

CONTENTS

5 EDITOR'S NOTE

by Cailin Briody Henson

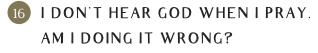
8 WHY JOIN A CHURCH?
On the meanings of church membership

By Délice Williams

13 WHO'S REALLY "LOST"?

Religious Leaders and Sinners

By Scott Limkeman



IDENTIFY: Advice on Life. Faith & Relationships by Lindsey A. Frederick

22 WRESTLING WITH A VIOLENT GOD
Finding Hope in the Dark Places of Scripture
by Scott Limkeman

30 LIFE IS NOT ABOUT THE JOURNEY
Everyone Can Know Their Purpose
by Jeffery Porter

36 THE GREATEST SHOWMAN

A million dreams and I still want more!

by Steve Limkeman

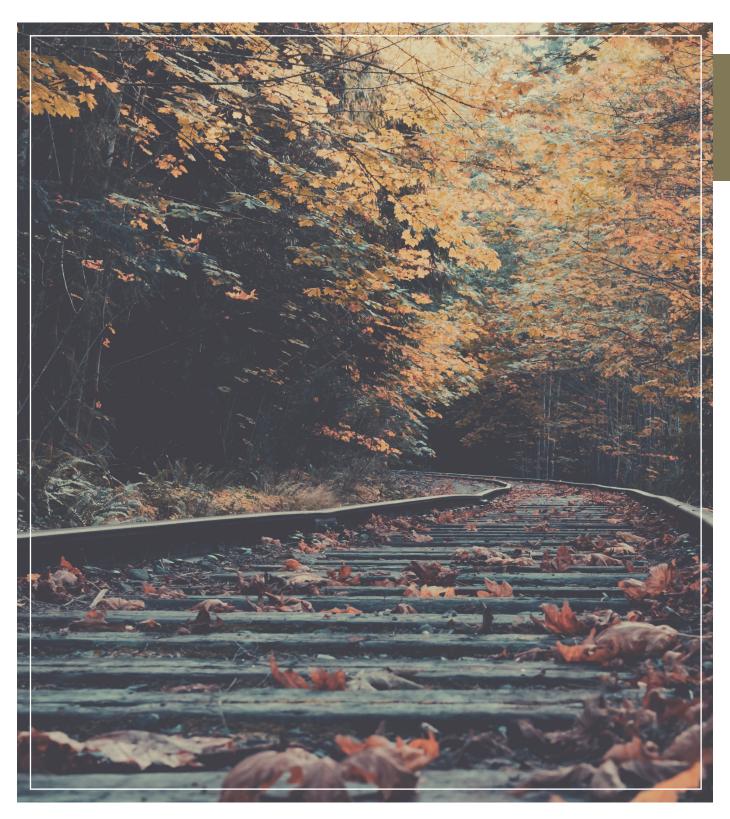
41 TICKET TO HEAVEN?
Rethinking John 3:16
by Greg Whyte







EDITOR'S NOTE



GOD'S ABILITY TO GIVE GRACE IS ALWAYS GREATER THAN MY EXPECTATIONS.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." —John 1:14;16

As a recovering perfectionist, I struggle to have grace for myself. I set the bar really high - whether it's striving to do something well on the first try, completing all the tasks on my to-do list, or telling myself to quit a bad habit - my expectations of myself are always greater than my ability. When I don't succeed, I get frustrated and want to quit altogether. I retreat in disappointment or reframe my goals to make them more manageable. I'm always going back on the promises I make to myself.

Thankfully, God never goes back on his promises and always does what he says. Grace is one of those things that he promises and gives freely. This kind of grace frees my soul to make mistakes, and to fail without fear. God's not frustrated with me. He doesn't want to quit being my Father, or retreat in disappointment. He already knows I will stumble, so he's ready to catch me when I try to carry too much or go for more than I should. God's ability to give grace is always greater than my expectations.

In this issue we have several great articles that bring grace to the forefront. We need to have grace for both sinners and religious leaders who are both "lost" in Scott Limkeman's article "Who's Really Lost?" We need to have grace as we grow in our ability to pray as Lindsey A. Frederick shares in her article "I Don't Hear God When I Pray. Am I Doing It Wrong?" We need to remember that God's grace is connected to our purpose in life in Jeffery Porter's article "Life Is Not About The Journey." Finally, we need to have grace in both our successes and failures in Steve Limkeman's "The Greatest Showman."

While I think it is good to set goals, I need to remember that a goal is not a finish line. An aim or desire, is not always a destination. I can have a good goal, and never reach it - but that doesn't mean it isn't worth striving for. In all of it we need to have grace for ourselves and others - because grace is what God has for us everyday: and it's overflowing.



CAILIN BRIODY HENSON EDITOR & FOUNDER

Cailin



ISSUE 37

VOLUME 10 NUMBER 2

EDITOR IN CHIEF

WRITERS Cailin Briody Henson

Délice Williams

CONTRIBUTING

COPY EDITOR

Lindsey A. Frederick

Rose Midori

Steve Limkeman

Jeffery Porter

Scott Limkeman

Greq Whyte

EDITORIAL BOARD

Rose Midori

Jon Chillinsky

Sloan Parker

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Sean Estill

LAYOUT &

DESIGN

Cailin Briody Henson

Sandra Estill

Ramon Mayo

Yvette Mayo

Tim Henson

Cailin Henson

Send letters to the editor via feedback@newidentitymagazine.com or to New Identity Magazine, P.O. Box 1002, Mt. Shasta, CA 96067. Copyright ©2018 by New Identity Magazine. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or part without written permission is prohibited. The opinions and views contained in this magazine are those of the author exclusively and do not necessarily reflect the views of the New Identity Magazine organization, staff, volunteers or directors.

New Identity Magazine (ISSN 1946-5920, Vol. 10, No. 2) is published quarterly by New Identity Magazine, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, P.O. Box 1002, Mt. Shasta, CA 96067, United States.

BIBLE REFERENCES

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright@ 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (The Message) are taken from The Message. Copyright 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Scripture quotations marked (AMP) are taken from the Amplified Bible, Copyright @ 1954, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright @ 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights

Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright @ 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

CONTACT US

NEW IDENTITY MAGAZINE

P.O. Box 1002 Mount Shasta, CA 96067-1002

PHONE 310.947.8707

EMAIL inquiry@newidentitymaq.com WEB newidentitymagazine.com **SOCIAL** @newidentitymaq









MISSION

Our mission is to provide diverse, Bible centered content to help lead new believers and seekers to a fuller understanding of the Christian faith.

VISION

GROW

Showcasing different Christian perspectives, building a biblical foundation, understanding Christian concepts, jargon, and the practical application of Scripture.

CONNECT

Encouraging others through testimonies, relationship topics, fellowship, church culture, 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.





ON THE MEANINGS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

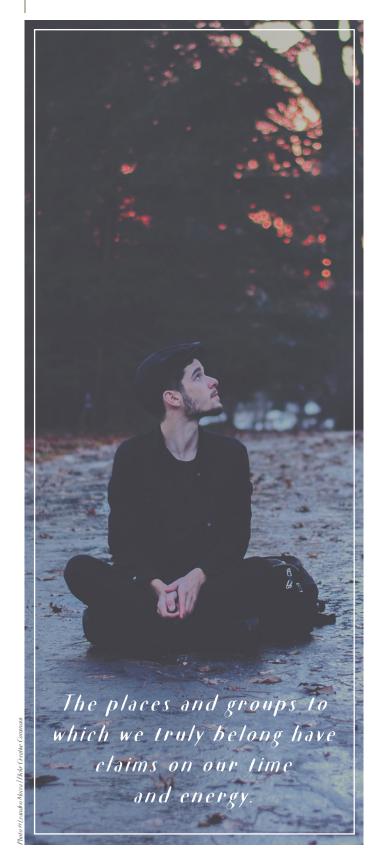
By Délice Williams

owhere in the Bible does it say that Christians have to be church members. Hebrews 10:24-25, verses that are often quoted in discussions of church attendance, does specifically tell us not to "[give] up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing" (NIV). That is a clear direction to gather regularly with other believers, and that instruction is

connected to encouragement in our walk with Christ: We meet so that we can "encourage each other toward love and good deeds." The implication is that community is vital to living the Christian life. But good Christian community can and does take many forms. And if you're looking for a "thou shalt join a local church" commandment, you won't find one. Still, I've come to believe that there is something important to be said for church membership. I don't think it's just a holdover from generations ago. Instead, membership can be one human mechanism to spur us on to greater spiritual maturity.

My beliefs about this topic came out of my own transformative experience of membership. When I was in graduate school, I attended a small Baptist church in St. Louis, Missouri. It was a cozy community, welcoming to newcomers, and generous with love. Families invited me to holiday dinners when I couldn't go home, and they even bought me groceries on a couple of occasions. Basically, they adopted me. I was a student far away from my family, and people in the church took it upon themselves to make sure I always felt like I had family close by. Almost 20 years later, I still have "St. Louis parents" whom I love dearly.

Although I was an adult when I started there, I felt like I grew up in that church, and one main reason for



that was that I became an official member. Honestly, I didn't want to do it at first. A few things kept me away.

One was that this was a Southern Baptist congregation, and I knew that Southern Baptists had a troubling history on issues of race & gender. I wanted to keep my distance from that history, even though I felt that I could embrace the people and most of the teachings of this local congregation. I consciously resisted becoming a member because I didn't want that affiliation.

The second reason for not joining was that, on a really basic level, I saw no reason to do it: I mean, I went there nearly every Sunday, gave offerings, volunteered for things, and liked the people. I couldn't see why having my name on the official church roll would make one bit of difference. Furthermore, I didn't want to commit to a community because, knowing myself, I figured that I would feel guilty if I ever decided to leave. I wanted to keep my options open.

Soon enough, though, I was so involved, and so many people had mentioned membership to me, that I decided to go ahead & join, even though I still had reservations. Defining my relationship to that group of believers proved to be tremendously meaningful

for me, and it taught me a few things that I believe are true for all of us who are interested in being part of a local Christian community.

Here are four things that I learned.

Making a public commitment can shift your mindset. I would guess that many of us find ourselves going to church as consumers and critics. We know our preferences for music, we know what kind of preaching we like. If a church isn't giving us what we need or want, we don't think twice about looking elsewhere. I was in a similar mindset, even though I was pretty involved in my church. After I became a member, though, I found myself thinking more like a contributor than a consumer. I wanted to use my talents to help make things work. I wanted to know what the needs were and to offer my input where it could be helpful. In other words, instead of just setting my preferences and following where they led me, I started to take more responsibility for my part in what was happening.

Belonging is more than just a feeling. It definitely feels good to be part of something that you think is good or successful. Most of us love being part of teams, and we like to declare our allegiances by wearing the t-shirts and sporting the bumper stickers. It also feels good to have a place where

Many of us find ourselves going to church as consumers and critics.

you can feel recognized, valuable, and cared for. But there's another dimension to true belonging, and that's responsibility. The places and groups to which we truly belong have claims on our time and energy. We have a role in making them good and successful. Membership made me "level up" my idea of belonging to my local church. I started to see that I couldn't just sit back or float in and out anymore. I had a part to play in making it a place of effective ministry, a place that made other people feel like they belonged as well.

The church needs us. When we passively consume and/or actively criticize church instead of contributing our gifts and talents regularly, it is easy to forget that it takes people's time and energy and money to minister effectively and make church happen. Somebody needs to work in the nursery, play the drums, greet the guests, and mow the lawn—every week. Somebody needs to organize the meal train, clean up after the baby shower, arrange hospital visits, and coordinate service projects. To make that happen, churches rely on people committed to serving. Yes, you can serve without

being a member. Thousands of people do. But active members—people who have decided to commit to a community—often do most of that work. Many churches, even those with full pews, are starved for people with that kind of commitment. Membership, I believe, can help nudge us toward a different mindset about our service. Imagine what church could be if the people who sat in the pews every Sunday suddenly started to see themselves as contributing to God's work in your congregation.

We need the church. The verses from Hebrews that I quoted at the beginning of this piece talk about meeting together to encourage each other. In times of crisis or loss, that need to be with other believers can be particularly acute. If you have ever felt supported by a church community in a situation like that, then you know how precious and lifegiving that can be. In fact, that kind of support is another feature of true belonging. Can you have the same supportive belonging and relationship without church membership? Definitely. But I would suggest that when we enter into membership and follow through with the right mindset, we make it more possible to forge those kinds of sustaining connections. My mom put it to me this way: "when you belong to a body, people close ranks around you in times of difficulty, and if you're going to want that support in times of difficulty, you need to be around

in the regular times." My mom was not suggesting that you cannot expect support unless you "pay up" in some form beforehand. I am not saying that either. I'm only pointing out that communal relationships that are nurtured and sustained by commitment can often be a source of strength in difficult times. This is true in many contexts. It's especially true in church.

You can certainly be a Christ-following believer who is not a member of a church. And you can definitely serve God faithfully and well without making a public declaration of membership in a local congregation. But in a time and culture where genuine commitment and connection are harder to find, church membership might be one way for us to challenge ourselves to do our part to strengthen bonds and forge connections with one another. We would benefit from that individually, and so would the body of Christ.



Délice Williams

Delice Williams is a professor of English who has taught literature and writing at both the high school and college levels. She is an active member of her beloved Nazarene congregation in suburban Maryland. Writing is one way for her to be salt and light in the world.



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE "LOST"?

By Scott Limkeman

The term "the lost" is a common term that Christians use to refer to anyone who has not committed their life to following Jesus. At its best, it is a descriptive term that implies deep compassion for someone who does not yet know the God of the universe. At its worst, it can be perceived or even intended as an exclusionary term that implies an "us versus them" mentality. The biblical source of this word actually reflects the compassionate heart of God and challenges any sort of in-group superiority.

Jesus' view of the lost is maybe best seen in a trio of parables throughout Luke 15. Jesus tells three stories in response to the grumblings of the religious leaders of his day. They were upset that Jesus hung out with "sinners" - with "the lost." They viewed anyone who broke the law with disgust and sought to keep separate from them. Jesus counters this with challenging compassion.

In the first parable, Jesus describes a shepherd with a hundred sheep. One of the sheep goes missing, so the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to go find this one lost sheep. When he finds it, he is overcome with joy. In the second parable, he describes a woman who loses her paycheck and earnestly does all she can to find it, rejoicing when she does. Jesus says that there is more joy in heaven from just one person who repents - who is found by God - than from a host of religious people who "don't need to" repent.

In the final parable, Jesus describes a son who asked for his inheritance from his father early and then goes on to promptly waste it all. He hits rock bottom, finds himself homeless and hungry, and decides to go back to his father to beg for a position as one of his servants. But when his father sees him approaching in the distance, he runs to embrace him, rejoicing that he is no longer lost. Afterwards he throws a big party. The plot twist at the end of these



three parables comes with the description of the father's other son - the older brother. This brother is angry that the father forgives the younger son and throws him this elaborate dinner, so he refuses to attend the party. The father goes out and tells the *older* son that it is right to rejoice that his brother is back home - because he once was dead but is now alive, and he once was lost but is now found.

Jesus turns the idea that the religious leaders of the day had about who was "lost" and "found" on its head. He tells them in these parables that the worst of sinners can repent and be found, and that the most observant and devout religious person can be the one who remains truly lost in their failure to understand God's grace — just like the older brother.

Being lost simply means that someone, by their life, beliefs, and actions, does not know and love who God really is. It isn't just a designator for someone outside of Christianity's religious structures. It's not just for people who don't go to church. The most desperately lost person might call themselves a Christian and do all the things you might expect a Christian person to do, even while in their hearts they do not know God. Jesus turns the "us-verses-them" mentality around on the most devout religious people of his day to say that it isn't just the sinners, the prostitutes, and the tax collectors who are lost - it is the self-righteous

Being lost simply means that someone, by their life, beliefs, and actions, does not know and love who God really is.

religious who are lost. Like the older brother, they do not always accept the loving grace of God.

Finally, it is not a designator that should be used to pronounce some sort of final judgment on a person's eternal state. No one but God knows if someone who is wandering will one day turn back to find and be found by God. At its best, it is a word not characterized by judgment and exclusion, but a word full of compassion that reflects a God who would drop everything to find each one of us.

Scott Limkeman

Scott lives with his wife in Northern
California and works at a non-profit
ranch for young men in crisis where
he farms, directs programming, and
disciples the residents. He holds a
Masters of Divinity from Westminster
Theological Seminary and loves thinking
and talking about Scripture, theology, the
church, and the culture. He also enjoys nature,
food, music, movies, and books.





Dear Lindsey,

I've been a Christian for a little while now, but I have to admit: I don't really like to pray. It's not that I don't want to, it's just that I have a hard time staying focused. Some people say they can hear or feel God talk to them, but I don't feel anything. It makes me wonder if I am doing it right. Do I have to pray to be a good Christian?

Signed, Unimpressed by Prayer

Dear Unimpressed,

Can I tell you a secret? I've considered myself a Christian for more than 30 years, and I still struggle to pray. But I've learned some things about prayer over the years—mostly about what it is not—that have helped me.

PRAYER IS NOT EASY

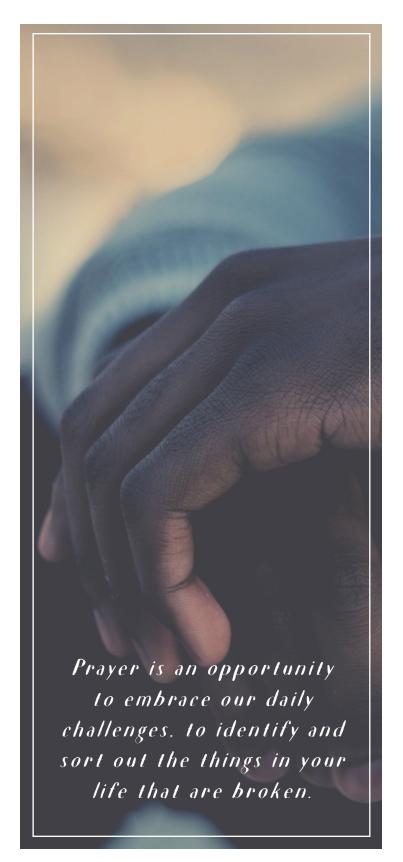
First, **prayer is not easy.** You've already discovered this. Talking to God is simple, but like any discipline (and prayer is a discipline), sometimes it can feel like a chore. To use a cliché, it's like going to the gym: You may not want to go—you grumble at the idea of lifting that weight or running that mile. It's hard. It's uncomfortable. Sometimes it even hurts. But you know it's good for you and you like the overall effect

of working out. Day by day, as your muscles break down they become stronger, fat melts away, and you feel healthier from the inside out.

Prayer is similar. It can be tough to focus. Sometimes the silence of prayer feels downright loud as other thoughts, worries, fears, and even painful moments flood your brain. How are you supposed to get your mind and your heart in a place of gratitude, confession, and praise? Philippians 4:6 tells us, "Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God" (CEV). Through consistency and intention your focus will gradually strengthen and that challenging silence may even begin to feel like home.

PRAYER DOESN'T MAKE YOU GOOD OR BAD. IT MAKES YOU BETTER

Speaking of challenges, **prayer does not make you a good or bad Christian.** So let's remove the pressure to be perfect Christians. Jesus came to rescue imperfect people. Prayer is an opportunity to embrace our daily challenges, to identify and sort out the things in your life that are broken—the pain of a failed relationship, a split family, a trail of



bad decisions, health challenges—and to ask God to change the way we think about or view these situations; to find guidance on how we should address them or how we should change our own behaviors. All this to bring us healing and wholeness, which leads me to my next point.

GOD DOESN'T NEED YOU TO PRAY

Prayer is not for God. He already knows what you need, and he already knows what you're going to tell him. I know what you're thinking, If God already knows what I am going to say, what's the point of praying? Easy, Grasshopper. I know this idea makes the prayer thing confusing, but here's one way to look at it: God relates himself to us as a father figure (among other things). Most parents already know what their children need before they need it or ask for it. But, as a child matures, the responsibility to make their request becomes their own. In the act of asking, the child is learning important life skills: how to identify, talk about, take responsibility for their feelings, and how to assess their needs in order to get them met in safe relationships.

Prayer helps you learn those same spiritual life skills with a couple of added benefits. Prayer is designed to interrupt the chaotic rhythms of life. It brings us

Prayer is designed to interrupt the chaotic rhythms of life.

to the present moment and teaches us to slow down, breathe deep, and filter your life through a lens of gratitude. Prayer benefits the one praying, deepening your bond with God by bringing your thoughts, your will, and your desires in line with the purposes he has for you.

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO PRAY

Finally, there is no "one-size-fits-all" way to pray.

You can literally pray any time, anywhere, in any way. And knowing yourself is part of discovering how you best connect with God. For me, praying out loud is like sending a Tweet—I have so few words. But with a journal and a pen, I'll write God a letter. I know people who paint their prayers, write songs and poetry, or simply sit in silence. There are tons of prayer expressions and methods developed through the ages, from praying the scriptures (Lectio Divina),

to personal examination (The Examen), and even visualization (Ignatian Method). The Living Prayer Center on theupper.org is a helpful resource to read up on these methods.

If you struggle with what or how to pray, remember: there is no one to impress. The Book of Matthew warns about "practicing your religion in front of people to draw their attention" (6:la). We get twisted up, thinking those with the most elegant prayers must be the most spiritual. Maybe they are. Or maybe they're gifted speakers. God is more interested in your fumbling, tongue-tied sincerity, than your eloquence.

Just like there are many ways to pray, there are many ways God communicates to you. You may not hear him right now, and that's OK. Even the famous Mother Teresa felt she didn't always hear God, yet she understood that he is always present. When an interviewer asked what she prayed about, she answered "I listen." When asked what God said to her, she answered, "He listens. And if you don't understand that, I can't explain it to you." Prayer is an invitation to be present with God. Even when we don't literally hear words, the act helps shape us to live and behave in the wise, gracious, and loving way that reflects a wise, gracious, and loving God. But don't just listen for his voice; look for it. I see God's voice in books and articles, in texts from friends, in

quotes on Instagram. There's no limit to the way God can speak to you.

I can't say you'll ever experience a mystical feeling when you pray (but I can't say you won't), because sometimes—maybe even most times—prayer is practical and even mundane. But I think that's the point. Jeremiah 29:13 says, "Seek me and you will find me when you seek me with all your heart." In the practice and sincerity of seeking God through your own communication style, you will find him in ways that are personal and meaningful to you.

Ask Lindsey!

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



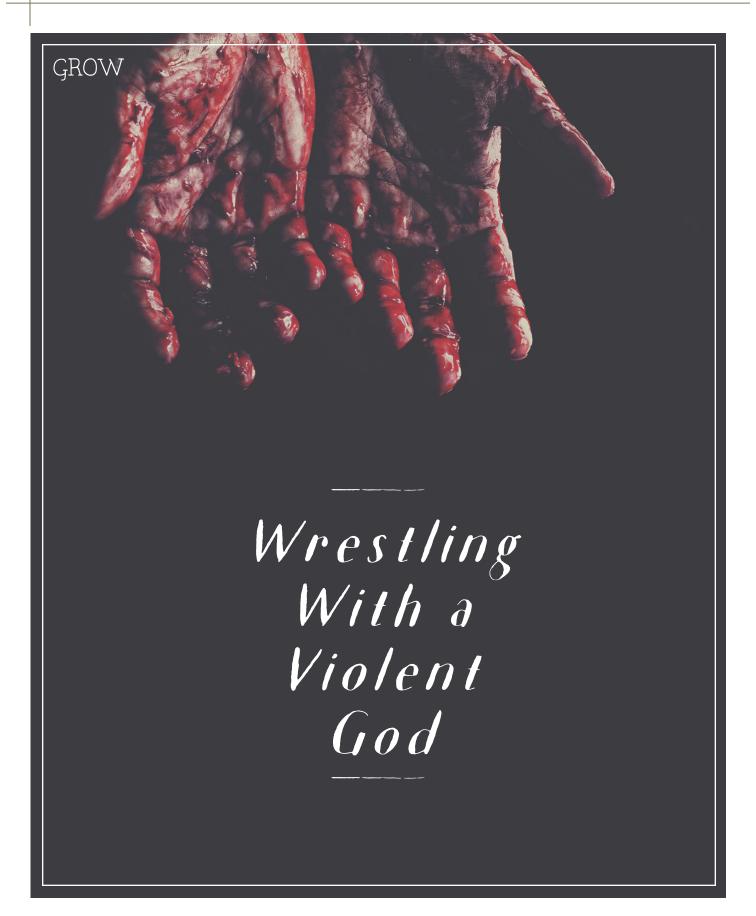
Lindsey A. Frederick

Lindsey A. Frederick is a marketing & communications manager in the Washington DC area and writes frequently about life, art, and faith.

You can follow her on Facebook @ /lindseyafrederick or Instagram @ fredericklindsey



NEWIDENTITYMAGAZINE.COM



FINDING HOPE IN THE DARK PLACES OF SCRIPTURE

By Scott Limkeman

n the cities of the nations that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes...as the Lord your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping

their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God." (Deuteronomy 20:16-18)

These words give most of us pause when we read them - and they should. The problem of a God who responds to evil and injustice with violence, and who even commands certain people to do so as an instrument of his judgment, is a difficulty most of us feel strongly when we read this and other portions of the Bible. I want to acknowledge that for most, this is not an issue of casual, philosophical speculation, detached from the day to day. For most of us, this issue touches at the nerve center of fundamental questions: Is God actually good? Can I trust the God of the Bible? Without pretending to offer easy "solutions," I hope this article helps give you reason to believe in the goodness and trustworthiness of God.

There are two broad approaches you can take when dealing with troubling portions of scripture. The traditional approach, what almost all would consider to be the "historically orthodox" approach, is to see scripture as being true in all it communicates, since it is a disclosure of God and by God. This leaves Christians to wrestle with what it means for God to condone certain instances of violence, while still maintaining that it is really God who did it and approved of it. The second approach is to cast doubt on the trustworthiness of what is communicated

about God in the Bible. This approach is increasingly popular, though I believe significantly flawed in light of what the Bible itself says about its reliability. Before moving on to see what sense we can make of violence in the Bible, I want to look at this second approach and point out what I believe is its fatal flaw.

THE TRAJECTORY APPROACH

This second approach removes the tension we feel when we wonder if God is good by reevaluating violent depictions of God, seeing them as earnest but misguided attempts by an ancient people to understand God and his will. Often referred to as the "trajectory" approach, it's a view embraced by teachers and pastors like Brian Zhand, Rob Bell, Steve Chalke, Brian McLaren, and others. This view starts with seeing the stories and teachings of the Bible as representing a progressive movement through the history of the Hebrew people, culminating in the arrival of Jesus Christ - a belief shared among all Christians. Proponents of this view go further, however, and claim that what we see in Jesus is so radical that we have to understand it not merely as a progressive development, but in many ways as a decisive break or shift in the presentation of God. As Brian Zhand says in his book Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God, "Jesus is what God has to say." Jesus represents a startling development in the

presentation of the character of God - though not an entirely unanticipated one. Again, Zhand writes:

"The role of the Old Testament is to give an inspired telling of how we get to Jesus. But once we get to Jesus we don't build multiple tabernacles and grant an equivalency to Jesus and the Old Testament...Jesus saves the Bible from itself!... Jesus delivers the Bible from its addiction to violent retaliation. Moses may stone sinners and Elijah may kill idolaters. And so violent holiness can be justified as biblical. But for a Christian that doesn't matter. We follow Jesus!"

The Old Testament, along with some portions of the New, are viewed as presenting "contradictory" and "discordant" views to those of Jesus. Assumptions were made by the Israelites in the Old Testament that now need to be abandoned. The Bible argues with itself from passage to passage, presenting many wrong ideas about God, and attributing things to him that aren't true. Christians are called to side with Jesus in this debate. In the words of the late scholar C.S. Cowles, Jesus introduces "an entirely new rewrite of Jewish theology." This is not to say that all of the Old Testament is wrong, which proponents of this view would quickly point out. The story is simply one of a primitive people encountering God in an increasingly clear way, struggling to understand

him as they evolve beyond their Bronze Age misunderstandings - a long, historical trajectory that ends at Jesus.

This approach is tempting, as it seems to allow us to fully embrace and declare the love of God and his concern and care for all people. It seems to allow us to firmly fix our attention on Jesus. Instead of forcing us into a place where we feel the need to look down and shuffle our feet when the more gruesome passages are brought up, we can happily declare that "Jesus isn't like that!" But as tempting as this might be, I don't believe this approach finally gives us what we're really looking for - a truly good God that we can reliably know.

A GOD WE CAN RELIABLY KNOW

I want to start with the "reliably know" part. The trajectory approach essentially uses Jesus to screen out the parts of the Bible that are troubling or seem counter to our modern day ethical understandings. This immediately runs into a significant problem: Jesus can't be used as a means of filtering out parts of Scripture, because he himself repeatedly affirms the authority of the Old Testament scriptures. Jesus everywhere assumes that the Old Testament scriptures are entirely true and reliable, and in several places he makes this explicit, stating that the

If Jesus trusted
Scripture, then his
followers should do
the same.

scriptures are "unbreakable" (John 10:35), that they all point to and reveal him (John 5:39, Luke 24:27,44), and that even the smallest letter or marking cannot be dismissed, since he came to fulfill the scriptures, not destroy or contradict them (Matthew 5:17-18). Moreover, Jesus himself says some of the most striking things about the judgment of God (Luke 10:13-15, Matt. 22:12-14, Luke 13:27-28, Mark 12:9, Matthew 13:41-42, Mark 9:4-48, Matthew 24:48-51, Luke 17:26-30, Luke 19:27). To pit Jesus against the Old Testament is to pit Jesus against himself, and the trajectory view principle of using a Jesus as a filter ends up filtering out Jesus. If we're on Jesus' side, then we have to affirm the Old Testament as true and reliable and approach it with a posture of humility, even as we ask hard questions. If we don't approach Scripture this way, then we are left to piece together portions of the Old and New Testaments that we

are willing to accept. But what does this do to our ability to reliably know God? When we approach the Bible with a pair of scissors, does the reliability of the end product then become dependent on our own reliability? In light of what Jesus has to say about scripture, the historically orthodox approach offers the only solid foundation to move forward. If Jesus trusted scripture, then his followers should do the same.

is his response to what the Bible calls Sin - a rebellion against God's direction and care that brings evil and death into the world. This mutiny leads to every injustice and oppression, every murderous thought and act, all hate and lies, and every twisting of God's good design in creation. God made his world good, we rejected his design a long time ago, and we reject it still today in little and in big ways.

A GOD WHO IS TRULY GOOD

On to the "truly good" part. There is *much* that can and should be said about the conquest of Canaan, the commands to kill and wage war, and the harsh, violent punishments for breaking the laws God gives to Israel. These are difficult subjects that do not have easy answers. All of these are tied together and interconnected as aspects of God's response to evil, injustice, oppression, and cruelty, and each of these deserves its own article. What I want to focus on in this space is the way that God's response to evil with violence is a source of hope - and how it corresponds to our deepest longings for justice.

In his book *The Skeletons in God's Closet*, Joshua Butler helpfully points out that "If there were no sin, God would not be violent. Violence is not essential to his being." What he means by this is that God's violence

What lies behind all of the most difficult passages surrounding conquests and lawbreaking is God's response to the evil humanity has introduced - his plan to make things right again. He does this by taking Israel, a weak and oppressed nation, and rescuing them out of brutal slavery. He uses this nation to judge the people of Canaan - a people who are exceedingly wicked and with whom God has been exceedingly patient. God is so patient with the people of Canaan that he waits for 400 years while Egypt enslaves Israel, since "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." (Genesis 15) This was a nation most famous for burning their own children to death as sacrifices to the god Molech. (Leviticus 18:21, 24) God continues his plan by establishing the nation of Israel in this land and providing them with a law that will ensure justice is done - not just for Israelites themselves but, as is repeated again and again in the law, for the foreigner within Israel's



borders. God even does this by judging Israel, his own people, when they become as unjust and evil as the nations that used to occupy the land - contrary to any ethnocentric interpretations of God driving out the Canaanites. God seeks justice against any nation that would stand opposed to what is good and true and beautiful, and against any nation that would trample on the poor or the marginalized. God's plan throughout Israel's history is to remove what is evil and establish what is good.

God must remove evil in order for good to flourish. God must put away everything and everyone opposed to his plan for justice and peace in order for the earth and humanity to be whole again. But there's a problem with this plan: injustice does not want to be put away. Oppressive rulers don't want to be removed from power. And so something must be done. The Bible presents God as a loving King and Father who is willing to do anything to bring joy to the realm, the home of his children - children ultimately not just from Israel, but from every nation. The story of scripture shows us that violence is the effectively just response to a violent and wicked opposition to what is good. That might

cause you to wince - it still causes me to. But I also wince when I hear a stories of rape. I wince when I hear about child abuse. I wince when I read about terrible corruption and greed in the highest halls of power. And so does God. And you probably do too. Our culture is increasingly sensitive to and vocal about matters of injustice - we all know that this world is not right, and we often feel helpless to do anything about it. A good God does not wave his hand and dismiss wickedness on the basis of a modern, western definition of love. A good God is passionately committed to making things right, and the longing that you feel when you hear of some horrific or tragic event is the longing for the King to return and "deliver the Kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power." (1 Corinthians 15:24) To put it positively, you and I long for the vision of Isaiah 11:9, where "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

The best part is that the story of the nation of Israel I outlined doesn't end in the Old Testament. Ultimately, God is so good and gracious that he paid the highest

price himself in order to bring about this peaceful kingdom. God became man in Jesus Christ and endured torture and death at the hands of the Roman Empire and the religious leaders of Israel. God does not stand far off in his commitment to get rid of evil. He endured the worst evil for us so that he might defeat the most wicked of powers - Sin, death, and Satan - and drive out the evil that is in each of our hearts. Jesus showed he is good and trustworthy when he sacrificed his life for us. Whatever struggles we might face when we're wrestling with the violence in Scripture, we have to remember that Jesus, God himself, willingly suffered violence to put an end to violence.

GOD'S VIOLENCE AND OURS

The problem of justified violence on God's part leads to an even bigger problem - what's to stop us from justifying violence and conquest today? This is where this issue comes to a sobering point, since a cursory look at history shows that many atrocities and unjust actions have been rationalized on the grounds of God's violent actions and commands in Scripture - from the Crusades, to the European expulsion of Native Americans, to the Rwandan Genocide. The Bible, however, makes no attempt to justify its misuse at the hands of wicked people by sanctioning these acts of violence. In fact, it does the

opposite. God's judgment on what is wrong in this world is, to use the words of Joshua Butler, "quite possibly one of the greatest resources for living peacefully in our violent world today."

Maybe this strikes you as an outrageous claim. How can a God who acts violently motivate us to live peacefully? What we find in the Bible, and explicitly in the New Testament, is that the promise of God's commitment to put things right in the end is an encouragement given for us to love our enemy and forgive even the most wicked persons. In Romans 12, Paul tells Christians to "Live peaceably with all" and to "never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay'...on the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." God's vengeance stays our hand when everything in us cries out for justice and retribution. Christians suffering intense persecution in the first century are repeatedly encouraged in Scripture to endure hardship while loving and seeking the good of their enemies, precisely because justice will one day come. (2 Peter 3:1-13, 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12)

In one portion of his book Exclusion and Embrace, Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf defends the picture of a God who will come with vengeance, and discusses how this view restrains us from seeking vengeance on our own terms. As a Croatian acquainted with the war, genocide, rape and murder surrounding his homeland in the 20th century, he comes to a sobering conclusion, that "it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die." (304) These are strong words that challenge those of us who live in a culture where the idea of judgment is offensive - but we would do well to remember that these are unique sensitivities that can in part reflect certain cultural assumptions, along with the privileges of peace we enjoy.

LEARNING TO WRESTLE WELL

You may be thinking right now of dozens of passages that I haven't addressed or difficult questions that I didn't raise. What I want you to hear is that those questions matter, and those passages are difficult. This is one of the most troubling aspects of Christian belief for many of us, and I can't pretend that this article didn't raise more questions for you than it answered. For a longer discussion of the subject, I heartily recommend the book I referenced earlier: The Skeletons in God's Closet by Joshua Ryan Butler. What is important for all of us is that we continue to wrestle with these things. I want to

close with the words of Alastair Roberts, taken from a blog post he wrote on the same subject, where he sees the story of Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32 as an illustration of our own struggle:

It is in the difficult texts of Scripture that God meets us, as if an enemy, wrestling against us. Our duty as Christians is to wrestle back, and not let go until God blesses us through these texts. We should, however, be aware that wrestling with such texts, while it can bless us, will leave us with a limp. As we faithfully engage with such difficult texts, we lose the jaunty gait of those who avoid such struggle.

We can learn to wrestle with these difficulties well, holding tightly to the surprising and challenging goodness of a God who is on a mission to bring peace and justice to our world.

Scott Limkeman

Scott lives with his wife in Northern California and works at a non-profit ranch for young men in crisis where he farms, directs programming, and disciples the residents. He holds a Masters of Divinity from Westminster Theological Seminary and loves thinking and talking about Scripture, theology, the church, and the culture. He also enjoys nature, food, music, movies, and books.





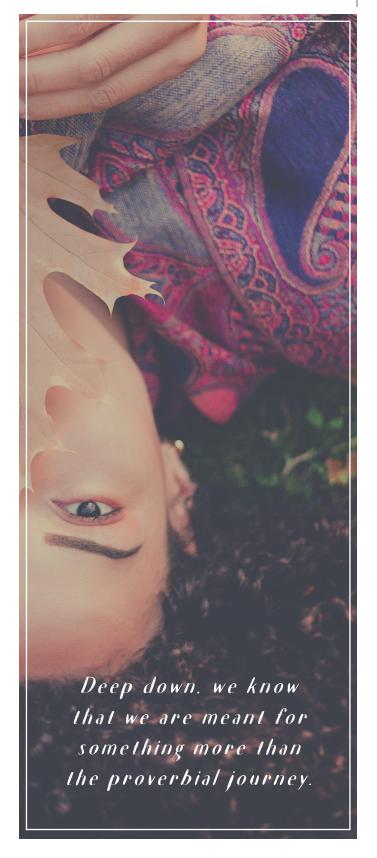
EVERYONE CAN KNOW THEIR PURPOSE

By Jeffery Porter

was recently surprised when a student confided that they were impatiently waiting for what God had planned for their future vocation. What surprised me was not that they were wondering what God has planned for their life, nor that they were feeling impatient. What did surprised me was that another student offered advice in the form of a popular saying, "Life isn't about the destination. It's about the journey." Though I disagreed with the advice, I had to admit that this cliché, like many popular sayings, does have some truth to it. Clichés persist in cultures because we recognize some wisdom, or perhaps just a shade of wisdom, in their pithy lines. Yet, simple truisms rarely give us the whole picture. Life cannot only be about the journey. In such a metaphor, the destination matters. An enjoyable journey towards an unpleasant destination is not a good trip. Likewise, a life aimed at sadness, loneliness or pain is not a good life, no matter how great the moments in between are. The journey cliché fails to provide a full picture of meaning and happiness because we know that as humans we do have a purpose. Deep down, we know that we are meant for something more than the proverbial journey.

For most of western history, it was an uncontested assumption that humans naturally had a purpose or purposes. Interestingly, "life is about the journey"

assumes the same philosophical starting point that led the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle to formulate a theory about human purpose. This would become the dominant view for close to two thousand years. The journey metaphor assumes that change is an inevitable part of life. Aristotle's thoughts on the concept of change became as important to ancient thought and culture as the scientific method is to our contemporary culture. In fact since Aristotle wrote about the nature of change in his book Metaphysics until quite recently, most philosophers and theologians just assumed he was right about how change works. He argued that since change comes from causes, everything in the whole universe has four distinct causes. He called the first type material - what something is made from. A match burns and changes because of the flammable material it is made from. The second type of cause is called formal and refers to the specific way something changes. The formal cause of ice turning into water is the melting process. Ice itself cannot be flammable the way a match is. The third cause is the one us modern people are most familiar with, and Aristotle called it an efficient cause. This cause is the exact action or event that precedes a change. For instance, the efficient cause of a tree falling over might be a gust of wind. The last and most important cause to one's life journey, is what Aristotle called the final cause. This is the purpose or end for which something



When we love God.

our lives become

oriented in such a way that
we let him purify us into the
person he wants us to be.

exists. The final cause of a match is to burn. Again, Aristotle said (and the whole western world listened), that everything in the universe experienced change and therefore had four causes, including people.

As Christians we should not find this line of thinking surprising, not because someone important like Aristotle said, but rather because the Bible tells us that we were made for purpose. Jesus summarized thousands of years of writings on the topic when he told the experts in religious thought that all of the writings of the Old Testament hang on the commandments to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:34-40). When we love God, our lives become oriented in such a way that we let him purify us into the person he wants us to be. And, because we are made for community, this necessarily involves loving

others. While individual people may have unique purposes according to how God has made them, we all share one common purpose. Throughout church history, theologians, pastors and individuals like you and I have used Jesus' words as the starting point to more deeply understand the purpose of human life. In the third century, St. Augustine wrote that the purpose of life is to enjoy God and that our hearts are restless until they finally find him. (Confessions 1.1) In the 17th century, when English Protestant church leaders got together to write an official curriculum for learning the Christian faith, their first lesson was on the idea that the purpose of a person's life is to "glorify God and enjoy him forever." However, over the last four hundred years, as the scientific method became culturally we have reduced Aristotle's four causes into just one, efficient cause. Because purposes cannot be tested or explained scientifically, we tend to focus on the parts of life that are demonstrable and repeatable causes and effects. Since we live in an increasingly secular society, we can have the tendency to operate as if humans lack a purpose. If there is no purpose to a human life, we reason, then life cannot be about the destination. It can only be about the journey because a meaningless journey is all that is left.

Wanting to know more about the purpose God has planned for your life is not an outdated idea. Asking

the question is just as important to our lives today as it was for Augustine's 1600 years ago. Most importantly, God, as the object of our love, is our destination. The apostle Paul said it is only in God that we find life and have our being (Acts 17:28). Loving God, enjoying God, and obeying God are the only things that can give meaning to what we do in this life. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made this point eloquently to a group of middle school students in Philadelphia six months before is untimely death. He told them,

When you discover what you will be in your life, set out to do it as if God Almighty called you at this particular moment in history to do it. Don't just set out to do a good job. Set out to do such a good job that the living, the dead or the unborn couldn't do it any better. If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music, sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera, sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.

When we come before God asking him what our unique individual purpose is, we should expect that

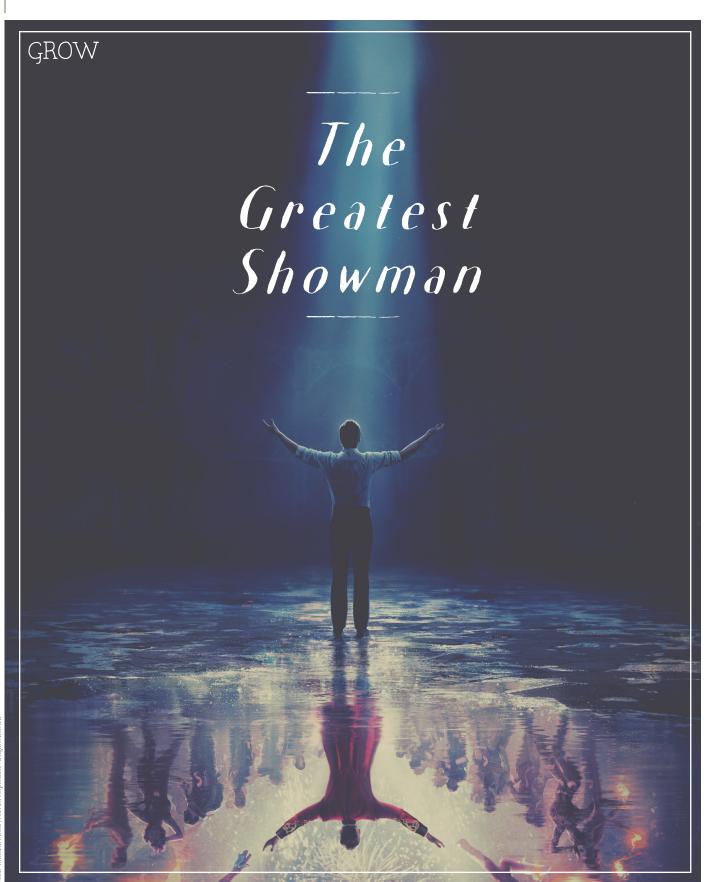
Wanting to know more about the purpose God has planned for your life is not an outdated idea.

the answer will align with and be secondary to our common human final purpose; to be creatures who glorify god. When we listen to God and life our life according to the Bible, the journey of life will bring us closer to him as we get better at glorifying him in our lives and loving those around us. Life is only about the journey when the journey has purpose.



Jeffery Porter

Jeffery Porter lives in Washington D.C. with his wife and son. He is a Chaplain in Residence at Georgetown University and a PhD student in Religion and Culture at the Catholic University of America. Before moving to D.C., he was a youth pastor in Southern California.



217 Twentieth Century Fox Film Comparation All Bights Recorded

A MILLION DREAMS AND I STILL WANT MORF!

By Steve Limkeman

" E very night I lie in bed, the brightest colors fill my head. A million dreams are keepin' me awake. I think of what the world could be, a vision of the one I see. A million dreams is all it's gonna take. A million dreams for the world we're gonna make."

As P.T. Barnum sings these words to Charity in the beautiful montage of their young lives, we are captivated by the hope that they share, the possibilities of their bright future, and the chance of their love overcoming the wall between privilege and poverty that keeps them apart. But as we race through the moments of their youth, through school and dating and marriage and having children, we quickly discover that this story asks a far greater question than whether or not P.T. and Charity are going to make it together. The Greatest Showman asks us to wrestle with the quest for the holy grail of our modern world: success and happiness. What is the good life? If a million of our wildest dreams came true, would we truly be happy?

Now middle-aged and disillusioned with how his life has turned out so far, Barnum returns home one day, freshly laid off from a tedious office job in a dreary industrial park. He walks through the rooms of their run-down apartment and laments to his wife, "This isn't the life I promised you." Born the son of a tailor in poverty, he is desperate to provide a better life for

If we put our faith in temporal things, they will inevitably let us down. They were never meant to be enough for us. Not alone.

his family than the one he knew as a child. Charity, seeing that P.T. is discouraged, wishes aloud for his happiness and attempts to reframe his perspective with the wonderful life they already share with their two daughters. But Barnum knows that he still wants more. His daughters, in turn, help to guide Barnum's ambition from building a wax museum to creating a circus comprised of people with wildly curious features and talents, until his fame and fortune grow so large that his company receives an invitation to meet the Queen of England!

To this point, P.T. has achieved the love of the common folk and enough money to move into his childhood dream home, but he aspires to be revered by the upper classes of society as well. Recruiting a famous European singer, he hosts a show at an exquisite theater in an attempt to establish his name among the critics. Seeing the distinguished crowd,

Charity asks, "Are you happy?" Barnum answers, "I will be if this works." But one standing ovation and thunderous applause later, he's planning an extensive tour across the United States, to the utter bewilderment of his business partner, which has the potential to devastate him financially if anything goes wrong.

Can you see the pattern? "I will be happy if..." This journey has no end! We will never reach our destination if our happiness is contingent upon something that we must achieve. Psychologist Shawn Achor, a globally renowned speaker on the subject of happiness, reveals that the traditional way most of us search for happiness is "broken and backwards." The idea that 'I must work hard to be successful and then I'll be happy' has effectively "pushed happiness over the cognitive horizon" in our society. Why? If you get good grades in school one year, you've gotta do it again the next year. If you graduate from school, then you've gotta get a job. Once you've got a job, you've gotta work your way up and get promoted or get a better job. The targets of success are always changing. Therefore, your happiness at meeting those targets is always fleeting and your successes will never ultimately satisfy you.

This sentiment underpins the entire narrative arc of The Greatest Showman and is most vividly



expressed through the lyrics of the song, "Never Enough," that we hear from the European sensation, Jenny Lind:

"All the shine of a thousand spotlights /
All the stars we steal from the night sky will
never be enough / Never be enough
Towers of gold are still too little /
These hands could hold the world but it'll
never be enough / Never be enough for me"

No matter how great of a showman Barnum becomes, it will never be enough for him. No matter how big of a star the singer becomes, she has a greater hole in her heart that she believes can only be filled by something more.

What are we to make of this tragic human condition? Are we doomed to race through our lives from dream to dream, always pressing forward and never feeling fulfilled? Considering the nature of

the insatiable desire we all have for more than this life has given us, C.S. Lewis' book Mere Christianity suggests this: "Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they can never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject which excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy." The problem, he continues, is of course not in the things themselves (i.e. a bad marriage or a disappointing vacation – for it could be the very best of relationships or adventures), nor is it that we ought to stop dreaming, settle down, and resign ourselves to a life that is ultimately unfulfilling. Not at all. Rather, as C.S. Lewis says, "if I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world...I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death."

If we put our faith in temporal things, they will inevitably let us down. They were never meant to be enough for us. Not alone. When Barnum finally does hit bottom, he recognizes that his heart has been led astray, fooled into thinking that fame or fortune could satisfy him. In the song, "From Now On," he sings these poignant words:

"I drank champagne with kings and queens /
The politicians praised my name
But those are someone else's dreams /
The pitfalls of the man I became
For years and years / I chased their cheers
The crazy speed of always needing more"

So when our eyes are no longer "blinded by the lights," when we realize that our greatest successes and our most fulfilling relationships will only take us so far, how do we cultivate an attitude of thanksgiving for the things we have, while not mistaking them for what they cannot give us, as Lewis suggests? How can we escape "the crazy speed of always needing more?"

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal, in his Pensees, argues there is only one place - one person - where we can find our rest: "All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end... And yet, after

such a great number of years, no one without faith has reached the point to which all continually look... What is it, then, that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself. He only is our true good."

In Jesus, we find a man who invites us into his presence with these words: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). He is the only one who can fill "the infinite abyss" of desire in our souls. The green pastures and still waters of our Good Shepherd are the "true country" for which our hearts long (Psalm 23). He doesn't change. His grace is always sufficient for us, even in suffering and weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Therefore, the apostle Paul is able to proclaim that he "has learned the secret of being content, in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:12). Psalm 1 declares that people who find their delight in the Lord will be blessed "like a tree, planted in streams of water, that bears its fruit in season, and its leaf does

In Jesus, we find a man who invites us into his presence with these words: Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

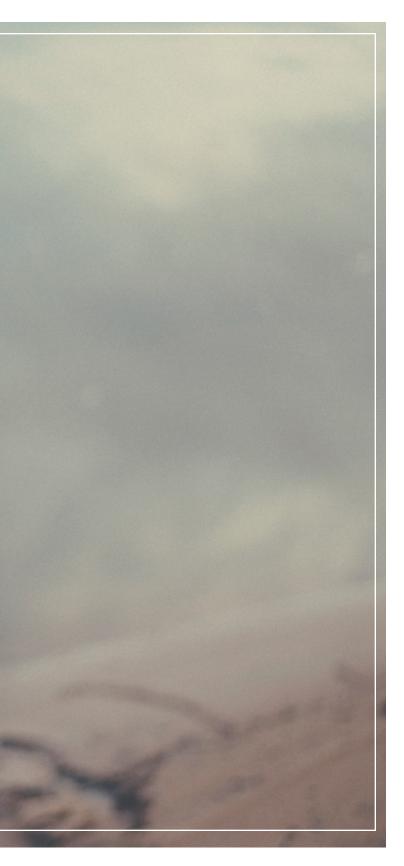
not wither." When you have fully devoted yourself and your dreams to your Creator, you will discover that "everything you ever want" and "everything you ever need" is "right here in front of you" in Christ Iesus.

Steve Limkeman

Steve Limkeman majored in Philosophy at Westmont College and now teaches Social Studies, Geography & Ethics at Golden Eagle Charter School in Mt. Shasta, California. He has also taught Chinese history and served as a youth leader for three years in Shanghai. His heroes include C.S. Lewis, Tim Keller, Ravi Zacharias, Christopher Nolan, Denzel Washington and Gandalf the Grey.



NEW IDENTITY MAGAZINE.COM



RETHINKING JOHN 3:16

By Greg Whyte

or God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16, English Standard Version)

Without a doubt, this is the most easily recognized, the most familiar, and the most memorized verse in the entire Bible among Christians, especially those of Western Evangelical convictions. It's seen as central to the gospel that we preach and is usually quoted during evangelistic events or displayed on banners at youth rallies. We've printed it on bumper stickers and in bold on t-shirts and other "Christian" merchandising (which may merit its own article).

If simply affirming belief is all that the gospel expects and all that John 3:16 instructs, why did they put Jesus to death for such a message?

However, what does John 3:16 mean? I mean, we quote it all the time, but do we know what was actually being said by these words? What does Jesus mean by "perish" and "eternal life"? Why use those words and not, say "suffer forever in hellfire" and "gain spiritual bliss in Heaven" (which is how the majority of Christian evangelists present and understand the afterlife)? Was the Love of God for the whole world, or just for those who believe (and are considered "saved")? And what does this say about the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, or even of his relationship with God the Father, who gave him to us? But even beyond that, what does the Bible say in the text around this verse? Does this change the meaning we've traditionally given it?

DANGERS OF READING
OUT OF CONTEXT

Many call this famous verse "an entire Bible in itself," or "the gospel message summarized in a single verse." Unfortunately, that's not entirely accurate. It doesn't tell the whole story, and it leaves much that needs to be included unsaid. Also, our thinking that this verse contains the whole message makes certain assumptions about the gospel message itself, something that we will need to explore further to get a better understanding. But we are also making assumptions about the audience of this verse, that they would have some background of familiarity with the rest of the Biblical metanarrative (the big story that the Bible tells).

For instance, in the Asian context, this verse would not hold the same central place it does in the West. Who is this God that's being talked about here? According to Hinduism, there are many. Why love the world? Is not the world a bad dream that we are all seeking to wake up from? And is love not just an illusion or a "second-hand emotion," to quote the popular song? To the Buddhist, we are to forsake the world with the pain and desires that come with it. It categorizes love as a form of desire, depending on how we define it. Did God really have a son? This is one of the biggest stumbling blocks for Muslims regarding Christianity. What do we need to believe about him for this "gospel" to work? Simply that he exists? So would it be acceptable to believe in him

alongside other gods or teachings of other teachers from the past? And if everyone lives forever anyway, why is "eternal life" the promise here? Both Hinduism and Buddhism teach reincarnation (which implies immortality of the soul, something that, though not taught in the Bible, has been believed by the majority of Christians through history). As well as this, some forms of Hinduism would state that they agree with popular Christianity's beliefs about believers going to a spiritual heaven somewhere out there, forsaking the prison that is our physical existence. Curiously, this belief more closely resembles the Paganism of the ancient world, as well as the Gnosticism that early Christians were fighting against than it does Biblical Christianity itself.

Additionally, if we consider the parts that are "left unsaid," by stating that this verse gives us the entire gospel, we are ignoring the controversial nature of this gospel, precisely what we are to believe about Jesus, and so much more, which essentially minimizes our faith to cheap and easy beliefism (or "cheap grace", to use the term coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor and radical disciple of Jesus during the years of Nazi Germany). Very closely related to that, if simply affirming belief is all that the gospel expects and all that this verse instructs, why did they put Jesus to death for such a message? And why, among the original apostles (other than Judas,

who killed himself), John was the only one who did not face a martyr's death for his faith?

BACKGROUND

To address this fog of misunderstanding, we will need to do at least three things. First, we will need to define what we even mean by "gospel", as this is a term that can cause much confusion by itself. We need to know what we mean when we say "gospel" before we can identify the correct one. Believe it or not, the Biblical gospel was not the only one circulating around at the time (or even today, for that matter). The book of Galatians, for example, was a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to address one of these false "gospels". Second, we will need to ask what the Bible presents as the gospel (the real one) that the early Christians were so passionate about, so we can get a clearer picture of what we're looking at. Then finally, we will look at this verse in the context of the verses around it, so we will know what it was actually saying and the message that this verse is really telling us.

First, regarding "gospel" itself, this word is the simplified form of the Old English "godspell", which itself was a translation of the Greek "evangellion," which literally means "good news". And yes, in case you were wondering, it is where we get the

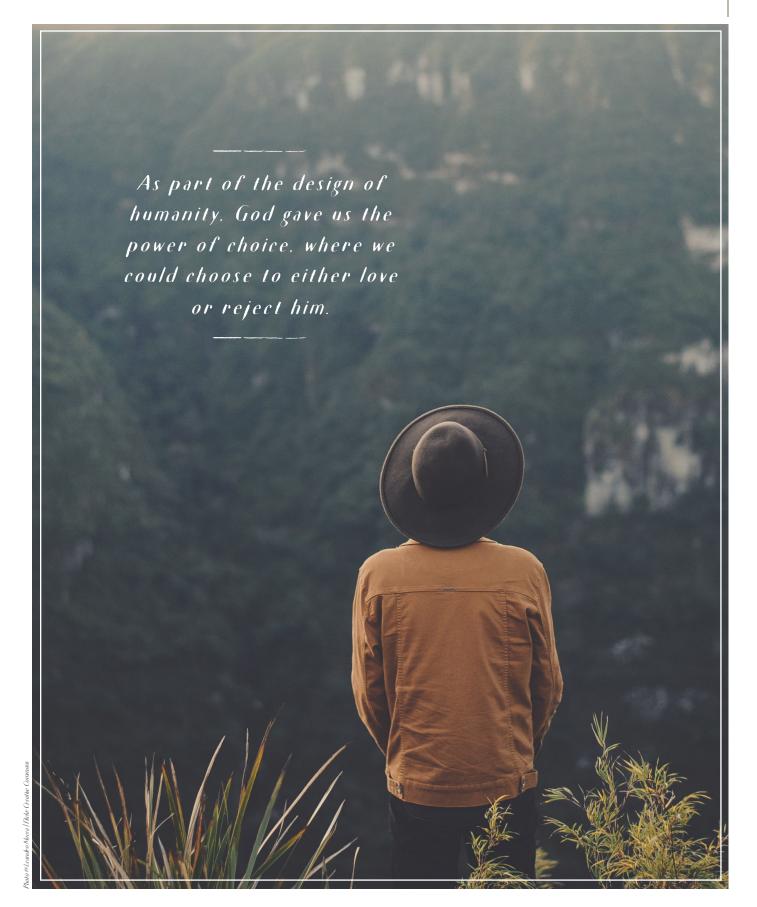
words "evangelist" (one who brings "good news"), "evangelism" (declaring the "good news") and evangelical (believing / dedicated to the "good news"). If we think of other occasions when this word was used, it was usually to proclaim the greatness of a kingdom's power, to announce the beginning of a new king's reign, or to proclaim to the people of a town that the king was coming.

If we look at the gospel that Jesus proclaimed in the New Testament books we call the "Gospels," we see him talking about a "Kingdom of God" (especially in Matthew, Mark and Luke), which might sound confusing to us because this term is never explicitly spelled out in the Bible itself. To clear up any confusion, this basically means God's reign over the earth, as it is in Heaven, much like what we'd find in the Lord's Prayer ("May your Kingdom come, May your will be done on Earth, just as it is in Heaven..."). But then we find ourselves asking, how is THIS good news, and what does the "gospel" as we understand it have to do with this? And what does John 3:16 have to do with any of this? That's where looking at the bigger story that the Bible tells comes in. For the sake of brevity, I'm not going to describe it in too much detail, just the main points.

In the beginning of the story, we are introduced to this Creator God, who created everything that exists. The pinnacle and masterpiece of this Creation were the creatures that he put in charge of caring for everything else: humanity (both male and female). When God created all of this, he considered it to be good. There was abundant life, harmony, flourishing, perfection, and wholeness, a state of being summarized by the Hebrew word shalom, a word we usually translate as "peace," but which means so much more than just an absence of conflict.

As part of the design of humanity, God gave us the power of choice, where we could choose to either love or reject him. This choice was represented by two trees in a garden. Unfortunately, the first parents of humanity chose to reject and rebel against God, and as a result, the *shalom* was broken. The relationships that once were whole became fractured. Humans became estranged from God, from one another, from the rest of Creation, and even from our own identities and self-worth. A curse of brokenness and death was introduced into the cosmos by this single choice. The fracturing continued to worsen as the beauty of God's creation began to become unravelled.

This God, however, refused to give up on his Creation. After cleansing the initial symptoms of the curse through the waters of a great flood, God chose to win the world back to himself through a



God (because of his love), refused to give up. He knew that the only way for things to become good again would be for the relationships broken in the beginning to be repaired and reconciled.

certain family who, ideally, would represent him to the world and win the wandering people back to the God who formed them. However, despite repeatedly showering his power, love, grace, and mercy on this family (and their descendants when they became a whole nation), even this family failed to represent him to the world. As the Old Testament closes, it seems as though the human experiment would end in failure.

Yet, God again, because of his love, refused to give up. He knew that the only way for things to become good again would be for the relationships broken in the beginning to be repaired and reconciled. However, the price for doing this meant that humanity would need to pay a debt that only God was able to pay. So God did something unexpected. An aspect of himself (his "Son") took on human flesh and was born into this world as one of us. He would show us what he was truly like and teach us his ways (which included proclaiming the Kingdom of God), in hopes that we would be attracted to him. Yet he was rejected, betrayed, abandoned by his friends, and then tortured and murdered by both government and religious leaders. Again, as we would think, God's plans seemed to fail. But they didn't. In fact, this was part of the plan all along, because this was the price that needed to be paid.

Just when we are tempted to end there (and many modern gospel presentations end there, unfortunately), the story continues with a surprising twist: this God-man, Jesus Christ, comes back to life again, and then appears to his friends before returning to Heaven and promising to return one day to finally and completely set things right again, restoring the shalom that had been lost in the beginning. Meanwhile, the disciples, whom one would expect to give up, become bold witnesses, filled with the Holy Spirit (another manifestation of God that now dwells within his people). These disciples would declare to the world that Jesus, despite being killed, was actually alive again and that he was God in the flesh and true Lord (as opposed to Caesar, or any other rival). This family of faith would now grow to become a new people that is no longer defined by ethnicity or race. Instead, it is simply defined by faith in Jesus, as we wait for his return and that final restoration, where we also will be raised from the dead, as he was.

THE ORIGINAL CONTEXT

Okay, so what does John 3:16 have to do with any of this? To answer this, we really should look at it with the verses that surround it, John 3:14-21:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,

This family of faith would now grow to become a new people that is no longer defined by ethnicity or race.

so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. (English Standard Version)

Looking in the context, we first of all see a reference to Moses and a serpent in the wilderness – a story that most of us, if we are unfamiliar with the Old Testament, would not know about. This story is found in Numbers 21, and tells about an occasion when the people were wandering in the wilderness. They began to grumble against Moses and God, so God sent "fiery serpents" who bit the people and many of the people died from these bites. Then God had Moses build a model serpent and fasten it to a pole, then lift it up. When he did this, God did not remove the serpents, nor did he heal everybody (some died), but those who looked to the serpent were spared (so it was up to the individual to look to and trust in that impaled serpent so that they would live). Jesus is then compared to that snake, with the implication that those who look upon him and believe in him would be healed and won't die (which also plays into verse 16, where it is again contrasting perishing (death) to eternal life (healing).

In looking after the verse (at verses 17 and 18), it is still using the same image, with the added point that those who do not believe already stand condemned, just as those who refused to look at Moses' impaled snake also died in the wilderness. But there is that point made in v. 17 — the Son (Jesus) was not sent into the world to condemn it, but to save the world through him. The curse and condemnation was

already in the world, but Jesus has now become the means by which we may find healing, through faith. So, in other words, it is those who look to and trust in Jesus and the Kingdom he preached, even the reference to his shameful crucifixion, that can be spared from the curse (which will continue to be in the world until he returns to finally set things completely right again). So this is where the individual aspect of our faith comes into the larger 'gospel' story.

There's still more: believing is not mere intellectual assent or a crisis confession at one time in our lives. John goes on in v. 19-21 to contrast those who continue to do evil (those in darkness) with those who live by the truth and begin to do good (come into the light, in other words). Jesus is described as the light, and even the one bringing that light, but those who reject him are those who continue in evil. In other words, to truly 'believe' means that there is a change in our allegiance, from darkness (the way we used to do things and what everyone else seems to be doing) to light (the wisdom contained in the Scriptures and a holy life, as we learn what it means to follow Jesus).

HOW CAN WE REALLY APPLY THIS VERSE

While not a complete picture of the entire gospel (as it assumes certain background knowledge, as well as a certain interpretation of what the gospel is), the message of John 3:16 is still an important element to our gospel, in that it focuses on the response of each individual as being part of the larger story. It confronts each individual person with a choice: will you believe in this Messiah and what he stands for (which means that you will now, from this moment forward, live in such a way that your allegiance is to his Kingdom), or will you reject him and continue to live as if his sacrifice is meaningless to you?

If we consider this choice in light of the rest of the gospel message, it really becomes a question of where our highest loyalties lie: to God and his priorities (the restoration of everything to his original intentions from the beginning), or to something else, even to yourself and your personal preferences.

Also, however we read or interpret the opposite poles of 'perishing' and 'eternal life', there is a note of finality to the fates represented by those words. CS Lewis, a British writer from the 20th Century, summarized the choice very well: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done." I would hope and pray that each of us would take the first option.

"There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God.' Thy will be done, and those to whom God says, in the end.' Thy will be done.'"

CS Lewis



Greg Whyte

Greg Whyte has a Master of Divinity from Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, Canada. He also has spent time in Peru, South Korea and Ukraine and has an interest in the global church. Currently, he lives in central Canada with his wife and two small children. He can be reached at gswhyte@gmail.com

