

# new identity

*God in focus. World in scope.*

MAGAZINE

## CALLING HIM FATHER

*Living as a  
child of God*

## JESUS IS KNOCKING

*Rethinking  
Revelation 3:20*

## IN HYDESIGHT

*A testimony of  
recovery and  
redemption*

*How A Roman  
Bishop Changed  
The Way I Read  
The Bible*

*On reading the Bible to enjoy God*



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## MAGAZINE

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### ISSUE 36

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New Identity Magazine's mission is to provide diverse, Bible-centered content to help lead new believers and seekers to a fuller understanding of the Christian faith.

#### OUR VISION

##### Grow

*Education of different Christian perspectives, building foundation, understanding Christian concepts, jargon, practical application of Scripture and more.*

##### Connect

*Encouragement through testimonies, articles about relationships, fellowship, church, community, discussions and expressions of faith.*

##### Live

*Participating in the world as a Christian, with stories of people actively pursuing God through their passions, organizations and resources. How to apply ones gifts, talents and desires to serve God and others, sharing the love of Christ in everyday arenas.*

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A BETTER WAY



*"Thus says the Lord:  
 'Cursed is the man who trusts in man  
 and makes flesh his strength,  
 whose heart turns away from the Lord.  
 He is like a shrub in the desert,  
 and shall not see any good come.  
 He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness,  
 in an uninhabited salt land.  
 "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,  
 whose trust is the Lord.  
 He is like a tree planted by water,  
 that sends out its roots by the stream,  
 and does not fear when heat comes,  
 for its leaves remain green,  
 and is not anxious in the year of drought,  
 for it does not cease to bear fruit."*

*-Jeremiah 17:5-8 ESV*

I love the contrast and imagery in Jeremiah 17 and it's just oozing with God's love for his people. The contrasting ideas of trusting in man to trusting in God, being cursed to being blessed, parched in the desert to dwelling by water - and there is much more - are all communicating a truth and a promise. This is the truth of what Jesus Christ has done for the world. Has done for us. Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection mends our relationship with God and reverses the affects of sin - this choice he made is our chance for change - for transformation. This is the promise that when we accept Christ as our Lord who has done such an incredible act out of love for us, we can trust God more than we trust people or the state of the world, we can go from being cursed by the sin that runs through our veins from our ancestors Adam and Eve, to being blessed as children of God (John 1:12) who can come to the Father's listening ear with any prayer or need, struggle or petition, and the aimless wander of our hearts can be filled with the living water (Jesus) that never runs dry (John 4).

In this issue we highlight several ways that God can and does transform us, (our ideas, our actions and our hearts ) into something (someone) better and more fulfilling (more like Jesus). Gary VanDeWalker talks about how God can take our goals and make better plans, Steven Butwell talks about how God can take a battle with alcoholism to recovery and a purpose in helping others, Bethany Wagner talks about how God makes our relationship with him that of family. We hope you enjoy these and many more!

*Cailin*





# WHEN GOD *Closes* A DOOR, DOES HE OPEN A *Window?*

ENDURING BIBLE MISQUOTES

*by* GARY VANDEWALKER







**W**e might be surprised to find out what we have taken as the wisdom of God is really dialogue from a musical. In the Sound of Music, Maria wants to be a nun. The Reverend Mother tells her she must first go spend a few months as a governess taking care of seven children. She sees this as an unnecessary diversion and pauses on the way out and says, "When the Lord closes a door, somewhere he opens a window."

When a path to something we pursue or desire is closed, a simple Bible misquote leads us to believe what we want is not cut off from us, but simply requires a workaround to achieve our goal. We can confuse our goals with God's and decide we just need to circle the house to find the proper entrance to arrive at our destination. The question we should ask is if our goal is one given by God, and if so, what is the door or window he is opening, understanding there is also a real possibility it is not God's goal at all and no entrance needs to be found.

It is a comforting thought to think our desires are accessible if we can just figure out the proper entrance to the house of God's will. We want our discouragements to be simple detours so we will still receive our aspirations. However, just like Maria discovers in the musical, there is no window which magically opens when God shuts a door. At times, God closes a door and he commands it shut and no other entrance will be opened to us.

When a path to something we PURSUE or desire is closed, a simple Bible misquote leads us to believe what we want is not cut off from us, but simply requires a WORKAROUND to achieve our goal.

In order to know how to respond to a door the Lord has closed, two proverbs provide precepts to follow. The first precept is found in Proverbs 16:9. "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." The verse is not discouraging planning. In the scriptures there are many examples of plans which God blesses and provides the open doors. It was King David's habit to make a plan and then bring it before God and ask if the plan was approved, or established on a foundation the Lord approved. When

the families of his men were captured, he made a plan to pursue them with his army, but before doing so, he asks God for wisdom: And David inquired of the Lord, "Shall I pursue after this band? Shall I overtake them?" He answered him, "Pursue, for you shall surely overtake and shall surely rescue" (1 Samuel 30:8). This was a door God opened. David planned, he asked, and the way was opened. But then there are closed doors.

The Apostle Paul wanted to spread the Gospel in Asia. God had other plans.

"And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (Acts 16:6-7).

Twice God closes the door to Paul's plans. Paul does not try another way, he does not look for a window, he makes new plans and continues on. With a new direction God doesn't bring Paul to Asia or Bithynia, but to a third location, Macedonia.

So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to

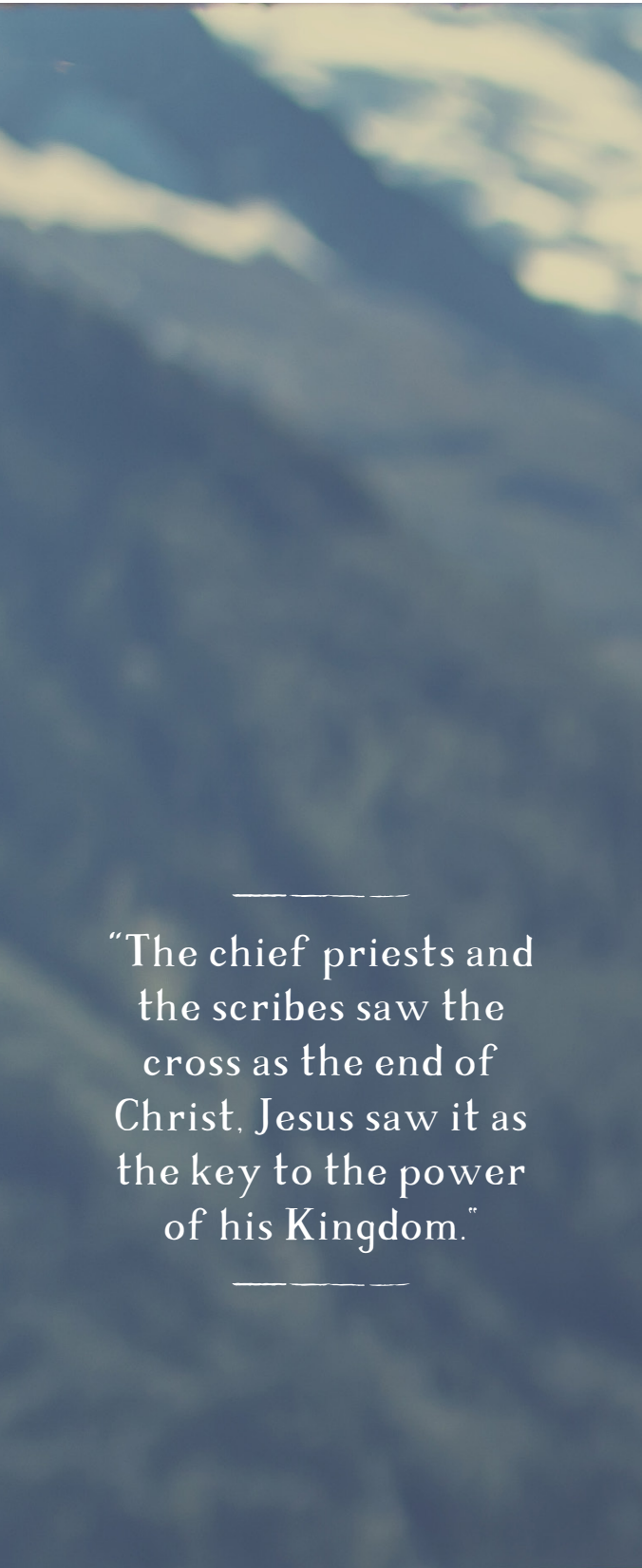
God rewrites Paul's plans  
and closes one door,  
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Humans plan, but God  
establishes the steps to  
take.

go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:6-10).

God rewrites Paul's plans and closes one door, opening another in a whole new direction. Humans plan, but God establishes the steps to take.

A second precept is found in Proverbs 19:21, "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand." Again, we are not discouraged to plan. In fact, we might have many plans in our minds. The precept reminds us the foundation of where these plans lead is not our own desires, but the purpose of God. No clearer example of this precept can be found than in the story of the cross and the death of Jesus. The chief priests and





“The chief priests and the scribes saw the cross as the end of Christ. Jesus saw it as the key to the power of his Kingdom.”

scribes in Jesus' day desired to kill him to eliminate his opposition of their leadership. “It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him” (Mark 14:1). They were making plans and would succeed in carrying them out. However, what they did not see was God's purpose to have Christ die in order that we may be saved. They saw the cross as the end of Christ, Jesus saw it as the key to the power of his Kingdom. “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Thus a second precept is set down. People may make all the plans they want, but God's purpose will always be the outcome in the end.

This returns us to our Bible misquote: When God closes a door, he opens a window. What we are wanting the saying to mean is opportunity is never missed. If I didn't get the job, the gift, the trip, or wish I put forward by walking through the door, I need only look around for the window God has opened to obtain what I want. But when God closes a door the only truth we are assured of is that God will establish our steps, putting them on a foundation which will lead to the fulfillment of his purposes.

This closed door will lead to one of three directions. God may be redirecting our course to the same goal, but just on another path. God may be asking us to

wait and return later to the door. These first two sound much like the misquote, but the quote misses a third truth. God may not want us to have what was behind the door and he has shut it to prevent us from moving that direction. God may have no other way for us to go and fulfill whatever it is we have desired.

God is sovereign, meaning he is in control of our history. Nothing is beyond his power. Either by time or direction, he may just have our destination or purpose on pause. God might be redirecting us for a short time. But it is an error to believe this is always the case. At times a closed door is exactly that, a closed door. God may be leading us in a different direction on purpose. We need to always consider his direction may include keeping us from a certain path.

An argument can be made from Romans 8:28 that the open window is always there. "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." The verse sounds like an open window type of verse. If I love God, everything will always turn out for the good. Only there is a bit more to this verse, "called according to his purpose." There it is again, the precept in which God establishes our steps in the direction that his purpose will come to fruition. This is not a Christmas present verse where we love God and he is somehow obligated to follow our plans. Rather it is because we love God, we trust in the path

The door closes. The window MIGHT open, it might not. God says no at times, not leaving a yes for us to find around the CORNER.

he takes us on which will result in a good in that is in-line with his purposes.

The truth is God does open and close doors and windows. He does this not to fulfill our plans and desires, but to establish his purposes. Not because he wants us to be miserable, but because his plans are what is best for us. Our happiness is found in his desires and plans. He knows our hearts better than we know ourselves. The door closes. The window might open, it might not. God says no at times, not leaving a yes for us to find around the corner. The quote would be better stated, "When God closes a door, he 'might' open a window."



When the door closes, we should be praying for clarity of direction. Other mature believers can give advice in how they see what is there. Proverbs 11:14 instructs, “Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” It is possible your plans were biblical in their intent, but not God’s plan for you. You see that as Paul is redirected on his own journey towards Asia. His desire to spread the Gospel was good. God had another location in mind.

As we pray, we should consider other directions which may also be biblical in their purpose and nature. Rather than let redirection disappoint us, we should see the adventure of following Christ and have an anticipation for what his future holds. When Marie found out there was no window back to her dreams, she discovered a new direction. She found a family and a husband she never thought she would have. Her journey was beyond a fictional one of the movie. The movie depicts a true story. She never found the open window into the convent, instead she discovered God giving her a different life.

We should watch for the doors God does open and pray for the wisdom to know where to walk. Pray with the Psalmist, “Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name (Psalm 86:11).

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## Gary VanDeWalker

Gary VanDeWalker is a senior pastor in Mount Shasta, California. He has a Ph.D. in Philosophy and apologetics. He and his wife Monica run the Narnia Study Center, along with their three boys. He can be found reading, searching for new books, or watching Star Trek when no one is looking. He has a passion for all things C.S. Lewis.



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LIVE

# IN HYDESIGHT

A TESTIMONY OF RECOVERY AND REDEMPTION

by STEVEN BUTWELL

I love watching Forensic Files. I could keep the Investigation Discovery channel on for the entire day without being bothered by it, which in most cases happens anyway while I am at work. I have learned from these shows that most of the time, if not all of the time, the perpetrators are on the run, eventually get apprehended and then are sentenced based on the severity of their crime. The way these people are caught, however brilliant they believe they are at the time, is by evidence. In my case, there were clues, like footprints, that formed a pile of evidence all pointing to my addiction. In my case, I was on the run since the age of 14 and wasn't apprehended until I was 31. That is 17 years of evading the truth in my life despite the evidence and a trail of tears and pain from those witnesses I'd hurt along the way.

As many of you know, from previous accounts (See *New Identity Magazine* articles "Courting Mrs. Hyde" (Issue 31) and "Confronting Dr. Jekyll" (Issue 32)), my history with addiction is fierce and persistent. By God's grace, I entered treatment nearly 2 years ago. For this, I am eternally grateful. I learned how to live a life of recovery from the wonderful people at the treatment facility I attended, some of which I have fantastic relationships with today. It's incredible the work that God will do in an individual's life when they allow him permission to do so. I had to allow God permission to strip me bare. I had to surrender my rights. I had to confess my crimes. I had to own my

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side of the street and make amends to both God and other human beings. I had to accept that I was an alcoholic. I had to not only admit this to others, in open court, but accept it in my own heart. These are two completely different challenges.

I had to accept what I was, what I had done, and who I had done it to. I had to take a good look in the proverbial mirror with deep introspection, turning the finger that pointed outward for so long in resentment because YOU, "YOU made me do it." I had to observe, then own, the three fingers pointing back at me in accusation of: "STEVEN made me do it." Of course, I had the excuse; "I was drunk and/or I took too many addictive painkillers." But, who made the conscious decision to over do the Percocet or Norco prescription

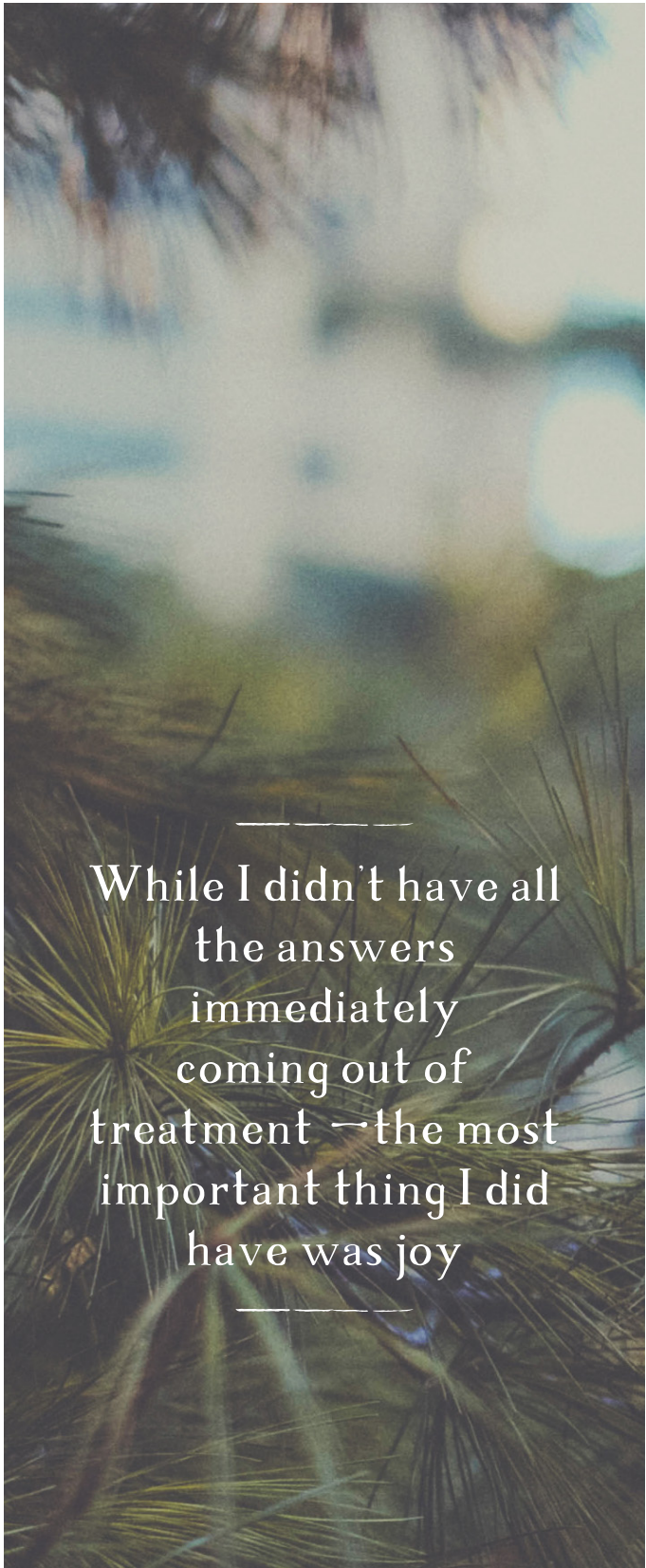


and take more than one? Who made the decision to take more than one drink of the Jameson, the Jack, the Jim, or the Skyy? Well, that was me. I accept that now.

I also had to make a perspective shift, which was tedious work. It took accepting things as they came; “Life on life’s terms” so to speak. Instead of picking up the bottle to numb the challenges and not “feel a certain way” anymore, I faced them. I have learned to confront the issues that come with a clear head, and instead of allowing it to bring out anger or fear, I allow it to teach me. Pain can be a powerful (if not the best) teacher. As can the past. If permitted to do so.

Moving forward I had to make a game plan. What was I to do next? I was fired as a youth pastor and was black out intoxicated when I abruptly quit my job as a server. I lost my house because I was in treatment with no income. My marriage ended. I was left with just me. And while I didn’t have all the answers immediately coming out of treatment — the most important thing I did have was joy.

Inexpressible joy. Joy I had never experienced, dare I say. It felt like true freedom. Freedom from active addiction. Freedom from past guilts and resentments. Forgiveness in my heart, knowing that God forgave me for horrible atrocities commit-



While I didn’t have all  
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ted towards him and others. And if God can forgive me for what I had done, I could boldly forgive those who I felt in my heart had wronged me. “Forgiven to forgive” as it’s said. In substance abuse treatment God taught me about real honesty and introspection, that we are only as sick as our secrets. God taught me about openness, to share my story. That beauty comes from ashes. That you cannot have the resurrection without the crucifixion. God had even shown me mercy, so that I could get off the judgement seat that is reserved for only one (Jesus) and show mercy to others rather than blame.

God gave me back my smile, laughter, and ability to not look through others when I spoke face to face, but to look at them. I could not only hear their hurts, but listen and have compassion on an entire new level – a “lived it” level. I was not just sympathetic with phrases like “I am sorry you are going through that.” I also offered more than just empathy in the forms of words like “I know what you’re going through, because I too have endured it.” Instead, I had compassion. Compassion like Jesus had on me. I say to people now; “I know how you hurt because I hurt witnessing you hurt. What do you need me to do for you? How can I help you through this?” Jesus Christ has brought me to a freedom from addiction, and it’s wonderful.

After my liberation, I started working in a treatment center similar to the one I’d come from. I worked on hand with clients regularly. I gave them medications, prepared food, carried on conversations (sometimes for hours), and helped them to dissect what had brought them to this point in their lives. I provided them a friend, an ear, a hug, or whatever they needed me to be in that moment. That was my role. It was my honor and my privilege. I was working full time in the recovery and addiction treatment field, but I never worked a day. It was a joy to give back in this way. For once, I had the freedom to drive to work, not having it be work and not feel burdened or loathsome. I was a counselor to those who needed advice. A hugger to those who needed a hug. A listener to those who needed to be heard. I was me. A fellow recovering alcoholic and person who had suffered severe loss. I could empathize with others because I was one of them. That’s freedom to me. Acceptance is freedom.

I cleaned house for awhile, both physically for the clients and proverbially. I told myself I would never go back into public speaking, or teaching, preaching, if you will. But that wasn’t Jesus’ plan for me. That was Steven’s plan, spawned from a resentment I held against the church from my past. I kept having these speaking opportunities land in my lap, and I picked them up, as painful as the obedience was, and God showed up, in life changing ways. My ability to meet



Alcoholics and drug  
addicts are not  
STATISTICS. They are  
not the scum of the  
earth, or the  
OUTCASTS of society.  
They are not people  
who have given up on  
life.

people where they were and identify with them, to establish rapport, and listen to their hurts, caught the eye of the clinical staff. Soon, I was offered a role as facilitator, a mock counselor if you will. I started to lead groups on a regular basis, that which I do today, at two separate facilities. Both are striving to help people get free from active drug and alcohol addiction. I am able to give hope, strength and encouragement to those in need, and I am paid for it. I honestly don't even know what to say, I am humbled by God's grace. I am speaking now, more regularly at a local

church, and the faith-based recovery meetings. I am able to share my story. I can relate to those who are just beginning their journey, help them see the milestones they've made within it, and provide reminders on why they don't want to go back.

Alcoholics and drug addicts are not statistics. They are not the scum of the earth, or the outcasts of society. They are not people who have given up on life. They are afraid. They are hurt. They have an extreme sense of loneliness, which can lead to isolation. They feel pain, anger, sadness, and sorrow. They are human beings. They are my neighbor. They are (were) me. They may be you.

These human beings need someone (as I did) to show them they can live a life of abstinence, free from the bondage of drugs or alcohol. And what better way than coming from someone who has lived it, known it. I am one. Admitting that, working on that, making amends, daily inventory (that is looking back on the day and my actions), closing in on my relationship with Jesus, solidifying that, walking with him, not getting ahead of him, but going at God's pace, allows me to show another human being how I do it, one day at a time, and how they can do it too. Sadly, this doesn't always work for everyone, the other person must choose for themselves, but I can try, hope, and pray they find and embrace that same freedom.

Jesus was sent for the lost. His focus was on his people who were far away that needed him. As a disciple of Jesus, there are lost people out there who I am meant to reach. I believe I have found them. My people are the addicts and the outcasts. My people are those who feel there is no hope, no way, to find and obtain freedom. God has sent me to help these individuals he so loves, to help them see that their cycle can be broken, lives and relationships can be repaired. To give hope to the hopeless, and bring freedom to the captives. Just as he did. What a privilege to be used by God. I am honored, even more, humbled.

I have enrolled in school, with emphasis in substance abuse counseling, as a credential and career. I have started the journey of ordination, as a recovery pastor and a biblical counselor for crisis intervention and addiction. A path that for all it's bumps and bruises, I'm surprised by, but God isn't. Christ called me at the tender age of 19 to preach his message, and while that calling has been full of detours, my roots remain in Christ and I'm on that road once more. It took intense pruning, allowing roots in Christ to grow stronger, deeper, and Jesus has equipped me to support the now weightlessness of my own burdened past, but also has given me the strength to carry the weight of the stories and struggles of those I counsel. I choose, will, have dedicated my life to the service of others who wrestle with addiction. If Jesus himself brought me back, perhaps he can use me, speak through me,

**My PEOPLE are the addicts and the outcasts.  
My people are those who feel there is no hope, no way, to find and obtain FREEDOM.**

act through me, to intervene in, and save another human who has built up, and believed in false hopes. Jesus is the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, man of sorrows, wonderful counselor, Christ who loves molding new things from broken pieces. The struggle never ends for recovering alcoholics. Good news is, neither does Jesus.



## Steven Butwell

*Steven is a former atheist who encountered Jesus face to face at age 19 in a vision. Since then, Steven has devoted his life to serving Jesus in every facet of his life. Steven's other passions include: reading the Bible, writing, traveling, playing Playstation 4 and public speaking.*



CONNECT

*Learning to have and  
enforce boundaries*



# Identify

Advice On Life, Faith &  
Relationships

With **LINDSEY A. FREDERICK**

Dear Lindsey,

I'm in my late 20s, and have lived away from home for almost 10 years, while getting my undergraduate degree, going to graduate school, and beginning my career. I recently moved back to my hometown for a great job and to be closer to family. But now that I'm back, they're driving me nuts! I love them to death, but they still treat me like I am 15 years old. They drop by my place unannounced and expect me to be at every family gathering, no matter what else I have going on. When I say I'm busy, they get upset and tell me I don't have time for them. I've tried asking for space and boundaries, but their feelings get hurt when I do. Sometimes my sister even cries. I'm not sure what else to do. Help!

Signed,  
*Too Close to Home*

Dear Too Close,

Your situation is tough, but not uncommon. Many adult children struggle to redefine family relationships once they've left the nest. You want autonomy and for your family to respect it, but you're frustrated they "just don't get it." While that's a completely reasonable desire, you can't control how people react. Families can also struggle with this transition. As we get older, our needs for our family will change, but some family members may be slower to catch on. It's up to you to let them know by not just asking for boundaries, but maintaining them. First, a quick chat about why boundaries are crucial.

**What is a boundary?**

Personal boundaries declare who we are. They define our thoughts and feelings, likes and dislikes, values

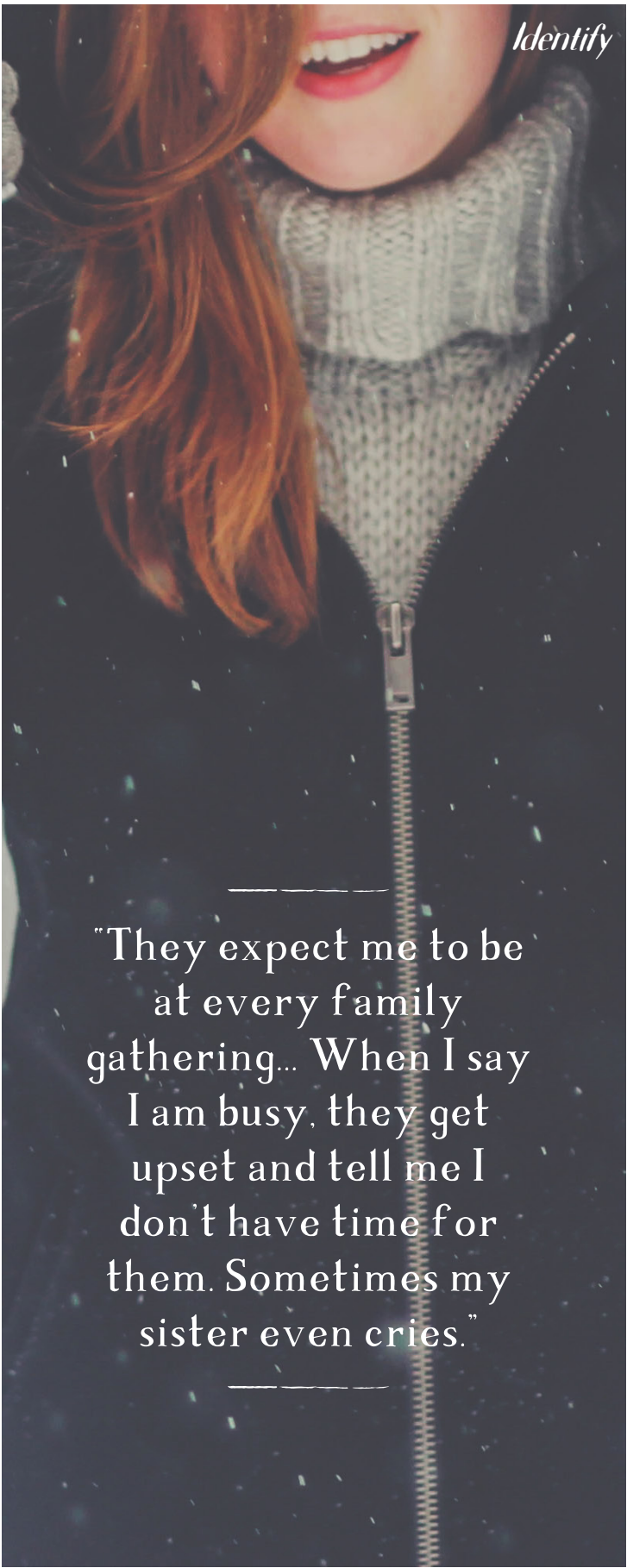


and beliefs, and they protect us from physical, emotional, and mental violations. “The concept of boundaries is rooted in God’s character,” says Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend in their book *Boundaries*. Throughout scripture, God defines himself as a distinct and separate being from us. He tells us who he is and is not, what he thinks and feels, and what he will and will not tolerate. He confronts offenses and allows consequences for behavior. And he never forces us to accept his love or spend time with him.

The most basic boundary-setting tool is the word “no,” as it helps keep bad things out of our life and protect the good. The Bible tells us to be clear about our yeses and nos (Matthew 5:37). Otherwise, it’s difficult for others to know when their behavior is driving you nuts. So, let’s chat about some of those behaviors and how you can deal.

**“They still treat me like I’m 15, and they drop by my place unannounced”**

Yeah, that can be frustrating. There are a couple of things to consider. First, you left home a teenager and returned an adult. But even though the world recognizes you as such, it can be hard for Mom and Dad to see beyond their “little baby.” Drs. Cloud and Townsend call this “acting out of memory instead of growth.” In addition, your family probably missed you and want to make up for lost time. So, they resort



“They expect me to be at every family gathering... When I say I am busy, they get upset and tell me I don’t have time for them. Sometimes my sister even cries.”

to what they know: acting out old habits. Before you moved away, you likely lived at home and they only needed to knock on your bedroom door to find you. Now, your boundary has expanded and you'd like a little more notice than a knock.

If you've asked for boundaries and your wishes continue to be dissed, check yourself. Have you asked your family to contact you before coming over? And have you clearly stated what will happen the next time someone shows up uninvited? The conversation might look like this:

"Hey Mom! I love it when you visit, but from now on would you please call before you come over? Otherwise, I can't guarantee that I'll be home or available to spend time with you, and I want to make sure we get quality time together."

Simple, right? If you've tried this, great! But now let's get real: have you followed through? This. Is. Critical. If you're having trouble, dig deeper. Are you afraid enforcing your boundaries will cause a family member to get angry or withdraw?

Boundary setting in relationships is an important, but difficult skill to develop, no matter the nature of the relationship. With family, however, this skill can seem almost impossible. It hurts to tell a parent or sibling no and, unfortunately, many relationships

involve a tug-of-war of manipulation. This can look like outbursts of anger, guilt trips, or tears.

**"They expect me to be at every family gathering.... When I say I am busy, they get upset and tell me I don't have time for them. Sometimes my sister even cries."**

No one likes to be told no. But guilt, blame, or shame are not healthy responses to whatever emotions arise. Sure, Sister might feel disappointed you aren't available for dinner, or Mom's feelings might get hurt that she can't visit you unannounced, but those feelings aren't your responsibility. Galatians 6:5 says, "For each [person] will have to bear his own load." You can have compassion, empathy, and understanding for how they feel, but ultimately their feelings are their "load" and their responsibility to take up with God and soothe, not yours.

The tough issue here is the guilt and pressure you feel because "they're family" and because of the displays of guilt and anger you've experience. You may tell yourself "Time with family is more important" or "It's not worth making someone upset" or "I'm being selfish" and begrudgingly break other commitments. The Bible tells us each of us should give what we have decided in our heart to give, "not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). While this verse is most often



# BOUNDARIES AREN'T RUDE, DISRESPECTFUL, *Or* UNLOVING.

applied to giving financially, it also extends to being good managers of all the resources God has given us, which includes our time.

Boundaries aren't rude, disrespectful, or unloving. If your "no" is consistently met with extreme phrases like "You always have something better to do," "You never have time for me," or any other effort to induce guilt or fear, it's best to put some distance between you and this controlling behavior until you're strong enough to enforce your boundaries. You may need to get yourself into a supportive community where it's safe to set limits without the repercussion of guilt and anger. This could be your church community, friend group, significant other, or a counseling support group. Practice setting limits on smaller things,

before deep-diving into a more difficult and sensitive situation.

And one more thing. Boundaries are also about keeping in positive, life-giving experiences. A friend once said to me, "You're better at saying no, but are you better at saying yes?" We can get so wrapped up in throwing out our old baggage that we can lose sight of—even fail to recognize—the good waiting on our doorstep.

You can create balance by taking matters into your own hands. Instead of waiting for family to invite you, initiate your own gathering. Host a movie night, get a coffee, go to dinner, or any other place you feel comfortable. By setting a new dynamic, you help break old patterns and build new memories. Meeting on neutral ground helps you continue building your boundaries, while still filling your family's need to connect. And you give them an opportunity to see you in a new way—the happy, healthy, confident, compassionate adult you've grown into.

Boundaries are something you will work through your entire life. And it will take time and patience to find the right groove with your family now. As you enter new chapters—marriage, children, moving, new jobs, making new friends—you will discover new boundary needs and renegotiate—or let go of—old ones. The more successful boundary conversa-

## THEY SAY, YOU SAY 30 SECOND TAKEAWAY

A helpful way to soften a potential disappointing response is to reframe your “no” as a “yes and.” Here’s what that might look like:

### The Situation:

Your sister invites you to dinner at the last minute, because she “really needs to talk,” but you’ve had a long day dealing with problems at work and don’t have the capacity to solve one more. She’s already confirmed the issue isn’t an emergency, and you need a quiet night alone.

### They Say:

Hey Sis! Come over for dinner tonight.  
Please I really need to talk to you!

### You Say:

I’m sorry you’re having a tough day, but tonight is just not a good night (no).  
How about we go out for dinner this Friday and talk then (yes and)?”

tions you have, the more your confidence will grow, and you’ll experience the freedom that comes with letting your “yes be yes and your no be no.” And, who knows? One day you may even find you no longer mind Mom or Dad popping over unannounced.

For more on boundaries, I recommend *Boundaries* by Drs. Henry Cloud and Townsend, and for more on understanding healthy relational patterns, check out *Safe People* by Dr. Henry Cloud and *Forgiving Our Parents, Forgiving Ourselves* by Dr. David Stoop.

### Ask Lindsey!

Do you have a question about life, faith, or relationships? Email Lindsey at [identifycolumn@newidentitymagazine.com](mailto:identifycolumn@newidentitymagazine.com), submit your questions online at [www.newidentitymagazine.com](http://www.newidentitymagazine.com), or leave a comment with the hashtag #identifyquestion on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.



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GROW





A cup of coffee with latte art is in the foreground, and an open book is in the background. The text is overlaid on the image.

# HOW A ROMAN BISHOP CHANGED *The* WAY I READ THE BIBLE

ON READING THE BIBLE TO ENJOY GOD

*By* JEFFERY PORTER



**W**hen I became a Christian as a sophomore in high school, it was clear that, as a Christian, reading the Bible was going to be a big part of my life. Every week my Sunday School teacher would ask us how many times we had read the Bible in the previous seven days. At youth group, my pastor encouraged me to memorize Scripture to counteract the worldly information I consumed through movie quotes and pop music lyrics. I recall often hearing other Christians talk about the importance of “getting into the Word,” and how essential a daily quiet time reading the Bible is for Christian spiritual development. In those early days of my faith I also remember finding myself unable to participate in some discussions with other Christians as they talked about obscure Bible stories and passages of which I had not yet learned.

Yet, my relationship to Scripture also quickly became complicated. Frustratingly, even though I knew it was important, I found reading the Bible quite difficult. The first couple chapters of Genesis were easy to read, and enjoyable for the most part. However, as I read along I found most of the Old Testament confusing, difficult to make sense of, and even boring. I always felt like I was missing something. Once I learned some important differences between the Old and New Testaments, I would usually just skip around the Gospels and the Epistles because they were the easiest to read. Making matters worse,

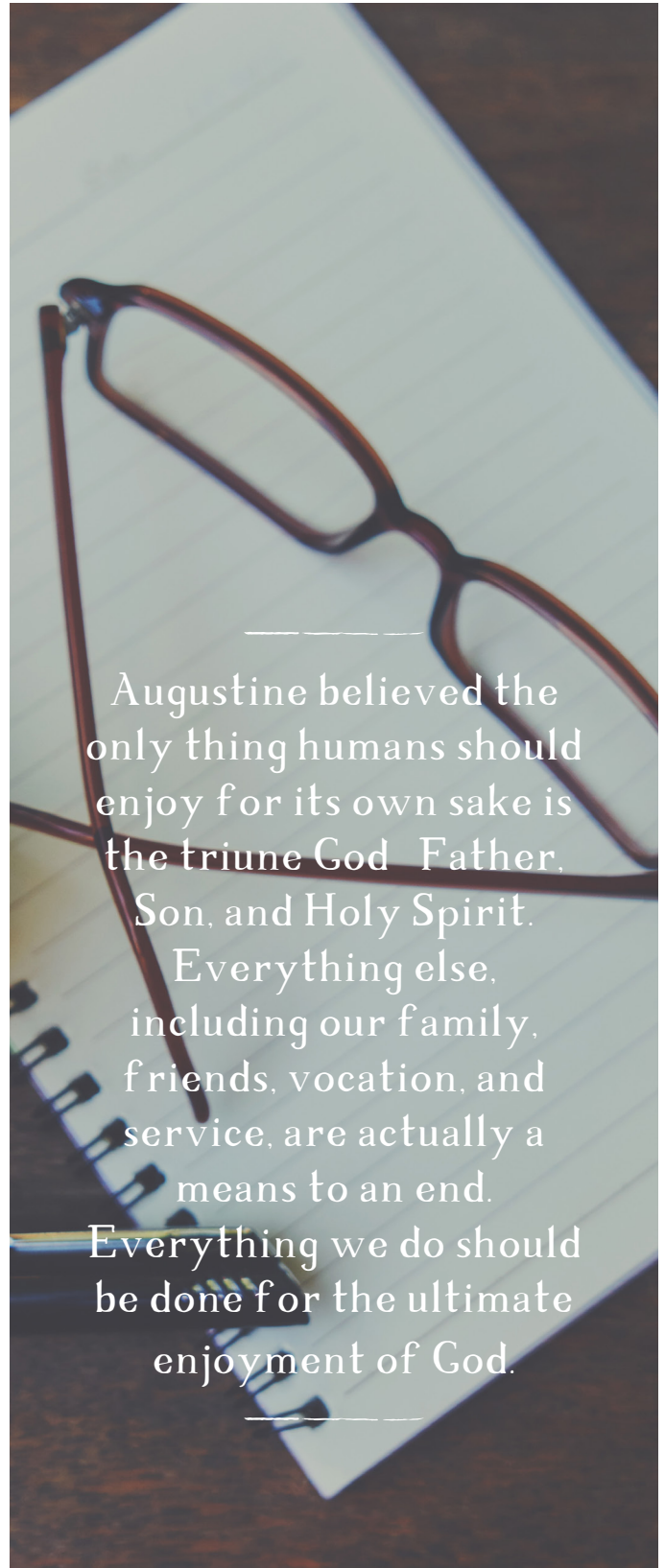
I would also overhear older Christians talk about reading the Bible using technical terms like, hermeneutics, contextual analysis, literary-criticism, and apologetics. Simply, early on in my faith the topic of Bible reading often made me feel like a failure because I was not reading it enough and/or I was not reading it correctly. At that time, I wish I had known about St Augustine’s 1500-year-old approach to reading the Bible.

## A MAIN POINT OF SCRIPTURE IS TO ENJOY GOD

Augustine of Hippo was a 5th century Roman teacher of rhetoric, which made him an expert in the art of argumentation. He became a Christian well into his adulthood, and immediately began writing about theology and philosophy. His writings, the most famous of which is the book *City of God*, have influenced Christian theology and Western philosophy for the past 1500 years. His thoughts on reading the Bible are meticulously laid out in his book *De doctrina Christiana*. He begins his how-to-read-the-Bible book with an odd distinction, the difference between enjoying something and using something. He believed the only thing humans should enjoy for its own sake is the triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Everything else, including our family, friends, vocation, and service, are actually a means to an end. Everything we do should be done for the ultimate enjoyment of God.

For instance, our enjoyment of a loving relationship with our spouse is a reflection of our relationship with God, and is therefore something God uses in order for us to better understand his love and how we can love him better.

This entails that God has given us the Bible as a means to an end. The point of reading the Bible is to come to enjoy God better and more fully. It might seem odd, or even a little sacrilege to think of the Bible as a means to an end. This is because we rightly think of the Bible as holy or sacred. But, it is not God. It is holy and sacred insofar as it is the word of God, given to us so we can better understand who God is. By reading Scripture we learn more about God, his work in the world, his plan for us, and his expectations for us. This is one of the means God has provided for us to enjoy him more. In fact, Augustine believed that if a Christian could hypothetically enjoy God perfectly in this life, that they would no longer need to read the Bible. Of course because we will not come to love God perfectly in this life, reading, meditating on, and yes, memorizing scripture, will regularly be a source of knowledge that help us to love God more. However, Augustine wants his readers to remember, that knowledge is not the goal for reading the Bible.



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## READING SCRIPTURE IS PURIFYING

This pursuit of knowledge was one of the things that tripped me up early in my faith. I intuitively believed that knowing more facts about God and theology would make me a better Christian. Augustine, was a very smart person, and he knew a great deal about the Bible, and most likely had large portions of it memorized, as was the custom in his time. Yet, he also knew there was more to the Christian faith than knowing facts. He argued that the process of reading the Bible, while it involved learning new information, was not just about gaining knowledge, it was about transformation, or more precisely, purification.

When a Christian reads the Bible, they are entering into a process God uses to purify them from their sin. It is sin which keeps us from knowing and truly enjoying God. As we Christians undergo this purification we will become wiser, and for Augustine, the best marker for Christian wisdom is the imposition to love. What we learn when we read the Bible should always support Jesus' two pronged Greatest Commandment: to love God and love others. If this lesson is affirmed in our reading, then we can have confidence that what we have received from our reading is what God has intended. Augustine explains this idea using a lively metaphor. He writes:

If [the reader] is deceived in an interpretation

which builds up charity... he is deceived in the same way as a man who leaves a road by mistake but passes through a field to the same place toward which the road itself leads. (*Doctrina*, 1.37)

This type of freedom in reading the Bible can seem odd to modern readers. When we read the Bible, or any text for that matter, we want to make sure that we are reading it accurately. Elsewhere in *De Doctrina Christiana* also Augustine makes it clear that the when we error in our reading we ought to figure why we have made the mistake in order to keep from making similar mistakes in the future. However, this does not take away from the freedom God has given us in the Bible. If the purpose of the Bible was only to obtain knowledge of ancient Jewish culture or the history of the early church, the complete accuracy would be the most important part of reading. However the purpose of the Bible is to help us enjoy God. Therefore, God uses the Bible, and the knowledge we gain from reading it, to sanctify us, that is, to make us purer and more like him. The best way to make sure that we are using the Bible correctly is to check that what we are reading is teaching us to better love God and to love our neighbor.

## WHY WE MAKE MISTAKES

Yet, because there is a very real potential for reading the Bible incorrectly, Augustine also wants to help





The point of reading the Bible is to come to enjoy  
God better and more fully.

equip us to avoid common pitfalls. He identifies two main ways readers can misread the Bible. The first way is forgetting or incorrectly using the rules for proper interpretation, and the second is the sin of pride. Rules for proper interpretation are simply a matter of language and reason. This involves understanding differences in genres (like the difference between a history book and a psalm), recognizing tones like sarcasm (like when Jesus says, “have you not read?”), and some knowledge of original Biblical languages (like the difference between God’s names Elohim and Adonai). I would add knowledge of era-specific customs and cultures are also necessary for better understanding of the different books and passages of the Bible. While rules such as these can seem daunting or even burdensome, Augustine believes this is the easiest part of reading the Bible because the technical rules are actually easy to learn. Also, Bible readers need not learn everything all at once. Most of his book *De doctrina Christiana* is actually on these rules, and the book reads a bit like an instruction manual. In fact, I would encourage all Christians to read this short book themselves. We can also rely on our Christian community of elder Christians to teach us these technical rules. This involves mentorship, small groups, regularly receiving expositional teaching at church, consulting Christian commentaries, and reading books on interpretation from throughout the history of the church. In our day, we are fortunate to also have resources like

websites, blogs, YouTube videos, and podcasts which provide a wealth of technical information that is helpful for better understanding of difficult passages, doctrine, and the Bible as a whole. Of course navigating this surfeit of information can also be a daunting task itself. Augustine reminds us we do not have to get everything right all the time, and that our knowledge of the Bible is a journey, which will involve ups and downs and mistakes along the way. Again, the goal is not to be the smartest or the most adept. The goal is to enjoy God truly and more fully. Consistent engagement in our faith community, humility in our approach, and strong mentorship will help us grow more knowledgeable about the contents of the Bible and more adept at reading it on our own.

The second reason for making mistakes in reading the Bible is much more serious for Augustine and cannot be avoided by learning more technical skills or knowledge. He warns us that when we rely too much on our own knowledge of scripture, or if our purpose for reading scripture is simply to learn more facts, then we are approaching the task of reading the Bible in a state of pride. If we attempt to read scripture with a prideful heart, or an over focus on ourselves, then we are essentially attempting to read scripture without the help of God. When this happens, Augustine says we have become, “ensnared by the wisdom of the serpent.” (*Doctrina*, I.12) By reading scripture with a prideful heart we are falling into the

same trap as Adam and Eve when they ate the forbidden fruit. In eating from the tree of the knowledge of good of evil, they attempted to learn things about God without his help. Knowledge is a good thing, but it is not the ultimate good. Knowledge is only good insofar as it helps us enjoy God by loving him and loving our neighbors. If we think we are clever enough, educated enough, or just happen to have a secret method of reading the Bible on our own, we are reading the Bible with a sinful heart.

Augustine warns that this kind of prideful approach to the Bible is what leads to skepticism and moral relativism. When the Bible reader is overly reliant on their own abilities in their quest to acquire knowledge about God, they will inevitably come to unsatisfactory or contradictory conclusions. Augustine believes that as a fallen people in a fallen world, we cannot actually come to true knowledge all on our own. We always need God's merciful intervention. People who attempt the task on their own will either come to believe that it is impossible to acquire true wisdom at all, which is skepticism, or at best, that we can only have subjective opinions about the text, which is relativism. This is why some people believe the Bible is chock full of errors and contradictions, and why others believe the Bible is open to any interpretation. This is one of the issues I struggled with early in my faith as well. The reason why so much of the Bible was confusing, and some passages seemed to con-

tradict others was because I approached the Bible in a singular and individualistic fashion. That is, these original struggles largely stemmed from my original motivation for reading the Bible. I rushed passed all the grace and love stuff, focusing on trying to figure out all the complicated ins and outs of the Bible so I could feel knowledgeable and smart.

## THE NECESSITY OF HUMILITY

If we are going to read the Bible in a correct fashion, we need God to cleanse us from such selfish pride. The Bible is not intended to make us feel knowledgeable and smart. In many ways, God uses the Bible to make us pure. In fact, in the same way that we must learn the technical skills and know-how for interpreting the Bible properly, we must also undergo purification. Augustine uses a helpful medical analogy to describe this process. He writes:

Just as he who ministers to a bodily hurt in some cases applies contraries, as cold to hot, moist to dry, etc... in the same way the Wisdom of God in healing man has applied Himself to his cure, being Himself healer and medicine both in one. Seeing, then, that man fell through pride, He restored him through humility. (*Doctrina*, II. 13)

For Augustine, the humility modeled by Christ is not only a necessary part of reading the Bible, he also

## Humility must also be an ongoing task for every Christian who wants to read and understand scripture as a process of purification.

believes we need humility before we even open our Bible. Furthermore, humility must also be an ongoing task for every Christian who wants to read and understand scripture as a process of purification. Our humility not only opens us up to receive guidance from the Holy Spirit as we read scripture, it is also necessary in order for us to learn from others.

In his book *Contra Academicos*, Augustine provides a vivid analogy for this practice of humble openness compared to the limitations of pride. In the analogy he imagines two travelers. One traveler is willing to humble himself and ask for directions. The other traveler is overly careful, relying solely upon his own reason and ability, to the extent that, in his prideful self-reliance, he despises his companion as he, “laughs and ridicules the [humble traveler] for having assented too rapidly.” (*Academicos* 3.15) Yet, it is the humble traveler, the one open to listening to the wisdom of others, who is able to find their destination. The prideful traveler, however, becomes lost.

When I first became a Christian, while I had accepted God’s gift of grace, I sadly began my reading of the Bible as a prideful traveler. I believed I was smart enough to figure everything out on my own, and that through diligent study I could make myself a better

Christian. The source of my shame when it came to the Bible reader was not that I was a bad Christian, as I had thought, but my shame was actually the exposure of my own selfish pride. I hope you will read *De doctrina Christiana* to learn more about Augustine’s great practical advice for understanding difficult passages and how purifying reading the Bible can be. However, above all, as we Christians read the Bible, I pray we approach it like the humble traveler, with the expectation that Christ is there with us along the path, and by the power of the Holy Spirit may our reading of the Bible cause us to love others more deeply and to enjoy God more fully.



**Jeff Porter**

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GROW

# JESUS *Is* KNOCKING

RETHINKING REVELATION 3:20

*by* GREG WHYTE

**B**ehold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. — Revelation 3:20, ESV

### OUT OF CONTEXT MEANING:

Probably most Christians would be familiar with this image of Jesus knocking on a door. As an image, it has inspired the artwork of several famous painters through the centuries, the most famous of these paintings being “The Light of the World” by Holman Hunt.

If the reader is also a Christian familiar with the Evangelical traditions, they would also be most familiar with the meaning given by evangelists — an invitation for an individual who is not a Christian to accept the claims of the gospel, as it has been presented by the evangelist in question, and it usually involves reciting certain renditions of the ‘Sinner’s Prayer.’ The door which Jesus is knocking on is the heart, the center of the emotions and will, of those hearing the message, and the invitation is to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.

While the risk in reading the passage this way is not necessarily in the message being said (because part of being a disciple includes that first step of acceptance), there is risk in missing what is not being said

— which is what the original meaning of the verse is actually all about. As we will see below, this message was not written to individual unbelievers per say, but it was actually part of a very sobering message to a church community, those who should be considered ‘believers.’ And as you will see, it is a message that strikes very close to home for many of our churches today.

### THE ORIGINAL CONTEXT:

This verse is found in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation - that very book of which so much misinterpretation and abuse by overly-zealous “prophecy experts” has caused many of the rest of us to keep our distance from its quite confusing and vivid imagery. And it is true that Revelation is a very confusing book, especially if what we focus on is trying to decipher what all of the individual images mean. However, as I was explaining to my church when I preached on the book of Revelation, these images are like panes in a stained glass, or like smudges on a window. I explained that we could either look at the window (which is sometimes easier when there are smudges on it — something I am learning about with small children), or we could look through the window at the messages that this very dramatic and visual document is trying to communicate. Just for an example of a few of the themes: worship is very

evident throughout the book, and even several of the most powerful songs that we sing from church come from one of these worship passages.

In thinking about messages that Revelation is trying to communicate, there are also several. However, for space sake, we'll only mention two. For one, it is an encouragement for persecuted Christians that in the end, God wins, and so we are to keep strong in our faith, no matter what Satan throws at us. But also coupled with that (which it hints at in this first section, where our verse comes from, but is also present throughout the book), there is a warning and a choice, even for Christians: we must choose which side we stand on. Do we stand for Jesus, or against him?

Part of the problem is that the genre of Revelation is one that we are not as familiar with nowadays. We commonly call the book of Revelation 'prophecy', which it is in a way (as it does call itself a prophecy in 1:3 and 22:18), but not necessarily in the way we think it is. That might have something to do with a general misunderstanding of what prophecy even entails. We assume that prophecy is all about foretelling the future, like what a medium or fortune teller does, but this is not entirely accurate. Prophecy does involve some foretelling elements, but the purpose of prophecy is actually to communicate the will of God to his people, and to remind them of what God has said before.

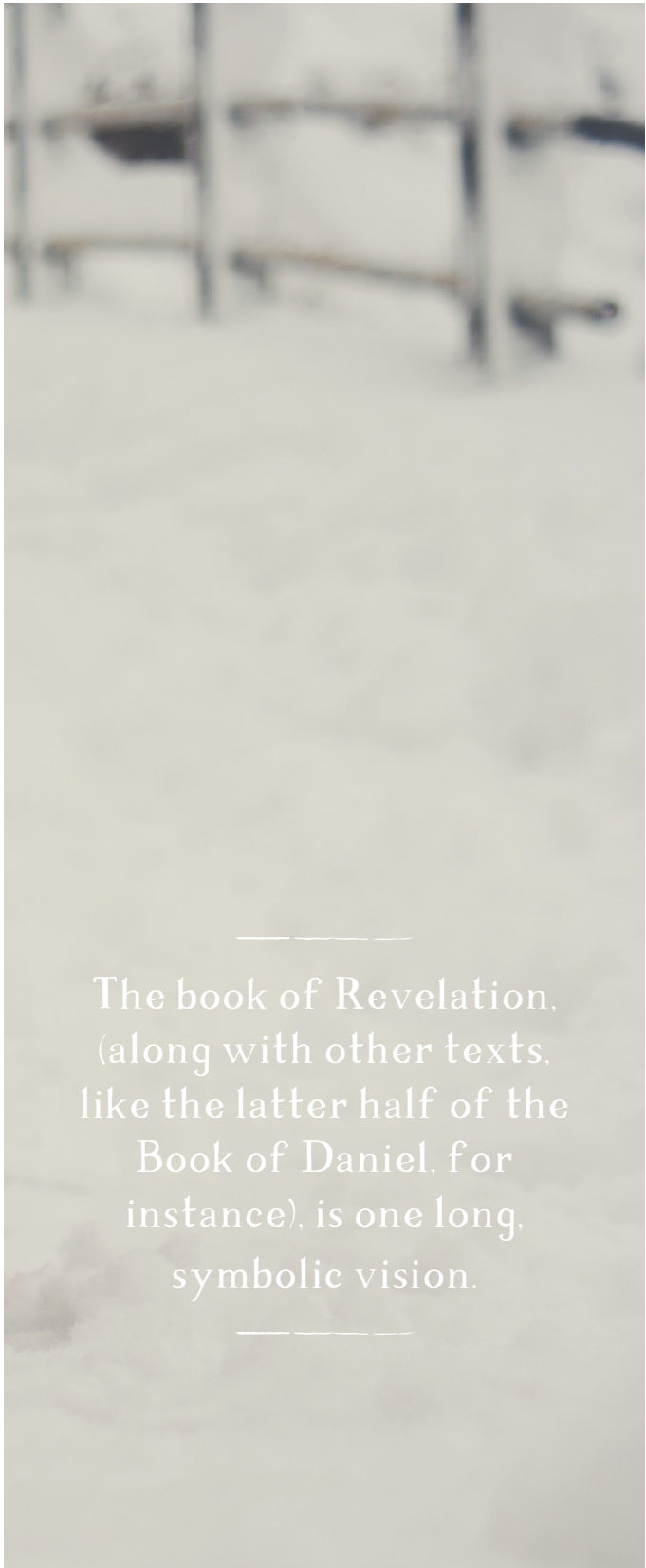
As for the prophets, if you look at how the prophets functioned in ancient Israel, they were actually more Reformers: those called by God to bring his people back to himself whenever they are at risk of forgetting the covenant, whether through idolatry and injustice, or despair at their pitiable state. While I realize my view may contradict that of others, I don't believe this has changed much since then. God still raises up 'prophets' to remind the people of his Truth whenever the people of God go astray. In fact, this year is the 500th anniversary of one of the more famous 'prophetic challenges' in Western Christian history, when, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of his church in Wittenberg, Germany. These theses were arguments against the abuses of the church hierarchy and false beliefs being preached by the religious establishment. Of course, just as with any other prophet, Martin Luther was not received well by the very establishment he was challenging. But what he did is a good example from post-biblical church history of how biblical prophecy functioned.

But the book of Revelation is not quite 'prophecy' as a genre. If you read the prophets, they sound more like sermons (which they were – the verb 'to prophesy' meant 'to call out' or 'to preach'), and while there was the occasional metaphor or vision used, these weren't the focus of the prophetic message. The book of Revelation, on the other hand (along with other texts, like the latter half of the Book of Daniel,



for instance), is one long, symbolic vision. There are other texts written around the same period of time that were also written that way, which were called 'apocalypses', much like Revelation. In fact, even the name 'Revelation' means 'apocalypse'. It means the unveiling of something that was previously hidden. The apocalypse genre was most commonly written as visions of the hidden, spiritual world, with underlying, secret messages (hence why they were called 'apocalypses'). I guess the closest that we have to the 'apocalypse' genre today would be fables (such as Orwell's *Animal Farm* or Golding's *Lord of the Flies*), or certain Science Fiction novels, where the main message is hidden behind a story in a world totally unlike our own.

There are also political interests and life situations of the interpreters that often determine their understanding of the texts, which may or may not have parallels with the original intent of the original author. One could say, though, that this obsession by some misguided "experts" has resulted in significant profits for certain publishing companies (though no actual prophets were present). For instance, the *Left Behind* series, which is a popular Evangelical Christian fiction series, topped even the *New York Times* bestseller list several times, and Hal Lindsay's early attempt at prediction, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (which is what the *Left Behind* series is loosely based on), has shaped the theological thinking and imagi-



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nation of an entire generation of popular Evangelical thinking. Perhaps part of what made Lindsay's book so popular was his attempt at explaining what each of the symbols meant in modern terms (the locusts being helicopters, for instance, or the nations invading Israel being the USSR and Communist China).

Certain denominations, notably those who follow a 'dispensational' theology (meaning that God interacted with his creation in different ways at different points in history, an idea made popular by Jon Darby, along with his doctrine of the 'Rapture', which he developed in the 1800's), as well as certain pseudo-Christian cult groups (most notably the Jehovah Witnesses) have become known for their date-setting, and supposedly using the Book of Revelation as a basis for their failed predictions. Of course, these were not the first to attempt date-setting. Joachim of Fiore had his own system for predicting the return of Jesus in the 12th Century, which he also based supposedly on the book of Revelation, and as we could see in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, there were also those of a similar bent even then (2 Thess. 2:1-2) – even though the book of Revelation wasn't even written then.

Unfortunately, this has also occasionally resulted in tragedy, much like what happened to David Koresh and the Branch Davidians in 1993. Partly because of a struggle for power between two factions within

the group, and their strong insistence that they were the end-time army for God (including weapons and everything), something they supposedly took from texts from the book of Revelation, the Branch Davidians, who were holed up in a commune in Waco Texas, were all killed in an armed stand-off with the American military and both federal and Texas state law enforcement agencies.

This, unfortunately, has resulted in many of the rest of us staying clear from the book of Revelation, despite the rich message that it has for the church; and it has also resulted in a lower level of trust in the wider culture toward the truth claims of Christianity. This is because often, these 'prophecy experts' insist that their proposed dates and schemas are explicitly found in the pages of the Bible, and when the passage of time proves their predictions wrong, doubt is then placed on the Bible by those who once trusted these predictions. And this is made even more-so as opposing voices (who deny Christianity) then ridicule for Christians for being so gullible.

The abuse of the book of Revelation by several of its commentators actually caused G.K. Chesterton to say, "St. John saw many strange things in his Revelation, but nothing as strange as his interpreters."

But our verse, Revelation 3:20, is part of a somewhat clearer section of the book. In this early section of the

book, John (the writer) has a vision of Jesus, and Jesus tells him to write letters to a series of seven actual churches (all located in what is now western Turkey). Specifically, the verse is part of the letter to the final church in the series, the church in the city Laodicea.

Here is the full letter to Laodicea:

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to

What I find SOBERING  
about this, the final  
letter to the churches,  
is that this church is the  
one church where Jesus  
does not find anything  
POSITIVE  
to say about it.

sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” — Revelation 3:14-22, NIV

What I find sobering about this, the final letter to the churches, is that this church is the one church where Jesus does not find anything positive to say about it. While there are a lot of rather harsh words contained in this letter (I certainly wouldn’t want them written to my church), we’ll specifically be looking at how they relate to the verse in question.



In thinking of the background of how the rest of the images come into play (especially as it relates to our Western church), Laodicea was a very rich and prosperous city. It had a lucrative textile industry, with its black wool being prized throughout the empire; it housed a medical school and exported ointments and special eye salve; and it had an important central bank. Likely, the Christians mirrored their culture in that they were very rich and successful (which is why Jesus, ironically, uses the strengths of their city, which they would boast in, as items they desperately need from him). They were self-sufficient, and had need for nothing. One could also assume, given both the image of the lukewarm water (which was also what Laodicea as a city was known for – disgusting, lukewarm water that they had to pipe in through aqueducts) and that of Jesus standing outside the church and knocking, that they may have even felt that they had no need of Jesus – or, at least that Jesus was being forgotten and left out for the sake of other agendas.

Jesus is writing to this church and asking them to open the door so that he could come in. What does that tell you about the Laodicean church? For me, it says at least two things, both of which are very sobering. First, it tells me that despite Jesus' promises elsewhere that he would be with his people whenever they are gathered (such as Matthew 18:20; 28:20;

Revelation 2:1), while this could have been hyperbole (a common rhetorical device used even today in the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean worlds), it seems, at least to my eyes, that Jesus is saying he is not present within the church of Laodicea. Second, because the door is closed to him, it doesn't seem to be a matter of Jesus abandoning his church per se, but that the congregation has closed the door to Jesus, whether that means that he has been forgotten for the sake of other 'programs' or priorities, or because his agenda (which could be found in his teaching and miracles in the gospels, but also through the rest of Scripture) is considered too uncomfortable or too extreme for the 'refined sensitivities of respectable society', or might be seen as 'too liberal' or 'too closed-minded'. In fact, because the door seems to be locked to him, one could even ask if the people even truly would welcome him if he did decide to show up one day. Truth be told, that is a very serious indictment for any church that bears the name 'Christian'.

### HOW CAN WE REALLY APPLY THIS VERSE:

In knocking at the door, Jesus was showing that he has not given up on his church, but that he wants to return to being the Lord of his church. He is calling this straying church to change its ways and return to true worship. The church of Laodicea was a church filled with nominal Christians, who might have given

lip service to worship, but whose hearts were far from Jesus. They were self-satisfied, and likely their 'faith in Jesus' had very little effect on how they lived their lives or in their priorities as a church. And yet, Jesus knocks, seeking even one person in the church who would recognize their need for him and the need for change, who recognize that church is not just about personal comfort or going through the motions or chasing the latest fad.

Jesus doesn't turn his back on this church. He waits and knocks. If they would repent, he would enter their midst and take his rightful place in their church — as its Lord and Master, as well as its focus. It's quite sad how often our focus as the Church can be taken off of Him, and often for petty things. In the closing years of the first millennium, it was in the question of supremacy between the popes of Rome and Constantinople, a split that affects the church so much that, to this day, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians will not share Communion together; in the fifteenth century, it was the lavish parties in Rome and expensive building projects, along with the "fundraising projects" called indulgences that led up to the Reformation; in the years following the Reformation, it was the warfare between Christians, as each state decided which "brand" of Christianity to adopt. And even today, so many distractions abound: equating Christian faith with the loyalty to a certain political party (despite how unchristian that

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party happens to be), debates over music styles or dress codes, focussing on programs (or on food that must accompany said programs), a dumbing down of message content, to be more palatable to what is considered 'sociably acceptable for respectable society' (which often means the avoidance of the harder topics in order to draw a crowd and not to offend people by our message). Even our comforts and conveniences that we take for granted can serve as distractions from Jesus, just as the affluence of Laodicea likely

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served the same for the church that received this rebuke.

Alternatively, if we were to read the image of Jesus standing outside the church and knocking as a sign of their self-sufficiency (and thus, feeling that they don't need him), this also speaks very much against our North American image of the self-made man (or woman), where we are expected to be individualistic and not rely on anybody for anything. While yes, there is a degree where we learn in our fallen world not to trust others to take care of us, and a certain degree of pride that many of us have on achieving 'success' in life.

Sometimes, our churches can be just like this as well. I realize that I cannot speak for every church, but I do remember one church I attended. It was a small church that wanted to think of itself as a large church, and would enroll in every 'church growth' program fad that came around. The pastor once confided in me that he was beginning to feel like a failure because he wasn't seeing the massive growth that these programs were promising, despite the several years of work that he had put into it. Being a pastor myself now, I can understand this need to feel important and successful, and in the church world, success often means that the church congregation is growing noticeably in numbers and the pastor's name is becoming well-known as a local (or in some



cases national, or even international) celebrity. But one needs to ask: where is Jesus in this quest to appear 'successful' (which, ironically, is a prerequisite in many pastor job ads online)? As much as I would like to say that Jesus is behind much of our celebrity worship as a culture, even in the church culture, I can't really honestly say that. If anything, it is yet one more sign that Jesus (whose teaching often offended the crowds) has been forgotten for the sake of growing a 'successful' church.

And yet, even with all of this, just as we see that Jesus has not turned his back on the church in Laodicea, there is hope that he also has not turned his back on us. Instead, his actions in this image show that he wants to have a close relationship with them (and us). After all, eating together in many cultures is a picture speaking of a close relationship, which means that there is hope. I mean, if Jesus is giving this call to a church situation like that found in Laodicea, despite its sorry spiritual state, because of his love for them, and if Jesus loves each of the churches that received letters in Revelation, despite their issues and struggles, don't you think he would also love the church of today as well? By writing this letter, it shows us that there is hope for even the church of Laodicea to recover, if they heed his call. Through these letters, even in this last one, Jesus loves his people too much to keep things as just 'business as always', and we need to remember that.

But what would it look like for us to open the door and let him into our midst? This is a question that I am currently struggling with. However, here are some practical thoughts. In looking at the churches in Europe, those who took an active role in sheltering and providing for refugees are now seeing revival spreading through their midst, as these refugees (many of whom became Christian because of the help they received from these churches as well as from various Christian organizations) bring a new sense of life and excitement about Jesus into their midst, while many of their neighboring churches (who chose not to reach out to the refugees) are not sharing in this revival. This is actually a scriptural principle, where care for refugees is something that God looks on with favor (Lev. 19:9-10, 33-34; Deut. 10:18-19; Isaiah 58:3-12; Ezek. 16:49; Matt. 25:25-36; Luke 10:29-37). In looking closer at the Matthew passage, Jesus even says, 'that which you did to the least of these, you also did for me.' So by welcoming into our midst those who might be different from ourselves, it is one way that we could also be welcoming Jesus into our midst.

Second, maybe instead of focusing on our individual salvation or just the salvation of our souls (which is important too, but sadly limited if this is all that we focus on), we start asking what it would look like for all of us to live out the values of the Kingdom of God together. It might mean actually loving one another

and helping one another if there is a need. It might mean re-thinking much of how we do church or what we mean when we call ourselves 'Christian'. It might even mean cooperation between churches.

Third, which once again I can't stress this enough: I would think that the best way to welcome him in as our focus would mean actually opening the Bible and studying it – not just the few random proof-texts that go along with our own thinking, but working to actually understand what it is truly saying to us in our day, which means studying it in context, and even studying both Old and New Testaments, which is basically what this series has been about. While some may claim that the Old Testament is not for today (which was actually also argued in the 2nd and 3rd centuries by a guy named Marcion, who also was one of the first to argue that salvation is only for the soul, by the way), what I've found is that by having an understanding of the Old Testament, it actually enriches the understanding of the New. The New Testament is, in many ways, based on the Old Testament (especially Revelation, which has the most Old Testament references of any New Testament book), and the Scriptures that the early Christians were encouraged to read and study (Acts 17:11; Rom. 15:4; 1 Tim. 4:15; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21) were the Old Testament.

Yes, to an extent, his actual presence can be a scary thing. Jesus might challenge some of our previously held beliefs and even some of what we think about when we think 'church' or 'being Christian'. Our people may become offended by what he would have to say about us, especially if it is a rebuke like he gave to the church of Laodicea. Ironically, the ones who were the most offended by Jesus (and who also came in the most conflict with him) during his ministry were actually the religious. It was the religious establishment (those who were most offended by him) who actually pushed for his death. And yet, to be truly called Christian, wouldn't that mean that we are those who want to be taught by him?

I'll leave that with you to ponder.



## Greg Whyte

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CONNECT

# CALLING HIM "FATHER"

LIVING AS A CHILD OF GOD

*by* BETHANY WAGNER



**S**cripture reminds us time and time again that we are God's children and he is our Father.

Psalm 103:13 tells us, "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him." In 2 Corinthians 6:18, God promises, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters." What does this mean for us, as we live out our lives, going to work, hanging out with friends, trying to follow God, and navigating the unpredictable future? Let's take a closer look because the parent-child relationship between God and us is one that brings courage, joy, peace, safety, and freedom, no matter where you are in life.

## BELIEVING AS CHILDREN

When you are a child, you often don't understand the reasons behind certain rules and commands. You're told not to touch a cookie sheet fresh out of the oven—but why? You're told to not cross the street without holding an adult's hand—but why? You're told to not eat too much candy, to wash your hands before eating, to say please and thank you, and to eat your vegetables.

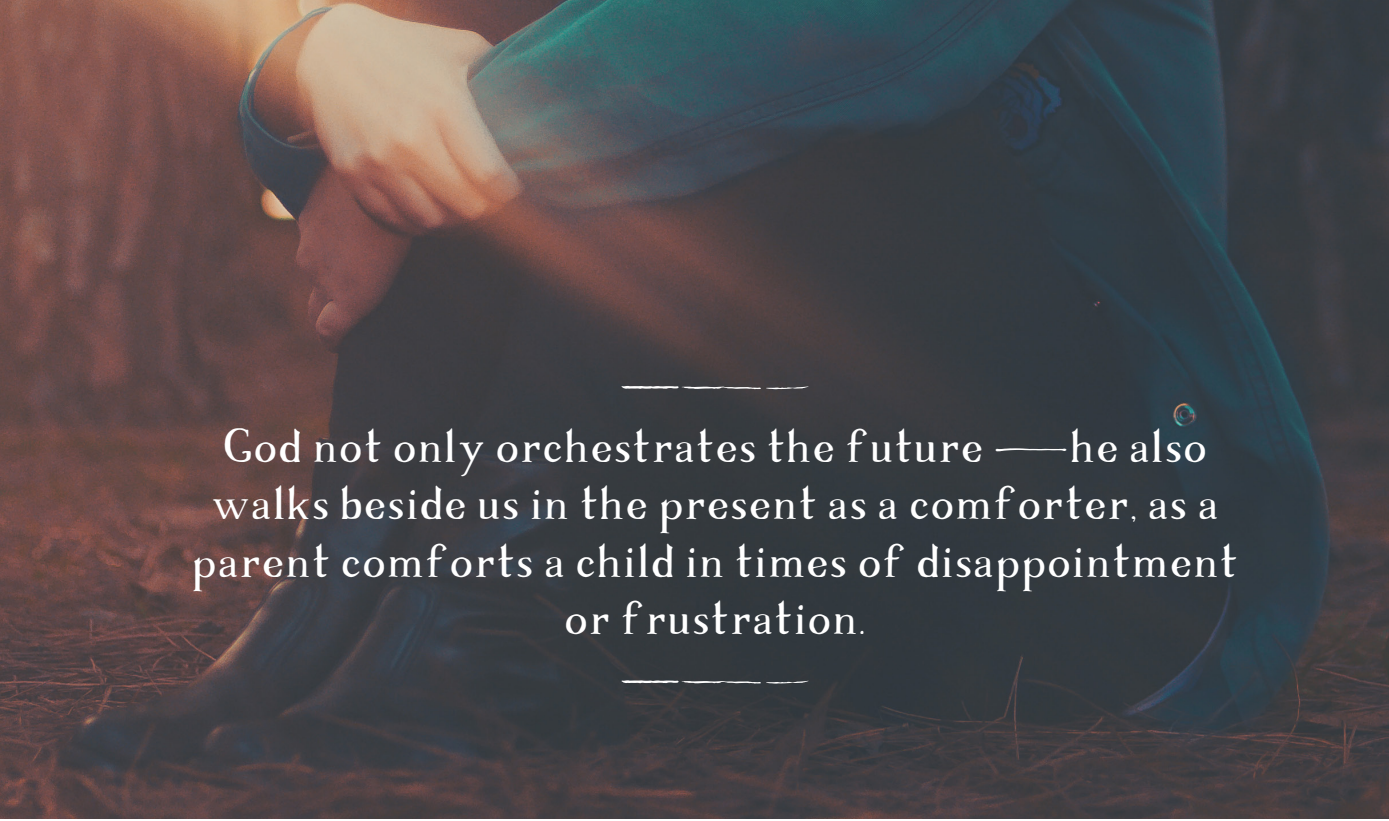
## WHY? WHY? WHY?

As children—in the very beginning, at least—we just don't know the whys. We don't know that the cookie sheet will burn our hand, that we need guid-

ance to safely cross traffic, that neglecting to wash hands can make us sick, or that consuming vegetables makes our bodies healthier—but we are to obey anyway (though, of course, we fail or only obey with great protests and tantrums).

Even when we grow into teens and young adults, much of this is still true while we live as adopted children of God and receive commands from him to change directions in our life or act in certain ways—when he speaks to us through the Bible, another person, or prayer. Here are two examples.

1. A door closes in your life. You lose your job, go through a break-up, or don't get into the school you wanted. We worship a God of redemption, meaning God takes the broken and failures of the world then uses them for good (Romans 8:28). We know God doesn't waste these moments. Yet when we're in the midst of a trial, like children, we can't see beyond the corner. We can't see the job we're meant to have, the person we're meant to be with, or the school we were meant to be at all along. We can't see that the bitter disappointment we've endured may someday empower us to encourage and inspire someone going through the same trial. Fortunately, God can see it all. He knows our past, present, and future. And so even when a door slams in our faces, we can still have hope. Like a child trusting her parents' instructions, we



God not only orchestrates the future —he also walks beside us in the present as a comforter, as a parent comforts a child in times of disappointment or frustration.

step forward with expectation that God will bring good out of any dusty, dirty failures or dead ends in our lives. And God not only orchestrates the future—he also walks beside us in the present as a comforter, as a parent comforts a child in times of disappointment or frustration.

2. We know what we *should* do (or not do). Yet we start justifying our actions because our sinful nature makes us fail to see the consequences of stepping outside of God's plan and the indescribable freedom of following him wholeheartedly. A person wronged you and spread negative rumors about you—it seems right to do the same to them! You've worked really hard on a team project and have a chance to take all the credit—it seems right to take that opportunity! You and your significant other want to move too far physically before marriage—it seems right that you should do so, because you love each other! In these situations—and countless others—our human nature does a good job of making the wrong decision look like

the right one. In those moments, it's more important than ever to act as God's children and trust the guidelines he sets out for our lives in the Bible, even when they don't make sense to us. When we make that choice, though it might be long and difficult days, weeks, months, or even years, God promises us the hope of an abundant life (John 10:10). Even when it seems hardest, God's way is always best.

## WONDERING AS CHILDREN

It does not take children long to get excited about things. The sky, that tree, the swings, a bike, crayons, or a pinecone. Each of these things is often enough to send a child over the moon with joy and excitement. The best way to describe this might be with the word *wonder*. Everything is new for children. Especially in the first few years of their life, every day is filled with an entirely new experience. In their eyes, the world is filled with wonder.

God **CREATED** us in his image, giving us life and immense value and the ability to create and have a parent –child relationship with him. Even when we **DISOBEYED** him, constantly turning to sin and deserving death, God pursued us and ultimately sent his Son Jesus to die for us.

I think part of coming to God as a child means coming to God with wonder. Look at this world he has created! Look at the trees, the sky, the ground, the mountains, the animals. Look how many things there are to taste and smell and see! Look at the people he created, each one so different, yet each so full of value.

Most of all, look at how much God loves us. Look at what the Bible tells us God did for us: He created us in his image, giving us life and immense value and the ability to create and have a parent-child relationship with him. Even when we disobeyed him, constantly turning to sin and deserving death, God pursued us and ultimately sent his Son Jesus to die for us. If you really think about it, this doesn't quite make sense to our limited human logic. Why would you sacrifice yourself to save something you created that had rejected you? God did just that because he loved us—and *that* is something to think, talk, and pray about like a child thinking, talking, or praying about the sky, ocean, tall trees, or the best cookie they ever had—with absolute wonder.

### GOD AS OUR PARENT

In Luke 15:11-22, Jesus tells a story about a father who has two sons. One day, the younger son comes to him and demands his part of the inheritance right away. Normally, that money would be given to the



sons after their father's death. By asking for it now, the son is basically expressing he doesn't care if his father is alive or dead—he wants his money. He takes his inheritance, leaves, and immediately wastes it all on an extravagant life, filled with parties and rich clothes and all-around bad choices. In just a short amount of time, he has spent all his money, making him so poor that he considers eating the leftovers from some pigs' meal just to survive. That's when he returns to his father, begging him to take him back as a servant. Fortunately, the father won't hear of it. Instead, as soon as the father sees his son returning, he runs to him with outstretched arms and holds him close. His son—the son who rejected him, wished him dead, and left for a wild life—had returned. And he did not welcome him back with anger, or even pity—but with joy and love, restoring him to his position as his son.

The younger son wanted control of his life. He thought that a life of luxury without the authority of his father would bring freedom and happiness. But instead, he became a slave to his selfishness and greed. Letting go of control in our lives is hard sometimes. Choosing to call God "Father" and obey him seems like the opposite of choosing freedom. But in reality, making that choice is the only route to true freedom. When we obey God's commandments like "Love the Lord your God" (Mark 12:30), "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31), "Do not lie"

(Exodus 20:16), and "Do not covet" (Exodus 20:17), we are saying "no" to our sinful desires, but even more importantly than that—we are saying "yes" to a life of peace and joy, free from the anxieties that come from focusing on ourselves and grasping tightly to living life our way.

John 1:12-13 reads, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

This is the God we worship. This is the God whom we call Father, and who calls us sons and daughters.




## Bethany Wagner

*Bethany Wagner has a passion for listening to stories and telling them. A graduate of Azusa Pacific University in English and theology, she now works as a freelance writer and editor based in the Pacific Northwest. She loves reading old books, drinking exorbitant amounts of tea, and rediscovering the beauty and magic of the ordinary. She writes at [thestoriedway.com](http://thestoriedway.com).*

# 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