jesus, gave his life as a ransom for all, as well as certain scripture that seem to push against retribution (Matthew 5 through 7 and the already mentioned Romans 12), how are we to view retribution? Our ideas of enacting morality and justice through the death penalty could be argued to directly conflict with Jesus' teachings in Matthew to "not murder," to "turn the other cheek," and to "love our enemies."

Deterrence

While statistical evidence doesn't confirm or prove that deterrence works, many people still argue that by executing convicted murderers, would-be murders will think twice about killing people. John McAdams of the Department of Political Science at Marquette University argues that the death penalty is beneficial even if it doesn't deter would-be murderers, "If we execute murderers and there is in fact no deterrent effect, we have killed a bunch of murderers. If we fail to execute murderers, and doing so would in fact have deterred other murders, we have allowed the killing of a bunch of innocent victims. I would much rather risk the former. This, to me, is not a tough call." Ecclesiastes 8:11 supports the idea of deterrence stating simply that, "when the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people's hearts are filled with

schemes to do wrong." Though, it could be argued that it may depend on the circumstances or type of crime, it does not make the idea and effectiveness of deterrence any less difficult.

Prevention of re-offending

While those against the death penalty advocate imprisonment for life without the possibility of parole, instead of execution, those for the death penalty argue that this does not adequately protect society. Apart from the risk of a person escaping prison and killing again, allowing the offender to live puts the prison staff and other inmates at risk. Helen Swanepoel, who is for the death penalty, believes that putting the perpetrator to death brings comfort that no one else will be hurt by that person. This is a logical view, but there seems to be little Biblical support of this type of prevention. On the contrary, the whole of Matthew 18 pushes very, very hard for followers of Christ to show mercy and to forgive people. Fear of a repeat may be our first response, but forgiveness may be a much more powerful way of creating a safer society.

Closure and vindication

Another argument often used in favor of the death penalty is that its action brings closure for the victims' families. One advocate of the death penalty, Nathan Ro, believes that, "There is an element of fairness that although [execution of the perpetrator] will never restore the families lives, it will help them to move on." Others argue that this type of fairness is our way of coping in the moment, and in no way makes moving on any less difficult. It instead fuels our desire for revenge (though Romans 12:19 speaks against taking revenge). Additionally, if God can and does restore *anybody*, isn't it also "fair" to give the perpetrator a chance for real remorse and forgiveness from God?

Innocence

Since 1973, the U.S. judicial system has released 116 people from death row after finding them innocent. Most of these people spent 9 years of their life on death row before being exonerated. This is the most common argument used by people you are against capital punishment is that the justice system is flawed. Mistakes will and have happened which result in people being put to death for crimes that they have not committed. In many countries there is also the concern that judges and legal systems could be bribed to make a judgment. Lassie Lawson believes that the death penalty can never be applied if there is the possibility that those wielding power could be corrupted. Do we have reasonable doubt that a perpetrator is guilty or reasonable faith that the justice system has worked accurately? There is no easy answer. Either way, Proverbs 17:15 says, "Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent – the Lord detests them both."

Brutalizing society

Those against the death penalty argue that allowing capital punishment brutalises individuals, the state and the law. In the USA, states that allow capital punishment have more murders than the states that don't. These States also report increased numbers of murdered police personnel, which some argue that the death penalty encourages a culture of revenge and continual loss. In addition, allowing the death penalty could have implications on the countries relationship with its citizens. George Kateb, author of *The Inner Ocean*, argues that "...the state's power deliberately to destroy innocuous (though guilty) life is a manifestation of the hidden wish that the state be allowed to do anything it pleases with life." Finally, those against the death penalty argue that it creates an unacceptable link between violence and the law making it seem okay for the law to use violence to preserve an ordered society. Those familiar with Martin Luther King Jr. know that he believed any form of violence to be incompatible with the Christian faith. Jesus himself said in Luke 6:27-28 "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

Expense

Though this is not directly a theological issue, it does have to do with stewardship and the use of resources (Genesis 2:15). It is often assumed that putting someone to death is much cheaper than housing that person in prison for life. However, in the USA, capital punishment can cost tens of millions of dollars due to costly and lengthy appeals such as the Oklahoma City Bomber, Timothy McVeigh execution which cost the country over \$13 million. In fact, since the death penalty was reinstated in New York in 1995, the cost for each person condemned to death has amounted to approximately \$23 million. All this begs the question, can justice even be thought of in financial terms? Especially when poor accused people who are unable to afford a private lawyer and use a state defendant are 75% more likely to receive the death penalty than those who can afford to pay for their own attorney.

Redemption

A final argument against the death penalty is based on the premise that people can change because of the work Jesus does in their lives. Proponents of this view believe that God does and can redeem anyone. An example would be that of Moses, who murdered a man, but who God chose to use to save Israel (much of his story can be found in the Bible in the book of Exodus). In addition some argue that people sentenced to death have less time and likelihood of finding spiritual salvation if they are executed.

Where Do you Stand?

Chances are that no matter which side of the death penalty argument you stand on you most likely have fairly strong feelings about why you are for or against it. That's natural. The death penalty affects real, living, breathing humans, humans who

hold value simply because God created them, like you and I in his image. In a recent interview, Christian musician Brian Doerksen related how through regular prison ministry he realized that before God our sins and choices are all equal, "I was having these conversations [with men who committed murder] and realized that the same grace that is changing them, lives in me, and is changing me, and we're actually on level ground together."

Join the Conversation! What do you think? We want to hear from you. Post your thoughts and ideas about the death penalty on our discussion board at www.newidentitymagazine.com



"In a recent interview, Christian musician Brian Doerksen related how through regular prison ministry he realized that before God our sins and choices are all equal, 'I was having these conversations [with men who committed murder] and realized that the same grace that is changing them, lives in me, and is changing me, and we're actually on level ground together.'"

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Tips and strategies for making your Bible reading more valuable.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR *Bible Study*



DELBERT TEACHOUT

Delbert Teachout has been married for 36 years. He is currently retired from military and civilian careers. Ordained into ministry in 2002, Delbert is now pursuing freelance writing as a ministry. You can read his blog at dteachout.wordpress.com

A new Christian soon learns that the Bible contains hard to understand parables, proverbs, and principals. With metaphors and figures of speech, poetry, prophecy, and prose, these new concepts can be confusing. The Bible may be interpreted and applied in different ways by different readers. Even people who have advanced degrees in divinity and theology do not agree on all their meanings. What is a new Christian supposed to do? The Bible says we ought to study to show ourselves approved by God to be good stewards of his word (2 Tim 2:15).

One good way to make sense of the Bible is to have a systematic routine for Bible study. One helpful tool is a study guide that contains questions and space to write down answers. You can use a study guide to follow the topic you are studying and make it easier to do every day, not sporadically. Many study guides will begin by discussing the author of the Bible book, followed by the date, place, and purpose of the book. An outline of the book will be next, followed by several questions for you to answer. Some examples are study guides on Genesis, Matthew, and The Life of Christ, but can include every book of the Bible. We seldom forget to feed our bodies, so we need to be careful to daily feed our souls on God's word.

Sometimes, not knowing where to start, you might turn to a page at random. This type of hopscotch reading should be avoided because words and ideas can be taken out of context, resulting in an inaccurate interpretation. For example, a person could open the Bible randomly and read, "Jesus wept." Flipping the pages again could lead to the verse, "Go and do likewise." A third turning of the pages could discover the verse, "What you do, do quickly." This may seem extreme but many Christians still insist on studying the Bible in this manner. It looks sort of haphazard, even silly, to say the least.

I have worked with over a thousand men in a rescue mission, taught the New and Old Testaments as an adjunct college

faculty member, and led many Sunday school lessons. I present what I believe to be the best approach to Bible study. Time is precious so I'll present a method to help us get the most from our Bible study time.

What Type of Bible to Get

Many types of Bibles are published to meet the needs of different types of readers. Regular Bibles contain all the books of the Bible and maybe a Table of Contents, but no study helps. On the other hand study Bibles have notes on the bottom of the pages to explain certain passages on that page. They also give references to other verses with similar topics. You can find an index of topics in the Bible and a series of maps to show where certain things occur. You can find many types of study Bibles all with different features. A bookstore associate will be able to help you make a good choice. Some good Study Bibles are *ESV Study Bible*, *Ryrie Study Bible*, and *NIV Study Bible*.

Word Study

Most study Bibles contain an article about how to study the Bible. The formula some of them use is to focus on a word, then word relations, look at context, and finally a look at the culture in which the passage was written. Some other study Bibles recommend reading the entire book first, then going back to look at specific words or passages to see how they relate to the meaning of the entire book. You could take the word "study" and define what it means. Then you could look at the relation of the word "study" to the rest of the sentence. We see in 2 Tim 2:15 that study is important to God. Then we look at the culture. The author of 2 Timothy was Paul and he wrote to help Timothy to lead his church, most likely in Ephesus. Ephesus was a pagan city that worshipped idols and many gods. It was important for Timothy to study the scriptures so he could preach effectively in that city. Whatever method you use, I recommend you still use a systematic approach.

"One good way to make sense of the Bible is to have a systematic routine for Bible study."

Other Resources that Will Enhance Your Bible Study

In addition to the Bible, some readers like to use a Bible dictionary, a Bible almanac, a Bible handbook, a Bible encyclopedia, and a few commentaries. Bible dictionaries such as *Vines Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* explains the meanings of words and how they are used in various other Bible passages. *The Bible Almanac* by Packer, Tenney, and White gives lists and descriptions of many facts in the Bible from a study of the ancient world to outlines of the Bible books. *Halley's Bible Handbook* covers such topics as a Bible commentary, archaeology, how we got our Bible, and a history of the church. *The Wycliffe Bible*

Encyclopedia could be called a “Bible library at your fingertips.” All the topics are arranged alphabetically so you can find information about anything in the Bible. Bible commentaries are books that go in depth to explain the Bible book by book by those who’ve studied them intently. Many commentaries contain several volumes.

A book entitled *How To Study the Bible* by Thomas Maphori and Published by The Good Shepherd Institute, distributed by Christian Broadcasting Network gives good advice. Chapters include individual book study, topical study, character study, and devotional study. This illustrated 133 page book can be useful for someone who has time to read that much before beginning a Bible study. Other good resources are *Reading the Bible for all It's Worth* by Gordon Fee, and *Seized by the Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* by Joel Green.

Before we begin a study of the Bible we need to decide which Bible we plan to study. Many publishing companies have printed study Bibles in many versions. We want to start with a version we can read and understand. Sometimes a Bible with two or more versions side by side helps clarify difficult passages. My New Testament has eight versions side-by-side. While side-by-side comparison is helpful we need to be careful we don't choose the version we agree with and disregard the others.

The Importance of a Schedule and a System

The two most important things about Bible study are that it needs to be regular and systematic. Failure to study regularly can lead to not studying at all. We need to find a time everyday where we devote time to study. If we happen to miss a day we can begin where we left off. We need to have a system for our study. I recommend we use a study guide such as the examples given earlier that we can write in. Not a table of daily Bible readings, study guides are books written with easy questions to guide new believers and more difficult questions for more experienced believers. We need to find one that we are comfortable using daily. Weeks or years later we can go back to see how we understood a certain scripture. Our study time needs to be long enough to read a passage and answer the questions in the study guide.

Remember “all scripture is God-breathed,” (2 Tim 3:16 NIV). Also “Above all you must understand that no prophesy of scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophesy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit,” (2 Pet 1:20 NIV). Following a study guide will help us to learn what devout people over the centuries have understood God to be saying because the notes and questions will lead to insight into the passage.

The Best Way to Start Off Your Bible Study

Since all scripture is God-breathed we want to be sure we receive from God what he wants to tell us. Therefore, we begin every Bible study time with prayer. Psalm 119:18 and 19 can be read as a prayer. A sample prayer is, “Dear Heavenly Father, I want to understand and obey your Word. Open my eyes and my heart that

I might see and know what wonderful things you are saying to me. I need your Word to guide me. Do not hide it from me but reveal it plainly since I long to receive wisdom from you today. Amen.”

Using a Study Guide

Christian bookstores have many types of study guides. As mentioned earlier, it is most important to choose one you can read and understand. How do you know which study guide to start with? As a new believer we need to learn all we can about the decision we made to follow Jesus. I recommend and use the *Design for Discipleship* series by NavPress which explain our new life in Christ: what it means to walk with Christ, foundations for our faith, and how to grow in discipleship. You will want to put down deep roots in your Christian life. Topical books like these, that can be found in Christian bookstores, will help that process. Other companies publish similar studies. We do not need to rush through the books. If we take one or two pages everyday and meditate on what those pages mean, we sustain a slow but steady growth in our Christian life.

Digging into the Books of the Bible

Once we have gone through the topics mentioned above it becomes time to begin a systematic study of the Bible books. The Bible has sixty-six books. If we studied one book from the Bible each month it would take us five and one-half years to study the entire Bible.

When we are ready to begin studying the books of the Bible, I recommend we begin our study with the book of John. John 20:30 states the purpose of the book is to help readers believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Plus, the early Judean ministry of Jesus, approximately one-third of his ministry, is only written about in John, no other gospel. Some examples are *John A Self Study Guide* by Irving L. Jensen, published by Moody Press; and *A Study Guide to John* edited by John Warren Steen. I mention those two as examples but you have many options to choose from.

Getting Help from Others

If your church has a class for new believers, you should attend. Any questions for which you cannot find the answer can be asked there. Many churches have weekly Bible studies which are great places to find answers to your questions. If you have a computer you may be tempted to use it for our Bible study. A word of caution is not everyone who publishes articles on the internet have a good understanding of scripture.

Simple but Practical

What do you do if you don't want to buy a Bible library or a study guide? Here is a simple formula. Read only a few verses or a paragraph during one setting. On a piece of paper write the words “observation, interpretation, and application.” Then answer the

following questions. What do I see in this verse? I see the word "study." How do I interpret that verse? A person should study. How do I apply that verse? I should study. If you are interested in building a Bible study library I recommend you begin with a study Bible, they cost from thirty dollars and up. If you choose not to get a study Bible, then get a handbook, such as *Halley's Bible Handbook*, which outlines each book and has paragraphs explaining keys points in the outline.

Even without a study guide or handbook we know that the Holy Spirit is a teacher who will lead us to truth and knowledge when we read the Bible. He has lead people over centuries to understand the Bible and these people have written books about what they have learned. We could spend years trying to learn the same information or we could look to the wisdom gained by people of the past to build upon our own. This is the benefit of resources like Study Bibles and the like.

A regular and systematic approach to Bible study will help you become grounded in your new faith, and it will also prepare you for whatever plans God has for you. This means you need to set aside a certain time every day to study. As you understand the parables, proverbs, and practices in the Bible, you prove you are good students of Jesus and his way of life.



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The 7th Commandment

Erica Mongé-Greer looks at the 7th commandment - you shall not commit adultery.



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ERICA MONGÉ-GREER

Erica Mongé-Greer is a graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary with a MA in Biblical Studies and Ancient Near Eastern Language and Literature. She teaches at Vanguard University and Life Pacific College, while writing occasionally for freelance publication. Erica lives in Pasadena with her husband, Joshua, and two children: Caleb and Emma.

Long before Emma Stone played the role of a modern teenage seductress in *Easy A*, Hester Prynne won for herself the first red 'A' for adultery in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. The *Scarlet Letter* illustrated the virtues of Colonial Puritan values in 17th century Boston. The famous story makes a heroine of the protagonist Ms. Prynne, an unmarried pregnant woman, who bears the entirety of shame upon herself, while the baby's father continues to benefit from his status as a religious leader without suffering the same condemnation from the Puritan community. Hawthorne's

“In this world, people tend to act alone, watching out for their own best interest and prioritizing values that lead to personal happiness and self-assessed fulfillment. God calls us to prioritize the virtues taught in the Bible (faithfulness, self-restraint, honor) and find true fulfillment (life abundantly).”

reminder from God that because he led the Israelites out of bondage, these commandments must be obeyed out of love. To commit adultery signifies one's decision to step away from God.

Adultery is foremost a sin of unfaithfulness. The Bible defines intimate love relationships in the context of marriage. The significance of marriage is the covenant agreed upon by each to live together in such a way that is honorable and pleasing to God. Committing adultery is called a great sin because it defiles a person in such a way that makes it impossible for him or her to stand before a pure and holy God. Adultery is often used in the Old Testament to refer symbolically to Israel's tendency to worship other deities instead of the one true God. To commit adultery is to act without faith. More than a sin against a person's own spouse, or the spouse of another, adultery is faithlessness to God.

This commandment, to not commit adultery, should be remembered in its context. It is couched between the commandment to honor one's parents, and the command to refrain from wanting things or people that belong to another. The affect of disobeying these guidelines would lead to dissatisfaction and guarantee the breakdown of honorable societal structure.

What does it mean for us today to remain faithful in a love relationship? The world most of us live in is very different from the world of the ancients. In this world, people tend to act alone, watching out for their own best interest and prioritizing values that lead to personal happiness and self-assessed fulfillment. God calls us to prioritize the virtues taught in the Bible (faithfulness, self-restraint, honor) and find true fulfillment (life abundantly). The world we live in today looks at Hawthorne's work and condemns the condemners, embracing opposing values of self-satisfaction and pleasure to prove their point. God may look at such characters as the religious leader and Hester Prynne and weep, because they have acted in such a way that separates them from God's holy presence.

book has been burned and placed on ban lists as many times as it has been recommended reading. The topic of adultery can hardly come up without reference to this landmark work of fiction which reveals the hypocrisy of religious judgment. And at the very heart of the issue is an attempt to understand the seventh commandment from the Bible—You shall not commit adultery.

For the ancients, adultery symbolized an act of impurity. The most profound consequence of this kind of sin is separation from God. The Ten Commandments are prefaced with a



Happiness & Blessing

*Encouragement and joy
in the Christian life.*

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TOM KOEL

Tom Koel became a Christian at 28, twenty years ago. He says they've been interesting years and that the Lord has done a lot of work on him. Tom has had several careers and currently works in real estate. He has been blessed to have his sweet wife by his side through it all and has two fantastic boys, ages 10 and 5.

Too many toys can mess up a person's spiritual life. Too many Hummers, iPhones, and Louis Vuitton purses, too many designer jeans with huge back pockets covered in embroidery, too many Brazilian Blow Outs, CAbi parties, chrome rims, and too much Twilight (way too much Twilight), can make it darn near impossible to know a real blessing when you get one.

We never lose that infantile fascination for shiny things. We sit in our BarcaLoungers and reach for the flat screen just as we



reached up for the colorful animals, stars, and toys in the mobiles rotating over our cribs.

So, how do we interpret our excitement for this stuff when it falls in our lap? Who is to say that getting the new iPhone is not a 'blessing'? What does it mean to seek a life that is blessed by God? If everything is going great - with lots of money and stuff pouring in—doesn't that just mean that we are blessed? If having a lot of cool stuff, and living in a zone where everything is going my way, is not being blessed, then what is? Conversely, when everything is going wrong, can you blame me if I don't feel blessed?

It has been said by some pretty smart guys—I'm thinking of C.S. Lewis and G. K. Chesterton to name a few—that one of the real distinguishing doctrines of the Christian faith that really was revolutionary is its affection for the poor and its drastic and explicit warnings to the rich, to the extent that one could conclude that to be rich was almost in itself a reason to be afraid for one's soul (Mark 10:25). Only in America and places where all the coolest stuff is incessantly waved, shouted, and served before all senses 24/7 could one imagine that Christ really wanted us to have it all (Matthew 6:19). I've tried to find the scripture that supports the health and wealth, and prosperity teachings, but I can't find it. The notion that the rich and healthy are or are not inclined to be more spiritual than the poor and sick may belong to some philosophy or religion somewhere, but it does not belong to Christianity.

It is true, though, that God wants to bless his children. The Scriptures say so over and over. The Sermon on the Mount begins with God promising blessings to those the world may have thought were least likely to get them—the poor in spirit, those that mourn, and those who are meek, to name a few (Matthew 5:3-5). But what does that mean to have God's blessing? What is that good thing he wants to give us?

Most often I hear a blessed Christian life described as one where we derive our joy from God himself. So, from this perspective, what God the Father wants to give us is not stuff, but himself. That is not to say that God is not interested in our physical needs (Matthew 6:8). And, it is right for us to feel blessed when good things happen to us—when we get the job, or the bonus, or score the goal. Still, there is something more, something truly better. And that is when the joy comes from God or is in God directly, and not through something else that he gives. Philippians 4:4-7 says "(4) Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! (5) Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. (6) Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (7) And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

There's one of the monster, off the hook, promises in

scripture. Mighty, mighty. (It is stuff like this, frankly, that is so super human that it had a huge impact on my decision to be a Christian in the first place, but that's another article.)

Obviously, joy like this would not only be better than a front row seat to the American Idol stage, but could even be expected to overcome life's great struggles. And life, as we know, can have some great struggles. But how does one connect with this? Because, let's face it, just being a Christian does not mean you're going to feel like Philippians 4:4-7 all the time. Heck, even the Philippians didn't feel that way or Paul wouldn't have reminded them about it.

Taken at face value it sounds like you're supposed to sit around and meditate on the Scriptures or Psalms or whatever and find some kind of meditative peace. And the more of this monastic peace you can gather into yourself—the more time you can stay in the trance—the better. That cannot be what God means when he says he wants you to have a blessed life.

The Christian life is the life of conquerors, and scholars, and athletes, and peasants. Of nuns, and soldiers, and teachers, and scientists. It is a full blooded life of vigor, and compassion, and commitment. I believe that the Christian life properly lived is one where we jump into the deep end. None of this is to exclude those times that require quiet, solace, and rest. But we should not expect

God's blessing to be something that takes us away, as an escape, from the life he has given us. We are physical. He was physical with us. Our joy in the Lord, this excellent joy that is the best thing in life (and probably heaven), transforms our spirits but is delivered in the midst of our physical lives. Our lives, in time, are the vessels of his blessing. That sounds weird, but what I'm really trying to stay away from is that our blessings are physical. I've said above that they can be, but this joy overcomes the physical though it is necessarily delivered in the physical. Still sounds weird. Keep in mind that this joy is possibly the most valuable thing a

person can have apart from salvation itself. It is the stuff of giants.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 8, verse 2, Paul wants them to take notice of the joy the Macedonian saints have exhibited, that they, in the midst of severe poverty and persecution, have nonetheless put together a huge offering for others in need. He calls this power (2 Corinthians 8:3), and indeed it must be if it can cause someone indigent and afflicted to cheerfully give up what small provisions he has to serve God's will. The world will call that person crazy, but it is the kind of behavior that built the largest church the world has ever seen or ever will. It is the kind of behavior that causes the nonbeliever to pause and wonder what it could be that could make a sensible person act so radically and be so brave and so confident in the face of such opposition.

This is a great section of scripture to help us with this often

"The notion that the rich and healthy are or are not inclined to be more spiritual than the poor and sick may belong to some philosophy or religion somewhere, but it does not belong to Christianity."

confusing topic. Paul goes on to say in verse 5 that the Macedonian saints did not blindly do what they were asked by the apostle, but first, in the midst of their trials, gave themselves to the Lord. From there they gave themselves to Paul's authority "by the will of God." That is, Paul does not brag that they were obedient to him, but that they sought God and came to know his will, and then were willing to obey his will by serving Paul. In that combination of events—the trial, the devoted attention to God's will, and then the doing of that will—they had superhuman joy and they had done an amazing thing. Their thoughtfulness combined with their devotion, and then combined with their action in the world. And they loved it.

The lesson I take from the Macedonians is this:

1. Know your circumstances, be honest and forward about the facts of your circumstances. What is the truth about you and your situation? Keep in mind it is almost impossible to know the truth about someone else. God has decided that we should not know each other's thoughts and motivations—therefore we should not judge one another. But, we can know a lot about our own thoughts and motivations.

2. Seek the Lord first. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7) is devoted to this theme. Get to know his will, his way of thinking. What is his will in relation to the circumstances of your life right now?

3. Then, put his will to work in your life. Do it now.

When we walk through life this way, we experience the kind of joy God wants us to have. Remember the monster scripture from Philippians 4 above. This is how Paul follows it—Ph 4:8-9 "(8) Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. (9) The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you." That confirms what we learned from the Macedonians, and, not coincidentally, forms an insane one-two punch of amazingly inspiring scripture.

So, what's the catch? For myself, I must say that I often fall short of feeling this joy. I struggle, get mad, and fail enough times in a day that I know this is not how it is supposed to be. It is because I am not following this simple plan. I'm not thinking clearly, and I am not putting God first. And when I get the first two points together, I resist following through. I resist doing his will.

It should be easy, but it is not. Haven't we all seen people

confessing they have done God's will when they have actually just done something really idiotic, like the guy who said God told him to drive his car into a tree? It is obvious that just thinking you are following God's will is not enough. The guy with the tree is someone not facing the facts. Remember point one, above. We have to get our heads around the truth of our circumstances. We have to be clear headed. Wise as snakes but gentle as doves, Christ said (Matthew 10:16).

Secondly, the world is noisy, isn't it? All that stuff I mentioned at the head of the article is day by day forcing itself into my head just as I am trying to push it out. It is hard to make meditation and prayer a priority when the kids have to get to school, the kitchen has to be cleaned, the car fixed, the bills paid, all during the same week that the super cool action movie got released. And I haven't even mentioned the really tough stuff like my wardrobe, the coolness of the apps on my phone, or whether it would be better to download music from iTunes or Amazon. The truth is I need to push all that aside and give myself to the Lord first (Matthew 6:33). I can think about those things, but they shouldn't rule me. My time with God is more important.

Finally, we need to act (Matthew 7:24). If you want to

feel the joy, you are going to have to get your feet wet. You are going to have to get out there and bump shoulders. Life is about living it, and God wants us out there knocking around. The tough part here is that even though joy will come from performing God's will, the world may not like it. For instance, you may find some blowback from your friends and family if you start doing particularly altruistic acts for the poor, or decide to tell the

truth at an inconvenient moment.

Furthermore, it is a fact that life is not easy and it is not safe. God has not given us a Garden of Eden. There is danger and trouble in the world—this is one of the facts that fits into our first point. But Christ has said "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) Now, that is some mighty, mighty encouragement.

As you go about trying to implement this, remember that the obedience cannot be forced (2 Corinthians 8:8). God does not force you to do anything. This joy comes from freely performing God's will. It feels good to do the thing that God wants us to do and that he would do.

So let's do it.

"The Christian life is the life of conquerors, and scholars, and athletes, and peasants. Of nuns, and soldiers, and teachers, and scientists. It is a full blooded life of vigor, and compassion, and commitment."



The Perfect Story



A testimony.

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KIMBERLY DAVIDSON

Kimberly received her M.A. in specialized ministry from Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon. She is a board certified biblical counselor, spiritual development coach, speaker, and founder of Olive Branch Outreach—a ministry dedicated to bringing hope and restoration to those struggling with eating disorders and negative body image. Kimberly volunteers in prison ministry and youth education outreach. She is the author of four books and a contributor to five books.



A

fter the fourth flush I grabbed the near empty bottle of Windex and then ripped off three squares of paper toweling and proceeded to clean up around the toilet bowl. After tossing the residue of a gaping emotional wound into the garbage I sat back down on the couch numb and oblivious to what was going on around me. *I feel like garbage... but tomorrow will be different*, I promised myself. I swore, Today is the last day. Despondent, that is what I had said every day for the previous fourteen years. It never is the last day when you are a bulimic.

In addition to bingeing and purging food I found pleasure in binge drinking because my self-consciousness and insecurities vanished. It changed my reality for a moment. It gave me the confidence to do things I would never do sober. The promiscuity was a way to fill my deepest need to feel loved and feel that I belonged to someone—even if it was only for a minute. Because of the promiscuity I got pregnant and chose to have an abortion. Then I had another demon to deal with. The wounds of shame, humiliation, and abandonment deepened. I could not stop the cycle. The dreams I conceived as a young girl turned into disillusionment. I experienced over twenty years of living alone in the dungeon of addiction and shame, unable to experience the fullness of God's amazing love and grace. Those who knew me would have been shocked to know how I lived, to know how much shame and isolation I experienced each day. Living a secret life is life draining. It takes a great deal of energy and calculated planning to keep the cover girl mask on tightly so the defective self is never exposed.

The secrets, the lies and the behaviors were slowly killing me. It was beginning to look like a life or death situation. My health was slowly deteriorating and it was inevitable I'd get another DUI, or even worst, kill someone while driving under the influence.

The day came when I could not take living this way any longer. It was vital I be rescued. God sent that person into my life and he took me to church. Soon after, I asked Jesus Christ to be my personal Savior and he walked into my messed up life. I was saved ... but still in bondage. God miraculously released from the act of bingeing and purging but my distorted thinking remained the same. I had not been set free from myself. The antidote for deception is truth. It was crucial I learn how to directly battle the enemy's lies and confusion. I chose to meditate on the truth of God's Word. This set in motion the process of learning how to engage in healthy relationships and how to set healthy boundaries. It also gave me a reason to hope and dream. For nine years, this was my story—my "testimony."

It can be very easy to believe that God's offer to remove all guilt and sin, and restore a relationship with him, is for someone else, for that "good girl." Since I didn't know God while I was wallowing in this destructive lifestyle, I certainly didn't see his providential hand on my life. When I stopped bingeing and purging I thought I'd finally gotten my act together—that all those self-help books finally kicked in. It was merely another self-deceptive thought.

I always believed in God. As a kid we went to church and

I attended children's Sunday school classes. During the adolescent years I wasn't forced to go to church so I chose not to, except at Christmas and Easter. Since I didn't know God he was merely a big cosmic entity who ran the world. He really didn't know or care about me. What I learned later astonished me. Not only had God been working actively in my life all along, but he had already—past tense—chosen me to be his daughter and to be set apart from the only world I knew.

God's Word told me, "Before I [God] formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart" (Jeremiah 1:5). Jesus said, "I have chosen you out of the world" (John 15:19). "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last" (John 15:16).

What I never knew is that God has known and loved me for so long that he cannot fully tell his story without speaking about me. He knew me and loved me before I was even born. And he will love me forever. It took me a long time to wrap my mind around the fact that God had a plan to save me all along—not just spiritually, but physically and emotionally. I didn't think very highly of myself, but he did. He didn't save me so he could love me. He loved me, therefore, he saved me. And he had great plans for my future, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

This is a picture of God's grace: today I have a master's degree in specialized ministry which I received at age fifty-three! I am a board certified biblical counselor, spiritual development coach, speaker, and founder of Olive Branch Outreach—a ministry dedicated to bringing hope and restoration to those struggling with eating disorders and negative body image. I teach abuse recovery at a state women's prison and volunteer in youth ministry and education outreach. I have authored four books and am a speaker. I love that God has a different and perfect plan for every Christian's life.

This is my story today. The difference is now I know that God's story is incomplete without me just as my story is incomplete with him. Paul said, "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because *from the beginning* God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. *He called you* to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, *my emphasis*).

Whatever God does for the lost world springs from his abounding love, grace and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6). We shouldn't regard his great plan as an impersonal device. His gift of salvation is grounded in his love (John 3:16). God proved his love for us at the cross where Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world. A believer can live with joy, passion and purpose. God's perfect story is our story.



Ready



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ERIC LEE

Eric Lee lives in Orange County and is an active member of Converge Family Church. In his spare time, he enjoys rooting for the Los Angeles Angels, packing his mind with as much trivia as he can, and blogging. Eric is a stay-at-home dad of one.

y or Not...Here Comes Baby

Eric Lee talks about the abruptness of parenthood and shares some of what he's learned during the process.

There is a idiom that says, “When the rubber meets the road.” Or in the case of being a parent, when your hand meets the diaper. You’ve gotten all the advice from your family, friends, and professionals. Yet, you won’t truly know what it’s like to be a parent until your child is crying in front of you and you don’t know why.

Along the same vein, you won’t know exactly how to divide up the tasks until your child comes. Whether you talked about it before or not, you and your spouse must decide how to divide up the responsibilities of taking care of your child. This includes everything from rocking the baby to sleep to changing diapers.

While my wife was pregnant, she joked that she would carry our child for nine months and then I would have to take care

of him until he turned 18. All kidding aside, raising a child takes dedication, love, and a good partnership to work.

DIVISION AFTER LABOR

So how do you assign tasks evenly for each parent? I can’t recall a particular discussion with my wife about who will do what. I do know that some of my pre-baby chores transferred over once our son arrived. For example, I am the designated dishwasher of the family. So when my wife started to use her breast pump, I was in charge of cleaning and disinfecting all the bottles, caps, tubes, etc.

For other responsibilities like getting up to rock the baby, you take turns at doing that. It’s not something you talk about and say, this day I’ll get up and the next day you get up. It’s really about sharing the load and gauging it on who has more energy at the moment.

As far as changing diapers, I knew that since I would be staying home with our son I would take on the bulk of that duty.

I can remember dreading the fact that I wouldn't get a lot of sleep. How am I supposed to care for this little human being that is so dependent on me to feed, clothe, and soothe him and also do it on less sleep? It was especially difficult because I already have problems sleeping at night. I mean it's not like you can store up sleep in a "sleep bank" before the baby comes.

Like it or not, you need to "grin and bear it." If you are fortunate enough to be able to stay at home with your child, you can catch up on sleep when the baby is sleeping during the day. If you work, then you'll have to get by on less sleep for a while.

REALITY SETS IN

The first week my son was home I was literally freaking out. I felt overwhelmed with knowing how to change his diaper, feed him, and how to swaddle him. Good thing my wife was still on her maternity leave! There really is something to the whole maternal instinct. As the weeks went by and I became more and more comfortable, I realized that I could handle taking care of my son by myself. That doesn't mean I didn't still call her at work to double-check things, but I called less and less as the months went by. I really learned what it means to be selfless to a certain extent. At first, I was really reluctant to take my son out in public. As time went by though, I learned that he wouldn't die if I took him out to the market, park, or other places. Once I got used to bringing him out on my own, I gained a lot more confidence that I could do it more and more.

THE TIME CRUNCH

Contrary to popular belief; your life isn't over. Before my son Elijah was born, I was told by a relative that "you are no longer number one." I took this to mean that everything revolves around my son. While it is true that your child takes priority as far as feeding, cleaning, etc., it doesn't mean you no longer matter as a person. Even after Elijah was born, I had this mindset. It wasn't until I had a conversation with a friend that this sort of changed. One of our friends at church told me, "You need to make each other a priority." By this he meant that you need to make an effort to make time for a date night and time alone. After baby comes, you may be ready to just give up those hobbies that you enjoy. Personally, I thought I'd have to kiss any time at the gym or exercising goodbye. To be completely honest, you will have to scale back time spent at the gym. It's going to be a balancing act that doesn't always quite achieve the results you wished for. However, time alone or time to enjoy your hobbies can be possible if you have a conversation and agreement with your spouse. One of my hobbies is playing tennis. All I need to do is just let my wife know in advance when I want to go out. My buddies and I have even made it the same Thursday

every month so it is carved out in our schedules. No surprises. The same goes for her. If she wants to go out with friends, get a massage, or see a chick flick, then she just lets me know. Sometimes it's even a last minute thing and it can still work out. That's how we get our time alone.

TIME FOR TWO


Will you ever get to have a date night again? Fortunately for us, we have a family member that lives with us during the week. She can baby-sit our son when we want to go see a movie, go out to eat, or go to a party. Or sometimes, my mother-in-law will watch him on her off days. I'm not saying that we get a date night every week or month but we seize the opportunity when it is available. If your family lives far away or aren't able to help you, you can always ask your church family. Like my wife says, "You'll never know if you don't ask." We've found singles at our church that were willing to help watch our son. Even other married couples without kids often don't mind baby-sitting.

MAKING TIME FOR GOD

A daily struggle that I have, especially as a stay-at-home dad, is making time for God. Before my son, I could jump into prayer or open my Bible whenever I wanted to. Nowadays, I have to be intentional about doing this. So before my son wakes up or when he takes a nap are prime times I can spend studying the Bible or praying to God without interruptions. Like anything else, it takes repetition and dedication to make this work. This is definitely an area that I'm still working on.

"All kidding aside, raising a child takes dedication, love, and a good partnership."

WHEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE

When all is said and done, you and your spouse will figure out who can handle what baby duties. Some of these tasks at the beginning, such as breastfeeding may be gender specific. From experience, I will say that most of the parenting duties are not gender specific. Time, whether it is for you, your hobbies, your spouse, or with God is always going to be an issue. Conditions are rarely perfect. Sometimes you are ready to hit the gym but your spouse is too tired to take care of your child. Sacrifices have to be made. That's all part of being a parent. Or you may finally have someone to watch your child but your child has separation anxiety and you have to cut your date night short. Well-intentioned time for God gets filled with other things to do. None of this means you're a bad parent or a bad Christian. It just means you need to give yourself a little grace. Bottom line is that you can have time for yourself, your marriage, your hobbies and God. A lot of times asking for help is the first hurdle. The time you do get to yourself may not be consistent but at least you will know where to go to get it. From there, it's up to you to seize the moment when it arises. 

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One Man's Musings on Dating

A stream of consciousness addressing the world of dating.

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SKYLAR COBB

Skylar Cobb considers himself just another muggle. Originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico, he spent his high school and college years playing in Colorado. After graduation and a brief stint abroad, Skylar took a corporate job in Southern California, where he now resides.

Let the search for truth continue...



Dating is like shopping, both online and not. Let's start by exploring one simple item we all, at one point or another, shop for—a winter jacket.

Even before I go shopping, I can pretty much envision what my “ideal” jacket might look like. This vision may be based off previous jackets I had or those I have seen before. Fortunately, jackets come in many styles, sizes, colors, features, patterns, and prices, which afford me the opportunity to choose the best jacket for me. I might pick a jacket with a waterproof shell and a long torso for practical purposes. In addition, I might pick another jacket that is teal solely because it's my favorite color. This selection gets a little more complicated when considering the many other jacket features available. What features do I want? Do I want armpit zippers? What about thumb holes in the sleeves? Do I want down filler? Is paisley available? What about fuzzy-lined hoods? The options seem endless. After a time at shopping and probably frustration, I will finally settle on a specific jacket.

Now I ask, what is the point of wanting and envisioning all those different jacket characteristics? I honestly do not know.

All I know is that the God once told of flowers in a field and how they never had to work for their insurmountable beauty. “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!” (Matt.

6:30). Harsh words. If this point applies to the clothes that we shop for, I am convinced it applies to the life-long companionship we long for.*

Many of us that date, especially if we date with the intention to marry, come to the arena with a long list of wants. I do not need to offer an example. It is safe to say that we all have a list, of one form or another. This might be a list of hopes for our future spouse or a list of minimums we need as individuals.

It was the late 1970's when my parents met in Albuquerque, New Mexico. My mother grew up there while my father grew up in Hugo, Oklahoma. After a time in Colorado, a temporary construction project brought my dad to Albuquerque for what was planned to be a six-month job. It just so happened that, after a couple more six-month jobs, both my mom and my dad lived in a specific mountain community outside of Albuquerque called Echo Canyon. This is where they met, started dating, and were eventually married on October 7th, 1978. That's 33 years of marriage and counting!

When talking to my parents about their courtship, my mom described their circumstances as “flukey.” Flukey as in by dumb-luck, by chance, or, I would say, potentially by providence. There is a distinct ambiance of serendipity surrounding my parent's meeting and eventual marriage. This ambiance goes beyond human control and foresight. My dad never planned on living in Albuquerque nor did my mom dream of marrying a carpenter. However, it just happened that way.

“God will provide - ah, if only He would till He does!” ~Unknown (Yiddish Proverb)



“There is a distinct ambiance of serendipity surrounding my parent’s meeting and eventual marriage. This ambiance goes beyond human control and foresight. My dad never planned on living in Albuquerque nor did my mom dream of marrying a carpenter. However, it just happened that way.”

*Here I make the bold assumption that you feel a deep seeded attraction to an intimate, loving and life-long marriage. If this is not the case, a opportunity for discernment is now presented. This can start by just talking about this idea of marriage with someone you trust. Please note that in this article I am not covering the very real calling on some of our lives to be celibate (i.e. to abstain from a married life and sexual relations), but rather a conversation on the ideas of dating, intimacy and marriage.

HOW DOES GOD SPEAK?

*God speaks through the Bible, dreams,
prayer, and friends.*

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KENDRA T. GREENE

Kendra Greene is a minister in training and member of the praise and worship team at her local church. She is a seeker of knowledge and is passionate about ministry and about seeking truth. She also has a zeal for the arts and traveling.

A still small voice, a dream, reading and studying the Bible, listening to Godly counsel from others. How does God speak? How can we differentiate his voice from our own imaginations? These are pertinent questions in understanding how God speaks to his people. From the Garden of Eden to the 21st century we have evidence of God speaking to his people. In the Garden of Eden, Adam communed with God. Throughout the story of the beginning of time, Adam and Eve heard and talked to God. In Genesis 3:8 it states “and they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day...” Hearing God’s voice begins with the recognition that he is with you, that you can feel him “walking” with you through your life and speaking to you through the situations that you face.

God speaks through his word, the Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 states, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God...” His word is an intricate glimpse of who he is and what he has to say to you. The word provides direction, correction, and guidance. The Bible is your guide to always have the word of God with you. “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” (Joshua 1:8, NKJV).

God speaks through dreams. Dreams and visions are mentioned in the Bible over 200 times. Great leaders such as Paul and Abraham were dreamers. “He speaks in dreams, in visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on people as they lie in their beds. He whispers in their ears and terrifies them with warnings.” (Job 33:15-16, NLT). Some purposes of dreams are to give warnings, to encourage, and to reveal a prophetic message. Joel 2:28 states “And

it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions” (ESV). As God’s spirit is being “poured-out” in your life, use the images that he has given you in your dreams. If there is something that you cannot interpret in your dreams, pray and ask God to reveal to you what he is saying to you.


God speaks during prayer. Prayer time is one of the most intimate settings to hear from God. During prayer you have one on one time with God. It’s important that when you are praying that you set aside some time to listen. The still small voice of God can come to direct you. Remember prayer is a dialogue. Allow God to speak.

Maybe you hear the same message everyday or it could be that you had a thought and someone called you and repeated the same thing back to you. This is called confirmation. Remember that the spirit of God is in you to make the right decisions and speak to your heart. Romans 8:16 (NKJV) states, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

Additionally, as a Christian you have a network of believers that are witness for God. Having godly relationships that provide godly counsel provides another method of hearing God. In my personal experience, God has sent people in my life to help me with concerns and issues. From every encounter I must say that I felt the unconditional love that only God could give me. By listening to their counsel I was assured that God spoke through them to remind me that he is always concerned about me.

One amazing thing about God is that not only does he hear you speak, he listens as well. As we begin to develop our relationships with him we are readily able to hear his voice and know who he is. John 10:27 states “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them and they follow Me.” Everyday circumstances are yielded to God and he can use them to speak to you as well.

God uses others to encourage and confirm. It’s important to have a church home and network of Christian believers in your life.

Beloved, remember that God speaks to us in many ways. He is not limited to one form of communication. Our God is infinite in all of his ways. When we understand his power and hear his voice we will elevate to a new level of understanding about him and his plans for our life. We must humble ourselves to him and know that he is faithful to lead us in the right direction. He will remind us of the many ways that he speaks. 

“It’s important that when you are praying that you set aside some time to listen. The still small voice of God can come to direct you. Remember prayer is a dialogue. Allow God to speak.”

THE **Be-er**
vs
THE **Do-er**

*Building a balanced life of busyness, rest,
worship and praise.*



KELLI WARD

With an intense love of and for the Lord (which didn't manifest itself in her until her early 20's), Kelli wants to share her experiences in being a Christian with the world in a down-home-direct way. As an aspiring screenwriter living in Los Angeles with an M.F.A. from USC, Kelli has also most recently decided to devote her writing talent to educating the masses about the Christian walk.

I've been feeling run down lately. Sick. Headaches, blurred vision, and extremely lethargic – unlike myself. I knew something was going on when I came home after work one night and went to sleep for 12 hours. Something wasn't right. This got me thinking, and thinking, and thinking. It wasn't my high blood pressure. It wasn't stress. I was too busy. I am always ripping and running. Scheduling. Cleaning. Cooking. Daydreaming. In realizing the things that I was doing, I realized the things that I wasn't doing: reading my Bible, praying, talking with God, and watering my relationship with Jesus (we all know that when we don't water something, it dies). Thinking about Mary and Martha, I realize today that God was trying to tell me something and it took a month of me feeling ill to get it through my thick skull: there's a time to be a Martha and there's a time to be a Mary.

"As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'" (Luke 10: 38-42 NIV)

"Few things are needed – indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better." What a powerful Word. Here Martha is running around in an attempt to make everyone comfortable, but she has in a way forsaken her company with busy work. What is the point of inviting someone into one's home when one has no time to spend with him or her? Mary on the other hand soaks up Jesus's presence by intently listening without distraction or

a care in the world. As we grow in a relationship with Jesus and an understanding of who he is we must realize that life as a Christian is about balance. We have jobs, children, responsibilities, volunteer work, husbands, wives, pets, etc., but we also have ministries, church duties, and seminary schooling. Sometimes we try to do it all and end up spreading ourselves out so thin that none of what we produce yields quality fruit. Sometimes we need to get back to the basics, which are praise and worship, reading the Bible, prayer, and placing the highest responsibilities first.

Also, as we are discussing Mary vs. Martha, this idea is not strictly for women in Christ but also men in Christ. As people in the body of Christ, we are called to put Christ first in all things. The distinction made between the "Mary" type and "Martha" type isn't a bad thing or something that we shouldn't embody. It's more of a differentiation between the two sides of one Christian as we are to spend time with him and to get to work for him, but in all this we should refrain from allowing the cares of this world or the concerns of life to take priority over following Jesus. We are told in the Bible many times to be sure that we remain unstained by this world. To do this means that we should continue to be worry-free, anxiety-free, and carefree, but I know by experience that this isn't easy and that sometimes we fall prey to these worldly traits. When we take on too much in life we sometimes become worried or distracted by many things and may be missing out on opportunities that God has for service and blessings, like Martha. When we try to do it all, we take away his glory and exhaust ourselves and get into the "I, I, I" worldly frame of mind. It's okay to take a sober look at this. Maybe you feel like you are always doing all the work and maybe that Jesus doesn't care about your situation. Or perhaps you may not be listening to Jesus's instructions, instead making up your own along the way or trying to debate God's will for you. Martha could also be stuck in the kitchen or out mowing the lawn while others are pouring out their worship on Jesus, but she works hard for him, to please him and he loves her, He can count on Martha to get the job done. In the same vain as Christians we do not have to earn the love of Christ by showing him how much work we are doing for him, it's already there, and he showed us by enduring the cross. But the very foundation of our relationship with him grows

when we spend time with him and in essence bathe in his glory. There is absolutely nothing wrong with being a "Martha" type, but as we are working hard, we may be more focused on the action of the work rather than the purpose. As Christians we all struggle with this. You are not alone. We must learn to keep it simple.

"Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus's honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus's feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the

"As we are discussing Mary vs. Martha, this idea is not strictly for women in Christ but also men in Christ."

perfume.” (John 12 1-3 NIV)

We always see Mary at Jesus’s feet. I once heard Bishop Charles E. Blake say that a woman’s hair is her glory so Mary placed her glory at Jesus’s feet. She doesn’t worry about today or tomorrow but has her first priority, which is praise-time for Jesus. Imagine being stress free because your day is focused on pleasing the Savior over pleasing others. It’s possible. It says it in the Bible that he will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on him. Just because we are at work doesn’t mean we can’t praise him on our lunch break. In our modern day world you may see Mary as having no direction. She may seem like a loser, a hippie, lazy, and maybe even unmotivated. Someone who doesn’t know the value of hard work like Martha does. But this isn’t true. Mary knew how to “hang out,” in other words she knew how to a) get the work done with efficiency, b) not let over-prioritizing/planning consume her day, and c) let the work stack up and kick-it with Jesus.

A woman named J.M. Price says, “I am more like Martha post marriage and kids. I am literally running behind my husband and kids all the time caring for them. I seldom take or make the time to just sit with Jesus. Even when I am at church I often times am not able to simply listen because I am mothering my kids. Pre marriage and kids, I was more like Mary. I went to church and Bible study pretty consistently. I prayed, read my word and fasted much more often as well. It is interesting to me that at a point in my life when I have so much on my plate, I am not fighting more to spend quality time with Jesus. Now, the time I spend with him is always while I’m doing something else. For instance, now I pray in the car while driving or while in the shower. I may read my Bible while having my lunch at work. I called into a prayer line on a Saturday morning and felt bad that I wasn’t with my kids. At the end of the day, I know that if I make time to be more like Mary on a consistent basis, I will be more effective and have a better attitude when I have to be like Martha.”

The above insight is relevant. Many of us are a combination of Mary and Martha and again this isn’t a bad thing. It’s often a reality as there are two sides to every Christian. When blending the two distinct personalities together the outcome is a balanced life with a focused work ethic, family life, prayer life, and overall healthy life. Being too busy or having too little work to do seems to often leave us worn out, bored even, unfruitful, and idle (which starts to eat away at your mind, leaving your thoughts to wonder into some not-so-good places at times). Balance means to be of equal weight. As we are all called to put Jesus first we must remember that he also calls us to be missionaries and the mission or ministry we are called to must be financed which means he calls us to work. He also calls us to be on the mission field at our jobs and in our homes. If we are too tired and subsequently cranky or too ho-hum about life, how are we to show others how great our God is with effectiveness?

Now you may be saying that it’s impossible to be like Mary all the time – this is true, especially in today’s world that moves at such a fast pace. But we can make strides to be like Mary and put Martha on the coat rack for a while as well as to hang up Mary and put on Martha. In Mary Southerland’s book entitled *Experiencing*

God’s Power in Your Ministry: Success and Survival for Every Woman Who Serves God she outlines habits that need to form in order for the women (this also applies to men) of God to go the distance for him in Spirit and in truth. In the chapter “Relish Godly Discipline,” she lists six ways to prioritize our lives for ministry (and day-to-day living):

1

Prepare

Just as we budget our money we must budget our time. Schedule one day a week to plan out your week – stick with that plan.

2

Eliminate

Once a month have a “spring cleaning”. Eliminate anything that is hurting you or your family. You may need to eliminate unimportant things to spend time with those you love.

3

Prioritize

Learn to leave the “lesser” things undone. Employ God’s priorities, not yours. You are not Superwoman. Ask yourself the questions: Does it really matter? Is it eternal? Does it impact lives for God?

4

Delegate

Find your team and include all of them in the work.

5

Simplify

Give up on perfection, it is meant for Heaven not Earth. The “further we get from simple things, the further we get from God.” – An Amish saying.

6

Yield

If home and family are only left with scraps of our time, energy, and emotions, we are walking in sin and disobedience. Home is our greatest mission field.

I collected a few responses to the question, are you Mary or Martha or a combination of both?

Samantha Jeudy says, “Well personally I think I’m like Martha, and I strive to be like Mary. When life is going good and there’s nothing bad going on that you need to pray about, you tend to get caught up with our own thing and neglect Jesus. One of the things that I have to work on is spending time with Him everyday no matter what’s going on in my life. Making sure I put him before everything and finding time to worship everyday. It’s not easy especially with our work schedules, friends, and family but I really


strive to be like Mary and going to him humbly so that I can learn more from him and his Word.”

Elder Richard Brooks says, “In brief, if you will notice the disciples first heard what Jesus had to say and then went to put it into practice. The case of Mary and Martha was that Martha was concerned about natural things (cleaning the house, fixing the food etc.) all of this while Jesus was sharing his message. There is nothing to indicate that he had any intention of repeating what he was saying. That is the message, we must hear God while or when he is speaking, not when we finish what we are doing.”

Helena P. Fils says, “I am definitely like Martha. I am always running around, cooking and cleaning. I just prefer to stay busy. This is how I do my best thinking and reflecting. This time is therapeutic for me. Not that I have family that I am doing this all for, but I find it relaxes me. I would like to be more like Mary, but I'm just not there yet. As I pray for a greater understanding of God's Word, perhaps I will be able to sit still and read, but until then...”

Phillip Olive says, “I think that the heart of the story is the formation of priorities. Mary put time with Jesus ahead of anything else. While Jesus was present, Martha decided to busy herself with other matters. In the Biblical accounts of Jesus spending time with people, he often would tell people what to do. Listen to this, go do this, pray, eat. People who were given even the simplest direction by Jesus were audibly hearing the will of God for them in the moment, something present-day Christians always say that they long for. If he had told Martha to prepare a meal, she would have been right in doing so. But if she wasn't given any direction by Jesus, with a choice between busy-ness and being with Jesus, she chose the lesser of the two. My struggle, everyone's struggle, is deciding to continually put time with Jesus first. Does he get our leftover time and attention or does he get the best of them? He is with us in spirit, so we always have access to him, but our job is to place him as our top priority instead of taking his nearness for granted.”

We are not alone in this fight, and it is a fight. Let's also drop the misconception that slowing down and doing nothing means you're lazy—it doesn't. It means you value peace, play-time, and good health. After understanding why I was sick, I made a commitment to slow down, relax, and be go-with-the-flow and to read the Bible everyday. First starting with one chapter, then prayerfully reading two, three, and so on. I also am focusing my prayer life on praising rather than asking. I am beginning with 10 minutes of prayer every morning and night. During the first seven minutes I thank God for being who he is, giving him the glory in all things. For the last three minutes I lay the issues of my heart at Jesus's feet. We can take steps even if they are baby ones to find a balance of Mary and Martha in our lives. “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.” (John 6:27, NIV)

Commit this scripture to your heart. For the next time you are tuckered out and overworked, too tired to spend quality time with God, recite this scripture and think on Martha who overworked herself for Jesus, and then Mary who abandoned everything to curl up at his feet. 

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blood:wōter mission

The band Jars of Clay creates a musical gateway to world change.

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NICHOLAS SOWELL

Nicholas Sowell has been involved in full time ministry since the age of 16. Having served as a lay minister, youth pastor, Christian radio DJ, Christian music production company owner, and surf missionary, Nick has used his love for writing to publish, inspire, educate, and most importantly, further the Kingdom of God. Now living in the South Bay, Nick enjoys staying active, and passionately seeking after the Lord.

Music has always been a driving force of influence all around the world. It evokes feelings, emotions, passion, and even memories. But nowadays music does much more. Artists reach out to their fans with causes they are passionate about beyond the music notes. We've seen many artists (particularly Christian artists) join partnerships with global causes to promote awareness while on tour and help bring aid to various social issues. For example, U2 is synonymous with the charities and humanitarian work they've done. While many bands partner with charities or social justice causes, the multi-platinum, GRAMMY Award-winning band Jars of Clay, decided to start their own.

What started as a seen need to help with the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa, continued on to something much greater. It burned in the band member's hearts to share their stories of experience in Africa and the Africans there already trying to bring help to their own people. After establishing the grassroots organization Blood: Water Mission, the band then learned of the vital link between living with AIDS and clean drinking water. The organization then went after both, hoping to establish improvement in providing clean drinking water and hoping to help with the AIDS epidemic. Targeting sub-Saharan Africa, the band brought awareness to every audience it played in order to raise funds for this people group. In 2005, Jars of Clay started the "1,000 Wells Project" with the idea that a \$1 donation would provide enough for one African to have clean water for an entire year. Jars of Clay saw that project come to completion at the end of 2010.

Having been in Africa, I can testify firsthand to the extreme need of clean water and AIDS support for the people there. Though many Americans have been educated in the public school system and their communities fairly well about AIDS, there are still millions of Africans that are uneducated about the disease even though it is affecting more people in the continent of Africa than any other on the earth. The poor drinking water conditions in Africa are greatly shortening the lives of AIDS victims and thus leaving families torn apart and worse yet, more and more children orphaned. In Africa there are over 320 million people without access to clean drinking water, while there are 21 million people living with


HIV/AIDS. Dirty water accounts for 80% of disease in developing countries. The need is not small; on the contrary, it is one of the biggest problems facing Africa today. HIV/AIDS victims aren't the only ones whose lives are cut short from the diseased drinking water; many of the African families are feeling the negative effects unclean drinking water has on themselves and loved ones around them. Africans walk miles everyday to bring back water that is poisoning their families. These people need clean drinking water, they need longer lives, and they need help from people like you. Since the beginning of the organization, Blood:Water Mission has helped over 1,000 communities in Africa, and over 600,000 people in over 13 countries. The organization is still alive and well today with the purpose of building community through creative social action. As Jars of Clay is a well-known Christian band and not shy about their beliefs, neither are they bashful to share that the organization is founded on the Biblical mandate to do justice, love, and serve the poor. Their efforts have now spread out to include projects in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Zambia, Rwanda, and the Central African Republic.

They are still building wells in countries within Africa. By building the wells and providing clean water they are helping to eliminate one of Africa's largest health issues. The organization focuses on building new wells, rain tanks, repairing existing wells, and handing out biosand filters (which are household filters for families to use in order to clean their water.) They seek to empower communities from within so that the Africans can be the engines of change from within their own cultural context. They work with local organizations to become greater agents of change in their community and a permanent footprint of help and assistance. They do this by financially aiding them and working on strategies and methods to build capacity and make long-term impacts in those communities. By drilling and repairing wells, teaching hygiene and sanitation in local communities, and supporting care clinics that serve those with HIV through testing, home care and support groups, they are making significant process in raising the quality of life for Africans all over their country. Their goal is to continue investing in water programming and furthering their partner's ability to serve those with HIV in each individual community.

The beautiful part about this organization is that it doesn't have a set way to help or bring in money. Instead, it lends to the imagination of its donors and volunteers and gives ideas, but really wants volunteers and participants raising money in new and creative ways. There are many ways you can take action to help this cause. For example, one group of bicyclists decided to raise money and social capital by taking an eight-week, 3,172-mile bike ride spanning from Los Angeles to Baltimore enduring all weather types from desert terrain to mountains and cities. Many people host "Water Walks" where they will walk to their nearest natural water source as a way to recognize and honor the Africans that have to walk miles everyday to get their water (which is quite often unclean). Others raise support and run in 5K races, while yet others make a "lemon-aid" stand and donate the proceeds to Blood:Water Mission. Garage sales, car washes, and social organizations can raise money and help.

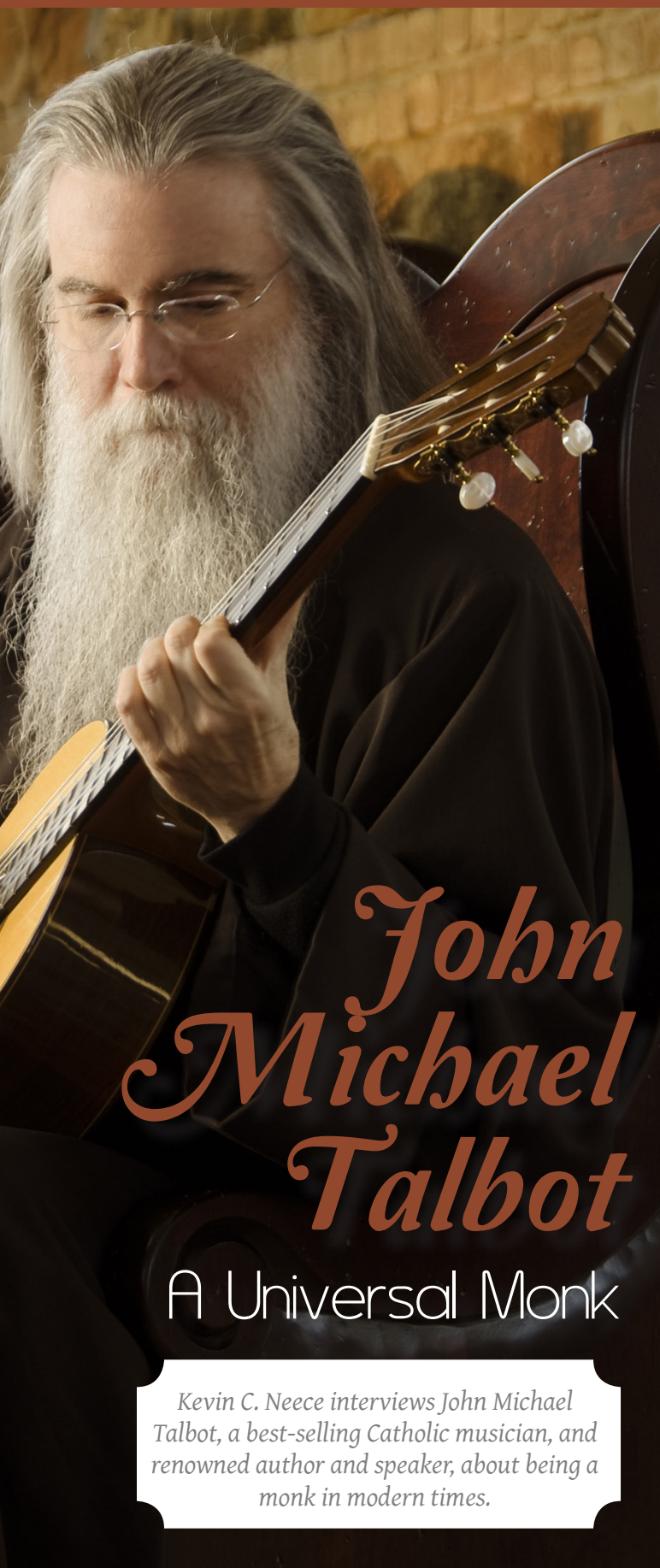
“Blood:Water Mission allows you to create and register your own campaign in however you see best to bring people together in your own community and build a bridge of love to help our neighbors around the world.”

Blood:Water Mission also includes ideas they've established themselves and given to readers, challenging participants to partake in events that also help raise funds. One of these is called “2 Weeks of Sacrifice” wherein you simply save the money you would have spent on anything you would drink (besides tap water) and using the intended drink money towards supporting Blood:Water Mission. Saving money from the morning orange juice, coffee you'd buy, the soda you'd drink for lunch or dinner, or any other occasion, you'd see how quickly it adds up. Blood:Water Mission asks that you'd make water your only beverage for two weeks and thus allowing someone to have clean water for a *lifetime*. Blood:Water Mission allows you to create and register your own campaign in however you see best to bring people together in your own community and build a bridge of love to help our neighbors around the world. All donor funds go directly toward serving the vision of empowering communities to work together against the HIV/AIDS and water crises in Africa.

The truth is that all of us carry the power to bring change. We carry the ability to care for others and help our neighbors. May our concept of neighbor be broadened to the people we share this world with. May our box of influence be torn down to contain no walls or limitations. For we no longer live in a day and age where our efforts can't affect those far from us. Our efforts can reach all the way around the world. For more information you can visit www.bloodwatermission.com where you can learn about the organization, download an extensive amount of resources from campaign kits, videos, and photos to print materials, campaign ideas, and online resources. Or, you can simply donate as well by clicking the “DONATE” button on the homepage. Jars of Clay saw a need and decided to act, now we have the same opportunity to affect change in people's lives around the world from the comforts of our own community. You have the power to bring about that change... what will you do with it? 



© All photos courtesy of John Michael Talbot Ministries (Used by permission)



Kevin C. Neece interviews John Michael Talbot, a best-selling Catholic musician, and renowned author and speaker, about being a monk in modern times.

KEVIN C. NEECE



Kevin is a writer and speaker in Fort Worth, Texas. He has written for Art House Dallas, *Rethinking Everything Magazine* and more, including the forthcoming book *Light Shining in a Dark Place: Discovering Theology Through Film*. He's also a contributing editor for *Imaginatio et Ratio: A Journal of Theology and the Arts*. Connect with him at kevincneece.com and undiscoveredcountryproject.com.

He may be the best-selling Catholic musician of all time and a founding father of Contemporary Christian music, as well as a renowned author, speaker and leader of spiritual retreats, but it seems that John Michael Talbot primarily sees himself as a simple monk who, by the grace of God, just happens to get to do all that other stuff. At the same time, though, he is something of a pioneer in the realm of monasticism as well, quietly cultivating radical community for more than three decades. I spoke with John Michael recently about his new book and album and what the way of the new monastics looks like from his perspective.

Monasticism: A Spirituality of Loneliness?

Most of us think of a monk as an isolated person, living in tattered robes, alone in the hills of France or deep in a cave in some remote mountain region. Stories of monastics (monks and nuns) who did not speak for years or who walked only on their knees populate our imagination regarding these devoted individuals. We hear the music of chanting monks—most popularly from the 1990s album *Chant* and its sequels or incorporated into the music of bands like Enigma—and we may think of lonely individuals, mumbling incoherent sounds.

One way or another, we often think of monastics as solitary, humorless and disconnected from the outside world, a residual echo from a long-forgotten age when religious devotion was kept within the stone walls of a cloister, never to see or hear the outside world. In reality, monks and nuns are joyful, dynamic individuals who love Christ and have chosen to devote themselves to a simple life that allows them to grow spiritually and minister to others. Monastics are famous for their writings and music (those chanting monks are actually singing rich, devotional lyrics in Latin) as well as for their art, crafts, food, generosity and hospitality.

They do indeed tend to live apart from society in general, but they are not disconnected. They pray for others and care for the needy. They are educators, mentors and guides who give as they can to those in need, be it food, shelter or prayer. Monasticism is alive and well in today's world; it is a global network of caring Christians who are merging ancient devotional practices with

modern life. John Michael Talbot is this kind of monk.

Monk Rock

A former star of the 1970s rock scene (with the band Mason Proffit), John Michael Talbot has shared stages and dressing rooms with the likes of The Byrds, Pink Floyd and The Grateful Dead. When he first came to Christ, he began recording albums for Sparrow Records, an early upstart in the Christian music world that remains one of the driving forces in that industry. His albums still echoed his country rock roots, but he eventually came to embrace the life of a Catholic monk and with it, a more contemplative, classically-oriented style. Once he embraced this style, his album sales skyrocketed and he quickly became one of the best-selling artists in Christian music.

Over the decades, he has remained famous for his quiet, simple melodies as well as his intricate classical guitar virtuosity and sweeping choral and orchestral arrangements. His popularity is ecumenical, reaching across denominations and including both Catholics and Protestants. Brilliantly talented and deeply spiritual, Talbot has toured around the world and has touched millions of lives with his music and ministry, all of it staying true to liturgical worship traditions and focused on meditative, joyous and prayerful spirituality.

His inner classic rocker is still alive and well, though, as his 2005 album *Monk Rock* and its '06 follow-up *The Beautiful City* attest. Though most of his work is more contemplative and orchestral, he still enjoys picking up an electric guitar and returning to his roots. "I listened to [*Monk Rock*] the other day and I went, 'Darn! That's good!'" Like his latest work, the album was also structured as a mass, rocking along with the structure of a traditional Catholic order of service. But, he says, "I really got slammed on it by a lot of liturgists." The backlash from these Catholic worship leaders, he says, means that Talbot fans like me are unlikely to hear *Monk Rock 2: The Monk Rocks Harder* anytime soon. "Yeah, it's gonna be a long time comin' because, I tell you, I lost a lot of my fan base with those two electric records." And, he says, "I didn't pick up any young folks because it's not really contemporary. It's classic rock."

Talbot doesn't talk like you'd expect a monk to talk. He still sounds like an old rocker and, in many ways, he still is. He's also quietly revolutionary. The atypical abbot of an unusual order, Talbot has carved out for himself and his community a place from which to speak with wisdom about new movements in monastic spirituality and their relevance to contemporary culture.

iMonk

John Michael Talbot is a member of a cult. He says so himself. No, he is not referring to the monastic community he leads in the hills of the Ozarks; that's a sanctioned part of the Roman Catholic Church. He's talking about a real sectarian group—a pervasive and possibly insidious underground of devotees—the worldwide cult of Mac users. "It is a cult," he said at a recent

concert in Arlington, Texas. Then, flashing a cheeky grin, he added, "but it's a good one!" He was joking, of course, though he is an avid Mac fan, always traveling with his iPhone and iPad close at hand, updating his Facebook page and Twitter feed daily and even uploading videos of the recording sessions for his most recent album, *Worship and Bow Down*.

However, as he told me earlier that day in Arlington, "Truth be known, I wouldn't even have a computer if I didn't have to write books and have a ministry. I just would go off in a cave somewhere." Of course, when he gets a computer to write books on, it just happens to be an iPad. It's no coincidence. The glint in his eye when he discusses his new toys gives him away, even though he sincerely does use them for ministry. So, he's a gadget geek with the heart of a cave-dwelling hermit. But that's just one of many seeming paradoxes in the life of John Michael Talbot. Contemplative singer and classic rocker, monk and married man, respecter of ancient traditions and forger of new paths, Talbot is a lover of diversity within the unity of the Body of Christ. With a vivid and deep grasp of monasticism's rich past, he lives fully engaged in the present, addressing issues in both the Church and the broader culture through his ministry.

Brothers and Sisters of Charity

Talbot's aforementioned monastic community is the Brothers and Sisters of Charity at Little Portion Hermitage in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. Talbot has been the abbot of this community since 1978 and it is quietly revolutionary. Consisting of celibate men and women, married couples and families, the group has been, from its inception, on the forefront of integrated monasticism. More than simply including different types of people within cloistered walls, however, the group also incorporates domestic expressions—members who live a monastic commitment in their own homes through cell groups across the United States. "In our community," Talbot says, "the notion of integration is very, very important. In other words, this monastic spirituality is something that can be given to [people in] all states of life in a way that's appropriate to their state of life. And monasticism, let's keep in mind that it was never a static concept. It had many, many different forms in the beginning of the Church."

Ask Talbot about those many forms, and you will get a thorough rundown of the history of monastic spirituality, from its earliest roots, across the span of Christian history to modern times. "There were rural expressions, urban expressions, expressions that included apostolic ministry, expressions that went into strict solitude. Egyptian monasticism was that which became the classical, kind of mythic, mythological type, you know, of early monasticism. But even it had different expressions."

Discussing the role of monasteries as educational institutions for the children of poor families, he explains, "So children get involved. And then families began associating with monasteries. There were monks as well as nuns. I mean, so monasticism has been a fluid development all through history. You know, in the Western Church, Francis [of Assisi] came along and said, 'the world

is my cloister,' with the Mendicants, then Societies of the Apostolic Life came along and the Jesuits and folks like that. ... So, this is just one more development in another era of this kind of fluid development of the monastic impetus."

The New Monastics

In his latest book, *The Universal Monk: The Way of the New Monastics*, Talbot seeks to provide a road map for refitting monastic spirituality to a contemporary setting. "The book is about going back and finding that monastic impetus and applying it in a modern setting in a way that's going to be life-giving for people of all states of life," he says. "And it's reflective of a movement that's bigger than just our community; our community is just one expression of it." This new monastic movement is a worldwide trend, but one Talbot and the Brothers and Sisters of Charity were far ahead of. "We were kinda doing it starting back in 1978. And we were doing it first under the Franciscan umbrella and now we do it under a more universal monastic umbrella, but within the Catholic Church, reaching out ecumenically, primarily, but even interfaith."

This concept of monasticism as something that stretches across boundaries and borders, ministering to those outside as well as inside the Church is something Talbot sees as particularly suited to an age when so many are seeking a deeper spiritual life, but looking for new, integrated ways in which to express it. "You know, I say down here in Texas when we go to parishes, 'Everybody wants to be a monk but nobody wants to give up their pickup truck.' ... So, the average American isn't going to jump in and join even an integrated monastery. They're going to want to live this monastic spirituality—a contemplative life, a simple life, a dedicated life—but out in the secular world, in the midst of their local churches, their local parishes and in the midst of their families. So that, I think, has the greatest potential in the United States."

The key, says Talbot, is to embrace radicalism—but not fanaticism. "Today, I think that's what's missing more than anything, a real understanding of what it is to be radical but not fanatical. The early Church called fanaticism a sin. To be a radical is similar to the word 'radish' in English, like 'rooted.' It just means you're rooted. And, like with a plant, the deeper the roots go down, the higher it can reach. And if the roots aren't deep, when it tries to reach up high, it gets blown away, like a cornstalk. You know, real radicalism is deeply rooted, but it's able to reach high up into new space and that's what new monasticism is all about."

But many Christians these days, especially those who are embracing Christian faith for the very first time in their lives, find themselves confronted with a landscape where there seem to be very few things that are called 'Christian' that resonate at all with the reason they came to Christ. How are they to ground themselves spiritually in such a way that those roots do grow deep? Talbot says, "Get thee to a monastery!"

"You've gotta tap into a tradition, a tradition that's life-giving and healthy. In Christianity, I think the answer is...not only learning your Bible, but learning about the early Church." Talbot encourages a study of early Church fathers and saints, as well as

monks and nuns. "And you're gonna find a tradition of radical but not fanatical Christians that will encourage us to live the Gospel in a similar way today, because they had to apply the Gospel in their own culture, in their own setting, in a way that kept the essentials but was able to adapt the energies of the faith in different ways. And so, that's our challenge today. Find you a monastery. Go to a beautiful liturgy. A lot of it you're going to get by osmosis. If you go to a monastic liturgy, you're going to experience something that is ancient, mystical and life-giving. ... Go talk to a monk. By osmosis, you're going to tap into something that is ancient, mystical and at the same time right here today with its feet on the ground in a very practical way."

Worship and Bow Down

You could also spend some time listening to a monk right at home. Talbot's new album, *Worship and Bow Down*, is a lushly orchestrated work meant to accompany the New Roman Missal, the newly revised order of worship for the Roman Catholic Church. Marrying layers of Talbot's warm, articulate voice and renowned classical guitar with choir and orchestra, the album is a deeply enveloping and compelling experience of liturgical worship. "We want to get back to the notion of sung liturgy because, as [early Church father] Augustine says, 'when you sing, you pray twice.'" Talbot also wanted to make his music adaptable for different congregations to sing. "And so the idea [emerged]," he tells me, "of the new contemporary chant setting that includes harmony and people are given the option to sing in Gregorian style, without harmony, or to sing it with harmony in a more modern type of setting."

Talbot talked with me about several of the tracks on the album, including the title track, "Worship and Bow Down," based on Psalm 95. "Now, that is the invitatory hymn," Talbot says of the Psalm, "that's used at the very beginning of what's called the Prime, which is the First Hour of the Liturgy of the Hours every day." The Liturgy of the Hours, or Divine Office, is a pattern of prayer that is used by monastics throughout each day. Psalm 95 and the invitation to praise God is at the heart of the album and its intended effect on listeners. "You know, the beginning of the Divine Office daily is a call to praise God," Talbot tells me. "In other words, as you wake up, don't fall into negativity, don't fall into negative thoughts. Start by praising God, thanking God for a new day. You know, as you hear His voice, don't harden your heart. Today is the day of salvation... gonna be a good day."

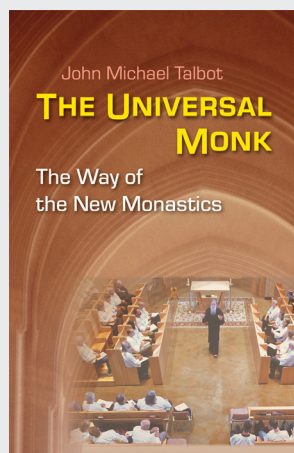
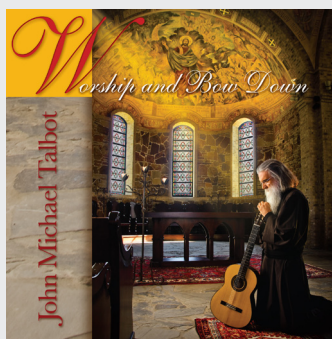
The idea of praising and thanking God is so important that it bookends the Liturgy of the Hours and the album. Talbot continues, "At the end of the Divine Office in compliment, the last thing that you think is thanking God for the day. You know, there may have been some challenges during the day, there may have been some failures, but there's also been good stuff, so give God praise for that. And that keeps you positive."

Since *Worship and Bow Down* is meant to accompany the New Roman Missal, it's not intended as simply an album to listen to, but also to be used in churches as part of their regular worship. For

that reason, Talbot felt a particular responsibility to make the music very singable and accessible to a contemporary audience, while staying true to ancient traditions. "I wanted something that was ancient but contemporary, something that was simple but elegant." He certainly achieved that goal and has received accolades for his work. He says simply, "I'm very pleased with it."

In his new album as well as his new book, Talbot continues to find unique, modern expressions for ancient ideas. In so doing, he preserves the traditions that have gone before, while moving them forward in ways that are relevant to our time and culture. "Having a positive attitude is so much more important nowadays," Talbot says, referring to the many ills we are now confronted with, from economic concerns to environmental ones. "The title of one of the cuts of the new record is 'Nothing is Impossible.' And I really, really wanted to keep a message that is indeed very, very positive throughout the new record."

It's a message of a Christian spirituality that is grounded in healthy, life-giving traditions in brand new expressions, an interweaving of the ancient and the modern that is both transcendent and grounded in everyday life. According to Talbot, "It's very, very livable stuff; it's not superhuman. Monasteries are very human, choosing to do something that is very heavenly and very godly. ... I think it's very cosmic and, at the same time, very functional." He chuckles, knowing that sounds a bit incongruous. But he's comfortable with what might look like paradox, something he referred to on his album *The Master Musician* as "the apparent dissonance of diversity." He lives there. Perhaps that is because it is in these unusual harmonies that Talbot most often finds the music of the Spirit of God. 🎧



Worship and Bow Down as a CD or digital download, the book *The Universal Monk: The Way of the New Monastics*, and John Michael Talbot's other books and music, along with information on his upcoming concerts and retreats are all available at www.johnmichaeltalbot.com. You can also keep up with John Michael at facebook.com/johnmichaeltalbot.

For more information on the Brothers and Sisters of Charity, visit www.littleportion.org.

John Michael Talbot:

A Selected Discography

John Michael Talbot (1976)

Talbot's first solo album is an essential snapshot of his country rock roots, reflecting his successful career with the band Mason Proffit. His classical guitar skills are in evidence here as well.

The Lord's Supper (1979)

An early breakout success, Talbot made his mark on the Christian music world with this album, a close musical cousin to *Worship and Bow Down*.

Come Worship the Lord Vol. 1&2 (1990)

These albums are simple, intimate recordings, reflecting the worship gatherings of the Brothers and Sisters of Charity.

The Master Musician (1992)

A masterful work featuring sweeping, large scale instrumentation and exploring the theme of music as a metaphor for our relationship with God.

Brother to Brother (1996)

Talbot's collaboration with legendary Protestant musician Michael Card not only represents an expression of Christian unity but is a wonderful record of two great musicians bringing out the best in one another.

Monk Rock (2005)

Harkening back to his earliest works, Talbot's brilliant classic rock album is based on liturgical patterns as much as on the monk's joyful exploration of electric guitar. 2006's *The City of God* furthered this journey.

CHRISTIAN COMIC ARTS SOCIETY

Christian artists create inspirational comics.

Images from Samson the Nazirite Issue # 1 'Birth' | Used by Permission



SARA NAPIER

Born in Southern California, Sara Napier has spent most of her life between California and Arizona. At the age of 22 she has begun to be established as an entrepreneur, musician and writer and has worked in ministry with Kingman Foursquare Church for the last 6 years. In her spare time Sara performs, designs clothing and writes for various blogs, including her own KingdomJournal.tumblr.com.

Have you ever had one of those moments where you feel awkward or out of place? Everyone is made specially with different talents and skills. It is up to us how we will use them, but when you feel there is no place to act in your talents, what do you do? This was a problem facing many artists some 20 years ago when the Christian Comic Arts Society came into existence.

Christian-themed comics were difficult to find and difficult to publish. This was discouraging for the artists, writers and

fans that wished to see spiritual themes developed in graphic novels.

With few places promoting faith-based comics, there were even fewer resources to nourish the development of the Christians creating them. Seeing this specific need, Donald Ensign started the Christian Comic Arts Society nearly 25 years ago. Beginning as a small meeting in Southern California, the purpose of the CCAS has always been to help encourage those that wish to incorporate personal faith into their art. It is an organization where like-minded Christians can come together to encourage and support each other.

What began as a social club of sorts has gone on to be a support for the careers of graphic artists and writers. It has fostered a creative environment where people can collaborate and help each other while trying to find their way in the industry. With opportunities to be a part of projects such as the APAZINE ALPHA-OMEGA, the CCAS encourages members of all skill levels and backgrounds to come together and create. This opens the door for artists that want to proclaim the Gospel, offering an outlet to share ideas, gain valuable feedback and discover new opportunities. Members can share their material with experts and receive help to know what's good and what can use a little bit more work. With some members having worked in comics for decades, even if they don't have the exact information or skills to give advice on certain matters, they have the connections to direct them to people that do. They are a valuable network to help people connect, grow and flourish. Overall, it is a great community to make friends and gain advice on how artists can hone their craft.

There are several ways to connect with the CCAS, the easiest would be to check out the website at www.christiancomicarts.com and sign up to become a member of the active web community already established. While there, you can create a profile, contribute to forums, join groups, read blogs and best of all, make valuable friendships with the members in the community.

I was able to sign up for the site and went, right away to the forums to introduce



Cover of Samson the Nazirite

“Our hope is that our story will get people excited [and] interested in the Bible [and that they will] actually pick up their Bible to read the incredible stories in it,” says

Luis Serrano.

myself and start talking to some of the members. Within the first week, I was able to talk with some of the nicest people I think I've ever met online. In some of the forums, members welcome each other with informal comments saying things like "Welcome to the CCAS! This is a great place to be. There are industry pros... veteran mentors ... a whole range of people gifted by God from fans, amateurs, aspiring creators, even professionals..." From just the few interactions I've made, I can tell it's a great place to make lasting relationships and enjoy comics with people that know the most about this timeless art.

Within the discussion boards, I was able to see where experienced members provide others with constructive tips and help to avoid the pitfalls they've made in the past. Without even knowing me, many of the members offered encouraging words, answered my questions and helped me begin to navigate the site. Beyond social and career-minded encouragement, members are able to share Christ with each other and find accountability. Much like the church of Acts, this community looks out for each other and quickly interacts with even the newest members and fans.

A great example of one of the interactions I had on the site was with a member named Luis Serrano. He and a few of the other members have come together to create Samson the Nazirite. It's a graphic novel retelling the Biblical account of Samson. This project is an example of the talent and passion that can be found everywhere on the site. It is an impressive work of art, one that anyone would be proud to take credit for but when commenting about it, they stated their purpose as Luis simply said "...our hope is that our story will get people excited [and] interested in the Bible [and that they will] actually pick up their Bible to read the incredible stories in it."

While the website offers great connections for artists and fans, one of the most popular venues to get to know the CCAS would be at the annual Comic Con convention. They host 3 events and have been actively attending the convention for the last 16 years. While there, you have the opportunity to meet some of the members of the society and learn about the associated media and resources.

At Comic Con, their first event is usually on a Friday night where members come together with interested parties and have a meet and greet where everyone can get to know one another. On Saturday, a larger host panel comes together for a discussion called "Spiritual Things and Comics."

During the Saturday panel, people from all faiths are encouraged to come to discuss their views and how having faith effects their careers and daily lives. This event is well-attended and offers a look into all beliefs. On Sunday, there is another host panel that is open to all beliefs but has a specific purpose to discuss Christianity. With small similarities to a church service, it begins with a few worship songs and after an opening prayer, the panel begins. Comic Con is a great time for the CCAS and offers a look into the

world of comics through a Christian perspective. The CCAS can also be found at several events on the West coast. For example, another popular event is Wondercon in Anaheim, CA where the team sets up a table each year. Founder Don Ensign is known to attend the conventions in Phoenix and other areas.

The Christian Comic Arts Society has thousands of members worldwide but their largest group is located on the West coast of America. In the recent years, they have begun meeting in Canada, Europe and even Africa. Buzz Dixon stated he "would love to continue expanding and get a chapter meeting in the South regularly." They hope to expand their presence there and other parts of America, especially the East coast.

Beyond the website and conventions, the CCAS continues to meet regularly in California. The times and frequency of these meetings depend on the activities going on with the society and the governing members. Usually held monthly in the early evening, the meetings are open to all society members and information about them is available on the website. During these nights, the

board members address upcoming events and then everyone is able to discuss a wide range of topics such as the happenings of the Christian culture, the arts and anything else that may be of importance.

Much like the members demonstrate on the website, the meetings are very casual and friendly. Afterwords the members go out to dinner together. I can think of no example that better illustrates what this community represents. People like Buzz Dixon, a legendary comic writer known for his work with Marvel and Eclipse Comics, sit among novice artists and writers to enjoy a meal together.

During this time there are no barriers, just a sense of togetherness as artists just beginning their careers are able to sit across the table from veterans of the comic industry. I believe the CCAS is a paradigm of the body of Christ. It is a society full of people with different skill sets, backgrounds and opinions coming together like a family to encourage, support and dream together.

The CCAS scripture is Hebrews 12:1-2, "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" and they clearly live by it.

Thanks to organizations like the Christian Comic Arts Society, it's that much easier for us all to connect in the body of Christ no matter the passion, skill or culture. I have already enjoyed my time getting to know about the society as both an appreciator of comic styles and as a Christian. I think it is a great place to learn from and grow and I have a feeling the experiences to be had will carry through a lifetime. 🙏

"Thanks to organizations like the Christian Comic Arts Society, it's that much easier for us all to connect in the body of Christ no matter the passion, skill or culture."

The Space Between

*Seeking the Sacred
Between the Pages of
Pop Culture*

Rescuing The Passion of the Christ

*Viewing this epic Easter
classic for all it's worth.*



KEVIN C. NEECE

Kevin is a writer and speaker in Fort Worth, Texas. He has written for Art House Dallas, *Rethinking Everything Magazine* and more, including the forthcoming book *Light Shining in a Dark Place: Discovering Theology Through Film*. He's also a contributing editor for *Imaginatio et Ratio: A Journal of Theology and the Arts*. Connect with him at kevincneec.com and undiscoveredcountryproject.com.

At this time of year, as Christians worldwide are focusing on the passion—the suffering and death—of Jesus, there is a perennial resurgence of interest in films on the life of Christ. Of course, in recent years, *The Passion of the Christ* has risen to the top of a short list of such films as a favorite for many people. Since its release in 2004, it has incited intense emotion—from pastors urging their congregations to the theatres in droves, from critics assailing the film as defamatory and from film-goers moved to either tears and life-changing decisions or disgust and anger by a theatrical experience. Seven years after its theatrical debut (seven is a good Biblical number, right?), I thought I might return to *The Passion of the Christ* and ask how one film can wear so many faces.

When I first heard that Mel Gibson was making a new movie about Jesus, I was incredulous. Yes, my mom had read it in the newspaper, but so many things get printed in newspapers about movies that never materialize. I thought this was surely a rumor, misinformation, even a hoax. But, of course, Gibson did make that film and in no time its figure loomed large in the genre of Jesus films and the culture at large.

It was infamous almost from the beginning. A big Hollywood movie about Jesus was coming. Would it portray him in a positive light? Was Mel Gibson a Christian? Should Christians see the film? Then came the news that the film was actually independent and was to be shot in Aramaic and Latin, followed early accusations of Antisemitism, reports of extreme violence, church screenings, endorsements from Christian leaders, and debates on TV. It unfolded like a national drama, like the OJ trial or a presidential election. No matter how early in its theatrical run you saw the film, its reputation preceded it.

But, now that the presses have run, the DVDs are in the clearance bin and Mel Gibson's drunken, rage-filled reputation has once again overshadowed his artistic brilliance, what are we left with? What is the film's message, its legacy, apart from the media tumult? Does it, can it have one?

I've made films on the life of Christ an area of personal study for 20 years. I've explored over a century's worth of film history to learn as much as I can about this curious little sub-genre. As you can imagine, I was therefore in the theatre for *The Passion of the Christ* as fast as I could get a ticket. I saw it theatrically three times and have seen it numerous times since. I've read essays,

listened to commentaries, read books and have learned and continue to learn all I can about the film. And I have an answer for you:

It's up to you.

I know that may sound like a cop-out, but it's also my honest assessment. The film's message depends a great deal on who is watching. Of course, that's true with every movie. But somehow, *The Passion of the Christ* seems particularly able to evoke strong and specific responses in its viewers. And I believe that openness to interpretation is inherent in the film's structure, perhaps more so than most films of this genre, because of one essential fact: Gibson, for all his dramatic abilities as an actor and director, is still an action movie guy.

That's not an insult, by the way. Many people see action films as unthinking, vacuous and unintelligent. It is this thinking that has helped make the word "muscle-headed" one of the most overused in the film critic's lexicon—implying that a film is all brawn and no brains. Often, unfortunately, this critique is ably earned. But action films don't have to be mindless; in fact, they can make powerful statements. What most people don't realize, though, is that they communicate in a different cinematic language than we're often used to. They use action—what the characters *do*—far more than dialogue to convey character development. They are highly symbolic and, in the best hands, great cinema. The same is true of horror films.


Gibson understands this and employs the "showing rather than telling" method in most of his films. *The Passion of the Christ* is no different. Watch the first 25 minutes sometime and ask yourself what this film looks more like stylistically: A Biblical epic...or a horror movie? There are as many scares in the first several scenes of *Passion* as there are in most films of that genre. The tools of the horror trade are in full effect—cold, shadowy lighting, startling cuts, still moments punctuated by wide eyes and strong vocalizations interrupting the quiet, the demon lurking in the dark, the mysterious hum of the unknown.

It's just one arrangement of the many kinetic, visceral, action-oriented tools Gibson uses throughout the film. From deep, resonant bass tones added to sound effects to quick cuts between flesh being ripped from Christ's back, Mary gasping back tears and Roman soldiers' faces spritzed with blood, Gibson doesn't want to fill our heads with theology—he wants to hit us in the gut.

Action movies and horror films do this. They speak in the language of human instinct and ask us to respond to quick cuts and striking physical feats, changes in film speed and dynamic camera angles in basic, human ways. We are meant to experience a collection of autonomic responses—increased heart rate, adrenaline production, changes in breathing patterns—that inform the way we think and feel about the story and its characters. So, why would Gibson choose these tools with which to make a film about Christ?

Perhaps it is because they allow the film to speak in symbols, in actions and images that can be imbued with very deep, personal meaning by audiences. In this way, it can create a response that is very specific to each viewer. Perhaps Gibson also knows—whether instinctively or with specific, calculated forethought—

that this kind of filmmaking puts the audience in a state of active response, that it demands even on a physiological level that we *do* something. He seems to want to compel us beyond emotion into an active state of mind that will confront us with the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ and ask us, "Now what?" demanding, daring us to respond.

So, that's my recommendation. Put yourself in the position to respond. The film is an intense experience; it needs to be a valuable one. If we allow ourselves to have that gut-level response, we can then begin to think seriously about what God might be asking us to do with that experience. This process is different for everyone, but it is almost universally powerful. Why? For the reasons I've listed above and also because, for all its faults, this film focuses deeply and at length on Jesus—not just his life or teachings, but the arduous process of his sacrifice. That's powerful—because he is powerful. If we connect with nothing else through *The Passion of the Christ* or any other Jesus film, we should connect with that. 

This article was the basis for Kevin's forthcoming paper, "Rescuing The Passion of the Christ: Viewing an Action/Horror Film About Jesus on its Own Terms." Get the paper, read more of his thoughts on Jesus films or book him to speak at your church, school or event at www.JesusFilms101.com

Things to Remember While Viewing *The Passion of the Christ*

1. **It's not for everyone.** No matter how widely it was promoted as a film every Christian should see, it's not. I saw people leading small children into the theatre at all three screenings I attended. That's wrong. There are adults who should avoid this film. It's rated R for a Reason.
2. **It's not history.** There's a popular myth/perception that this film is "how it happened." Hardly. It's just a guess and, as in most Jesus films, there's a healthy portion of fiction that reinforces the director's point of view. Do some research and view the film critically.
3. **Get definitive.** The definitive edition DVD is replete with informative, insightful extras that greatly enhance the experience of the film. They're worth the time and a few extra bucks.
4. **Get real.** Yes, Mel Gibson struggles with terrible demons and has embarrassed himself publicly many times. His art still stands. Take it for what it is and don't dismiss it because of his faults. The film's about grace. Show some.
5. **Get busy.** Do something. Something real. Something you can't fake. Let yourself be affected. That's the point.

new identity

MAGAZINE

**Dear God,
Thank you for the opportunity to read the stories of what you are doing in the lives of others. I desire to know you more and find my purpose and identity in you. I want to take my first steps by simply coming to you and asking you to forgive me for all the things that have kept me from you. Jesus, I recognize that my sins are forgiven because you cleared all my wrongs on the cross. May you cleanse me and make me new. Holy Spirit, guide me in all truth and give me the strength to follow in your ways.
In Jesus' name, Amen**