new identity

God in focus. World in scope.

MAGAZINE

MONEY MATTERS

Finances & Gender Roles in Marriage

THANKSGIVING STARTS NOW

Practicing Gratitude All Year Long

LISTENING FOR A WHISPER

Seeking the Holy Spirit amidst the clutter of life



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WHY "DIY" ISN'T ALWAYS THE BEST OPTION

I thank the Lord for the trust I can put in him for the most trivial things that plague my brain and keep me up at night. I may have told you before that I'm a worrier, so this isn't always easy. For reasons that I can't seem to pin down, other than the fact that I'm a flawed human being with a propensity to sin, I tend to be skeptical about God's provision and protection of me. I'm a product of a culture of do-it-yourselfers. And while DIY is great for homemade gifts and thrifty home furnishings, it's not so great when it comes to the details of our lives and the control we want to have over them.

I continually experience over and over that this control-freak state is not a healthy place to be, yet I even try to avoid such a state by my own willpower. It's a stressful cycle that seems to repeat in my life and I get frustrated with it. I'm still learning to trust God in all things big and small. Throughout this process I need to remember that God's grace is more than enough, no matter how much I fail (2 Cor. 12:9). Israel Ledesma talks more about this amazing grace in his article "Grace Like An Avalanche" on page 21. I need to rely on the Holy Spirit to speak into my heart about God's goodness and provision when I am weak with uncertainty (John 14:26). Sarah Mariano discusses hearing from and listening for the Holy Spirit in "Listening For A Whisper" on page 28. I also need to thank God for what he's brought me through, for worries that have never materialized and blessings that I haven't deserved. Lindsey A. Frederick talks about how we can practice thankfulness all year around and not just during the Thanksgiving holiday in her article "Thanksgiving Starts Now" on page 42.

All the DIYing of my life simply causes stress and anxiety, doubt and fear. In my own strength I can never have true confidence that I'm doing what is best anyway. I would be much wiser and more at peace if I would leave the details to God instead. He is, after all, the God who made the world and everything in it (Acts 17:24). I hope to confidently put my trust in him, and I hope you can too.

Enjoy the new issue!

CAILIN BRIODY HENSON Editor-in-Chief TATTOOS & FAITH | EGYPTIAN COPTIC CHRISTIANS | WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

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MAGAZINE

A La Carte Faith

THE PITFALLS OF TAKING
WHAT YOU LIKE FROM THE BIBLE
AND LEAVING THE REST

THE MAGAZINE FOR NEW BELIEVERS

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SURFING AND SERVING IN PANAMA
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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.

Referencing The Bible:



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

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ew topics produce as much discussion, concern, and even anxiety as the topic of money. Most of us spend a good portion of our days trying to earn, save, and figure out how (not) to spend it. In the context of marriage, financial pressures and the constant need to make decisions about money can sometimes be a strain. In fact, one 2012 research study published in the Family Relations journal, Volume 61, found that couples who argued about money early in their relationships were at greater risk for divorce. One of the authors of the study, Dr. Sonya Britt, stated quite clearly in a Huffington Post interview that "Arguments about money [are] by far the top predictor of divorce. It's not children, sex, in-laws, or anything else. It's money – for both men and women."

Clearly, money matters. In this third article in our series on gender and Christianity, we examine some different perspectives on the relationship between gender roles and handling family finances in Christian marriage. Our goal is to explore this complex and important subject from several angles while offering some scriptural references to help you reflect on and draw your own conclusions about those points of view.

Money and Work

In the familiar clichés about the "traditional" household (Christian or not), men go out to "work" and earn money while women stay home. To find such a

"ARGUMENTS ABOUT MONEY

[ARE] BY FAR THE TOP

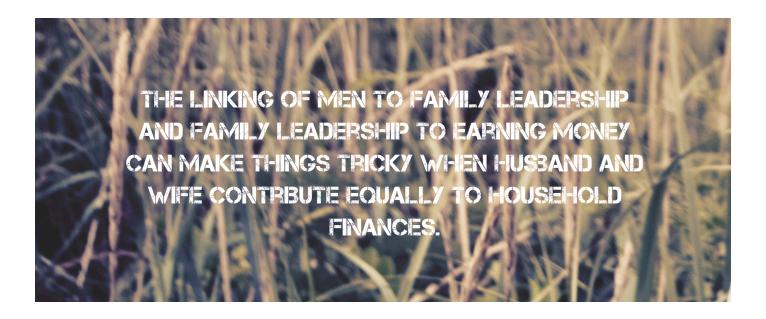
PREDICTOR OF DIVORCE.

IT'S NOT CHILDREN, SEX, IN
LAWS, OR ANYTHING ELSE. IT'S

MONEY—FOR BOTH MEN AND

WOMEN."

household most of us would have to travel back in time and into the imaginary world of black and white TV. "I Love Lucy" and "Leave It To Beaver" featured couples who resembled this stereotype. Shows like these, and the stereotypes they represented, reflected and perhaps reinforced the notion that work was something men did. The fact that men worked was more evidence of their status within the home: their going out to work and earn was another sign of their leadership. Women's work was either invisible or trivial. Houses on those shows were always clean and well furnished, and neither Lucy Ricardo nor June Cleaver ever seemed to be doing too many household chores.



Even back then, however, real life was quite different for most people in the U.S. and around the world. Many households then, and most households today, are supported in whole or in part by women who earn money. Still, even with the tremendous social and economic changes since World War II when there was a great surge in the number of American women working outside their homes, the notion that men ought to work and be the primary wage earners hasn't completely faded away: these supposedly "old fashioned" cultural expectations about gender and work seem to linger. Moreover, changes in women's work patterns and social status—the fact that so many women work outside the home and are treated more equally in society—mean that this lingering stereotype can become a source of tension in families. In other words, the linking of men to family leadership and family leadership to earning money can make things tricky when husband and wife contribute equally to household finances. It can get even trickier if a wife earns more or if a husband does not earn income at all. For many couples, these kinds of issues do arise, especially if a couple believes in a model of family relationships that designates men as leaders. Even if they don't hold to such a model, couples still have to negotiate personal and cultural expectations about who earns money and what that means for a relationship.

Insights from Scripture

The guestions for Christian couples are not just "What does culture reflect or value?" or "What works for us?" but rather, "What insights and guidance can the Bible offer us for negotiating these matters and handling finances in a responsible way?" The Bible has a lot to say about money. It reminds us to be generous (Luke 12:33); it warns us against greed (1 Timothy 6:10) and against taking bribes (Psalm 15:15); and it repeatedly calls us to avoid overvaluing money by making it more important than anything else (Mark 10:25; Luke 12:19-21). The Bible also offers us clear instruction about work, calling on us to avoid laziness (Proverbs 10:4; 12-24) and to work to support ourselves and our families (1 Timothy 5:8). A number of verses emphasize the fact that a willingness to work is clearly a very important character trait. It should be noted too that Scripture never says that one has to work for wages in order to prove that one is not lazy. Honest unpaid labor (for example, most household chores) is never singled out as different from, or less valuable than, paid labor.

We would also be hard pressed to find biblical passages that prescribe how men and women, or husbands and wives, should work. Indeed, people represented in the Bible were largely farm families in which every able bodied person contributed to the family welfare in one way or another. Moses was a shepherd; his wife

[IN THE BIBLE] HONEST UNPAID LABOR (FOR EXAMPLE, MOST HOUSEHOLD CHORES) IS NEVER SINGLED OUT AS DIFFERENT FROM, OR LESS VALUABLE THAN, PAID LABOR.

Tziporah tended her father's sheep. Rebekah, the wife of Abraham's son Isaac, tended flocks and watered camels. Ruth, David's great-grandmother, famously gleaned in the fields to support herself and her widowed mother-in-law (Ruth 2:1-6). In other words, biblical accounts show both men and women working.

Proverbs 31, the much quoted passage on the "Virtuous Woman," also sheds some important light on the matter of gender and work. The passage offers an extensive description of a woman who buys and sells merchandise and property (31:14-16), sews her own clothes (19, 24), cooks for a household (15), gives to the poor (20), and plans for the family's financial future (21, 27). To top it all off, she's extremely well dressed (22). There's no mistaking that this is a working woman, and the chapter emphasizes the importance of everything she does. I once heard a commentator note jokingly that when the husband of this woman is finally mentioned in the passage, he's not working; he's sitting down chatting! (Proverbs 31: 23). Kidding aside, it is clear that the woman's diligence, wisdom, business sense, and kindness help to support husband, family, employees, and needy people outside her household. The Proverbs 31 woman is building and leaving a great legacy. It's also worth noting that this isn't a depiction of a particular woman; it's a portrait of an ideal type.

In other words, the passage offers a general model of how a woman of virtue would act. Scholars have also noted that in the Hebrew this passage is an acrostic: it's arranged so that it's easier to memorize. Some suggest that that indicates a desire on the part of the author, who is inspired by God, to have people take special note of the passage.

Proverbs 31 therefore shows us a woman doing all kinds of work on a large and small scale while supporting her family and others. It says nothing about a requirement to restrict her earning potential. It says nothing about the work that a husband in such a household would do. In light of the passage, then, it appears to be quite difficult to defend a position that married women are obliged not to work out of some kind of deference to their husbands.

If, then, the Bible calls all of us to avoid laziness and handle money carefully, regardless of our gender, and if a significant passage of Scripture (Proverbs 31) depicts a household in which a woman manages financial affairs and supervises the earning of household income, then it would seem that the cultural cliché that men are required to be the only or even the main "breadwinners" in a household is at odds with scriptural teaching. Proverbs 31 gives strong support to the notion that wives can, and indeed should, use their energy and talents to help support their families in whatever way they can.

Questions to Consider

In a previous article in this series, I described two common models that are often used to frame gender roles within marriage. The first, the "complementarian" model, sees marriage as the union of people with different roles and responsibilities. In this model "husbands hold positions of authority and primary responsibility within the family, although that authority manifests itself mainly in sacrificial love." As I noted before, "believers in the complementarian model hold that these different roles (husband as primary decision-maker and final authority; wives as essential and important helpers who inform but ultimately defer to that authority) are God-ordained from before the

Fall." (For more on gender roles and family leadership see the article "Following the Leader" in *New Identity Magazine*, Issue 22)

Although the kind of work men should do is not specifically prescribed anywhere in the Bible, men's work often correlates with their leadership position in this model of married life: they often are the primary or sole breadwinners in their families. But that is not inevitable. Ultimately, even couples who choose the complementarian model for their relationship must decide whether or not a man's status as leader requires work outside the home, or precludes a woman's work outside the home. Can a man lead only if he is the sole or primary breadwinner? Is a woman's working outside her home somehow a threat to that leadership? Those are some of the questions "complementarian" couples need to work through. The Proverbs 31 passage discussed above would suggest that the answer to the second question is "no," but the cultural expectation that men be providers might lead some to conclude otherwise.

The egalitarian model of marriage, in which there is no designated leader or head, and both husband and wife contribute to family life according to the couple's inclinations and talents, is perhaps the more common model within Christian families and in the culture at large. Although the question of leadership doesn't seem to be as important here, practically speaking, because American culture links money to social status, the spouse who earns more money can be seen to have more say in decisions. For these couples, one question that arises is quite simply, "Does higher income equal de facto leadership in a relationship?" Indeed, significant differences in income could disturb the whole notion of total equality on which this egalitarian model rests. Therefore, couples who embrace this model have choices to make about how each spouse's earnings could affect their roles at home. Furthermore, since the egalitarian model doesn't necessarily require that women work outside the home to contribute to the couple's well-being, there's nothing to prevent avowedly egalitarian couples from dividing up labor traditionally with the wife working at home and the husband being the primary wage earner. The question then becomes how to maintain that sense

of equal value and equal status when each spouse's financial contribution to the family is significantly different. A couple in that situation would need to buck the cultural trend that privileges paid labor outside the home over unpaid labor within it.

Living the Life

In our previous article in this series, we heard from married Christians who embraced different models of family life and were living out their decisions day-today. One of the women interviewed, Mandy Myers, described her own consciously complementarian marriage to her husband Ben as one that "didn't fit the stereotypes" of an oppressive, male-dominated marriage, and was instead flourishing and mutually rewarding, with both spouses striving to love, respect, and honor each other in their different roles. Asked about money matters, Mandy noted that she was the one who oversaw the family finances because she had more of the knack and inclination to do so. For their family, Ben's leadership role doesn't preclude Mandy's handling the money matters. The couple has this arrangement even though Mandy works mainly inside her home raising their 3 children, while her husband works outside the home as a writer and professor.

Maureen McGowan, whose 38-year marriage to her husband Winston is probably best described as a mix of the complementarian and egalitarian models, has worked in and outside her home at different stages of her family life. She says she "always planned to be at home" if she had children, "especially during their formative years." She attributes the decision not to a cultural expectation or a religious conviction, but to her own "pretty personal views about how children should be brought up." She adds that another important reason for her choice was that she had seen "some destructive things happen to children because both parents were working." While she says she and her husband never considered the idea of him staying home permanently, she doesn't believe that being at home is solely a wife's responsibility. In her mind, "whoever has the gifting for it, both the willingness and the ability" should stay home with children. Maureen did note, however, that while her status or respect

"SOCIETY CONSIDERS THINGS IN TERMS OF 'ONLYS,' NOT RECOGNIZING THAT YOU HAVE DIFFERENT SKILLS AND DIFFERENT ABILITIES."

within her family didn't diminish because of her decision to stay home, it definitely affected the way people in society saw her. "Society considers things in terms of 'onlys,' not recognizing that you have different skills and different abilities" she notes, "so you're 'only' a housewife [if you stay at home]." Reflecting on changes in attitudes toward stay-at-home mothers, she adds, "in my later years I think people have recognized the value of [staying home to raise children] and have validated me for it."

Hartley Robertson, a husband and father who also leans toward the complementarian model of marriage, believes that couples need not make salary differences a point of contention in marriage. Asked about his view on the matter, he says, "The verse that comes to mind immediately is 'submit yourselves one to another' (Ephesians 5:21), so there has to be mutual submission regardless of who makes more money or who is more educated. I think generally it's easier when the man is making more than the woman because the cultural mindset is that the man should make more money, but if there's mutual submission, if you realize that 'you know what, we're all in this together,' then it can work." Referring to the experiences of close friends, he says, "I know people for whom it's a real problem. I know someone who married a woman who was more educated, so she made way more money. It used to really bother him. But [this person] said because she never talked about the fact that she was making more money, or spent as if she was making more money and just acted like everything was theirs, it worked." Hartley affirms that "the aspect of mutual submission makes the marriage work well regardless of who is making what. In that light, if you keep in mind 1 Corinthians 13, then money should not matter. Of course, that's in a perfect world, [but] if you go in on the principle of what love is, if you think of what love

is, and you submit to one another, then you should be OK. You're building a life together so it doesn't matter if you bring in \$5 dollars and I bring in \$20 because we're all in this together."

Some Conclusions

Negotiating the cultural expectations surrounding gender, work, and finances is not always easy, but as we've heard from these Christians who are dealing with these very questions, it is not impossible either. Many Christian couples can and do manage to minimize the possible sources of contention about this aspect of their finances. A few things seem to be crucial to their success. Here are just a few of those:

1. Seeking God's guidance on the proper use of money.

Money is a key aspect of life, whether or not we're married. If we are striving to live well as Christians, we can and should seek God's guidance through prayer, reading Scripture, and asking trusted Christian friends and mentors for advice. Instead of depending on our own wisdom, or just doing things the way we feel like it at the moment, Scripture calls us to make decisions carefully, always in the light of God's word. Things should be no different when it comes to money matters.

2. Valuing unpaid domestic work.

Whether we embrace the complementarian view of male leadership in households, or the egalitarian view that there is no designated leader, we need to value all the necessary unpaid work that supports a household, whether that work is done by a husband or a wife.

How much is it worth to have a clean, safe place to return to at the end of the day? How much is it worth to have the kids cared for and kept safe? How much is it worth to have someone oversee finances and pay bills? Many people—most of them women—do that kind of necessary, invaluable work day in and day out and receive neither pay nor thanks. Love calls us to respect those kinds of contributions, if for no other reason than that they make it possible and easier to work outside a home.

3. Refusing to attach personal value to income.

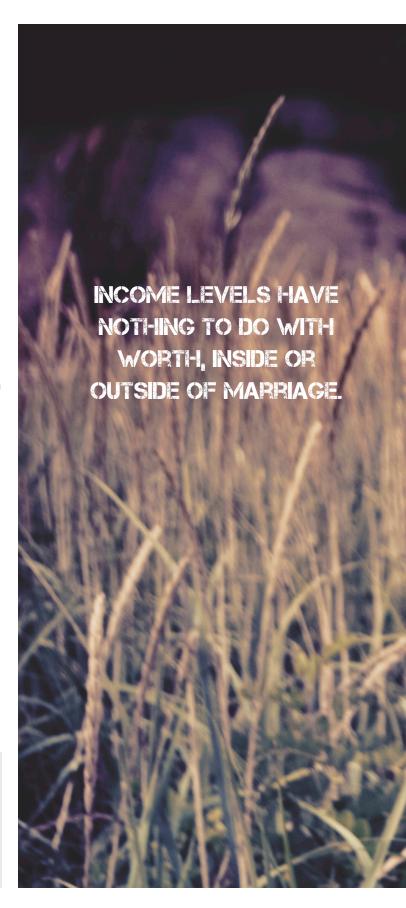
In Matthew 10:29, Jesus reassures the disciples that they are precious in God's sight. In John 3, Jesus also teaches that we are so precious that God sent his only son to die as punishment for sins. That's how much each of us is worth. In light of those truths, we can and should see ourselves and each other as far more valuable than our pay stubs say we are. Whether we make \$1 a day, \$7.50 an hour, or \$500,000 a year, we are precious in God's sight. Income levels have nothing to do with worth, inside or outside of marriage.

Finally, as you consider these money matters in relation to questions of gender and family life, take time to reflect not only on what the Bible teaches about money, but also about love—God's love for us and the ways that we are called to love each other. Feel free to ask for guidance in handling this and all the other matters that make up our daily lives. Pray for wisdom as you make choices. God hears our prayers and promises to provide the answers and guidance we need.



DÉLICE WILLIAMS

Délice Williams holds a Ph.D. in English and has taught literature and writing at both the high school and college levels. She is an active member of her beloved Nazarene congregation, where she serves as Director of Children's Ministries and often chips in with writing and design work for church publications. She seeks to be salt and light in suburban Washington, DC.





The Att of Suffering

On personal pain and large scale suffering

by AARON D. CONLEY

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Over the past several years I've started learning from the wisdom of people who have suffered and weathered some of the roughest storms of life. These people come from backgrounds different from my own. This wisdom has brought new sets of questions for me about the nature of pain and suffering and the place of God in all of that. My understanding and experience of the liberating work of God has matured as I've gained a deeper sense of how the cross and resurrection relate to suffering in me and in those around me.

I grew up believing that to suffer was central to my identity as a Christian. After all, the Bible told me so. I knew all the verses about God not giving me more than I would be able to handle and about how I am supposed to rejoice in suffering because it produces endurance and makes me strong. I knew that Jesus called his disciples to take up their crosses to follow him and that I'd be blessed for suffering on his account. I even knew a little bit of the history of the earliest Christian martyrs who stood firm in their faith in the face of torture and execution. Ultimately, I thought suffering was a test brought to me by God just as God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac.

I welcomed opportunities to take up my cross because I thought that it would make me a better Christian. All throughout high school I thought I was suffering when I didn't get invited to parties or when I got up early once a year to pray around a flag pole. I put myself in these situations with zeal. But what I didn't realize was that it was a privilege "to choose" to suffer in these ways,

which, while uncomfortable, were not really suffering at all. Worst of all, since my idea of suffering was so small, I lacked empathy for my friends who were going through deaths in their family, generational poverty, and racial discrimination.

I am not sure if I missed something or if it was never taught, but I never made the connection between actual pain and suffering and the type of self-inflicted martyr-complex I developed in my youth. So when I sat with my close friend after his mom passed away from an aggressive form of cancer, or when my own marriage came to the brink of collapse, I didn't know how to relate these experiences to the biblical and theological traditions about suffering.

Similarly, I didn't know how to respond when another friend told me he abandoned God shortly after he almost lost his wife and first child during his wife's labor and delivery. The image I had of suffering wasn't big enough to account properly for painful experiences that we didn't actively seek. So I sat silently in the full knowledge that no cookie-cutter church answer could absolve his pain.

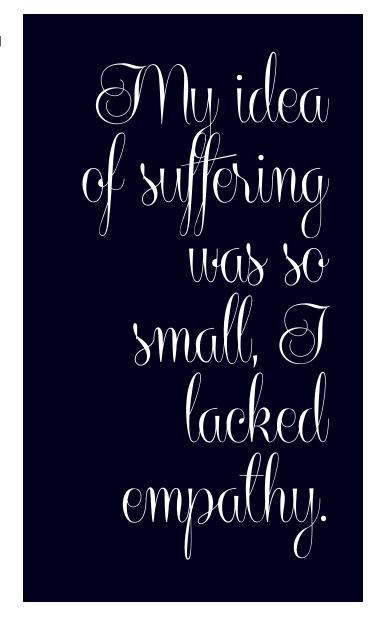
Yet in the midst of all this suffering subtext came a fundamental misunderstanding of suffering generally and of Jesus and God specifically. Nobody likes to go through hard times, but when hardships do come, this misunderstanding of suffering may be why some people end up leaving the church or walking away from God. I see this now when people tell others who are grieving their circumstances things like, "It is God's



will," or "God is testing you." While trying to bring comfort, such words bite deeply into fresh wounds and communicate a theology of a disinterested God at best or of a sadistic God. In effect, those that say God directly brings pain to one's life, make God out to be the author of evil. And with such thinking, then God's goodness quickly goes out the window. We know that God is not evil, as Psalm 100:5 says, "For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations." But how do we reconcile these opposing perspectives and truly help one another in the face of pain and suffering?

Learning to listen to and be with others who are suffering helped expand the narrow category of suffering I held in my youth. Learning that not all suffering is the same and that there are differences between types of pain helped broaden my understanding. I grew immensely from the writings of Womanist ethicist Emilie M. Townes, like her book A Troubling in My Soul (Orbis Books, 1993). In this book, Townes talks about suffering from the perspective of her own experiences as a black woman within the United States. She recounts a history of oppression and marginalization that she and her community have endured. She rejects the theology that claims God brought slavery, segregation, and their fallouts "for a reason." What kind of a God would inflict those horrors on a covenanted community? These horrors are the result of a real evil, to be sure, but an evil that comes from a dominant society whose values and institutions promote a life-denying ideology.

As I understand Townes, the God who heard the cry of the Israelites in Egypt and who delivered them from their oppression is not a God with some poorly designed plot to run generations of people into the ground. This is a God who hears our cries and brings liberation. What is more, God's work through Jesus is the supreme act of justice, which fully demonstrates God's victory over evil. With Jesus' victory, the Christian community is liberated to find wholeness. This wholeness is referred to as living in the "New Jerusalem," and it is directly aimed at the here and now on both personal and community levels with respect to our individual spirits and the church in society.

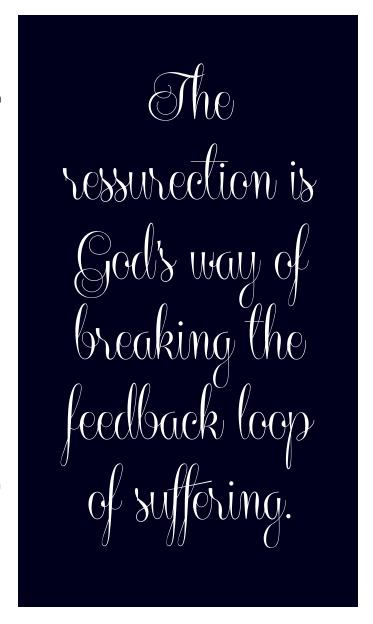


But freedom from the forms of oppression experienced by the Israelites or by blacks in the United States required people partnering with God actually to do something about their conditions. However reluctant Moses may have been, he still went to Pharaoh, and the Israelites uprooted themselves from their deplorable, albeit familiar, predictability of life by venturing out into the desert. On both accounts, it took courage: courage to leave Egypt and courage in the midst of their suffering to trust that God had not left them and that God would transform them out of their suffering.

But for most of us with more privileged backgrounds who have never known this kind of oppression, we still experience the chaos of broken families, drug addictions, illnesses, and death. I may concede that God worked out the liberation of the Israelites but then doubt that this same liberation applies to me. After all, the wounds are open, the sting is unbearable, and I can't catch my breath. Townes responds to the rift between large and small scale liberation with a helpful distinction between pain and suffering. Drawing from writer and activist Audrey Lourde, Townes notes that pain is inevitable and everyone experiences it. While pain is real, it is dynamic, meaning that it moves and changes. The dynamic aspect of pain allows us to move through the stages of grief, for example, and is what can move us towards change, growth, and transformation when a person courageously passes through it.

Suffering, on the other hand, is stagnant. It is "unmetabolized" pain. Suffering is pain that has gotten stuck in a feedback loop of sorts and never moves towards transformation or wholeness. It is reactive and life draining and, short of outright despair, one's only tactic for survival simply is to endure it. Suffering often leads to oppression on the level of the Israelites in Egypt during those four hundred years, and oppression is sinful in every respect because through it some people are excluded from the privileges and wholeness of life.

Emilie Townes goes on to explain that her community historically experienced, and continues to experience, oppression and suffering as a result of the dominant White ideologies and racialized social policies. But the reality of Jesus' resurrection provides a way out from accepting suffering as the way it is or the way it is supposed to be. The resurrection is God's way of breaking the feedback loop of suffering. By courageously partnering with God, the possibility becomes open to move beyond suffering to pain and renewal. "The resurrection is God's breaking into history," Townes proclaims, "to transform suffering into wholeness—to move the person from victim to change agent."



In the face of personal pain and large scale suffering and oppression in society, Christians are given the gift of the resurrection. This gift tells Christians that death does not have the final word, even in the worst of circumstances. The resurrection is the culmination of so many stories of pain and suffering occurring throughout the Hebrew scriptures. Like Noah's rainbow, it is a promise that wholeness is possible, even though the floodwaters keep the land hidden.

Two language translations are helpful to better understand wholeness. In Hebrew, *tamim* is the word we most often render in English as "wholeness." The

word refers to something brought to completion—to be whole was to be complete, without impairment, and without defect. To be whole is to be repaired so that you lack nothing, and what needs repair other than something that is broken? Move over now and look at the Latin word salvus, from which we get our word "salvation." Salvus is the act of mending something that's been broken, much like we would put an antibiotic salve on an open wound before putting on a bandage. Christian promises of salvation, then, are more than merely the pie in the sky that you get to eat after you die. Christian promises of salvation are for the real healing of real wounds.

Christian salvation is something we participate in for ourselves, for our fellow sisters and brothers, and for the rest of the broken world. This is where theologian lames Cone's voice added to my understanding of pain, suffering, and Christian life. Cone's most recent book is called *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. In it, he brings Christians in the U.S. face to face with the theological significance of our nation's lynching trees as a symbol of Jesus' death on a Roman cross. In the first century, Romans reserved the punishment of crucifixions for threatening and deeply political crimes. The cross was an instrument of fear and terror and was employed symbolically to control the population by continually reminding everyone who held the locus of power. The lynching tree served almost the exact same function in our society as over 5000 men, women, and children were strung up on trees between 1890 and the 1920s alone. After the civil war and the abolition of slavery, "God-fearing" whites, primarily in the South, used lynching to remind blacks that whites were still in control. For over a half-century, blacks lived in the shadow of the lynching tree. To live in the shadow of the cross, as the Romans intended, or the lynching tree really was to live in a world where people were not allowed to be whole. Jesus' death on that intimidating Roman cross and our claim of his resurrection transform the symbol. What was once a symbol of frightening death, has now become a symbol of freedom.

When I first read through this book I kept asking myself, "Why did Cone and members of his Christian community remain people of faith, and why didn't

they just leave the entire religion of their former slave-holders behind?" After all, it is reported that whites would interrupt their Sunday morning church service to participate in a lynching, only to resume their service after the lynching was over. I sat with these questions for a long time until I realized how deeply embedded the very questions are in my thin understanding of suffering.

How might we as Christians better face up to pain and suffering as a total body of Christ? How can we rejoice in our sufferings as Romans 12:12 instructs when I get to enjoy society's many privileges at the expense of others? Part of an answer comes by learning how to see the interrelationships between how I live my life and how others live theirs. For me, it required learning to sit at the feet of marginalized people before I found true empathy. It required a new understanding of a God who walks alongside the downtrodden and works things towards liberation and wholeness because there is suffering, not by using suffering.

Cone expresses that it was not an option for him and his black Christian community in rural Arkansas to give up hope in a God who promised to deliver the church from oppression. Cone's theology is such that God is the God of the oppressed, and that means that God is fighting on his behalf to make things whole again. Such assurance brings the necessary splinter of hope. And when this splinter of hope finds the support of an empathetic community willing to walk towards wholeness, we are empowered to move towards transformation. Then, with this transformation, we join back in with others and continually work to realize what it truly means to live in the New Jerusalem.

AARON D. CONLEY

Aaron is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Regis University in Denver, Colorado. He recently published his first book, We Are Who We Think We Were: Christian History and Christian Ethics, with Fortress Press. He and his wife, Kelly and their two boys spend as much time as possible enjoying the outdoors in the Rocky Mountains.





What is my worth? What is my value? I think these are questions that every person has asked himself or herself at one time or another. I grew up with this idea that everything that was ever given to me had to be earned. I used to have such a difficult time receiving things from people. I remember how awkward birthday parties felt as a kid. I used to hate being the center of attention growing up. Subconsciously, I never really felt worthy of people's time or money, let alone God's love and grace. It felt like I had to earn it and prove I was good enough.

I believed that if anyone really got to know me, they would quickly realize that I didn't deserve their gift, their friendship, or whatever else. It wasn't like I was out committing debauchery, robbing people, or murdering puppies. I even grew up in a good Christian family, with parents that would always try to force me to go to church. I used to hate church.

Still, I grew up pretty sheltered. I wasn't even exposed to porn until I was 17 years old. I still remember that day a friend from my football team approached naïve, oblivious, teenage me and handed me that DVD and told me, "Dude. Go home. Watch this. It's going to rock your world." Even worse, I didn't even know what a virgin was until later that same year. I just had this feeling since a young age of dirtiness and unworthiness that I just couldn't shake off. It haunted me, and I was reminded of it every time someone tried to express some kind of kindness or generousness towards me.

I GREW UP WITH THIS IDEA THAT EVERYTHING THAT WAS EVER GIVEN TO ME HAD TO BE EARNED.

Personally, I believe value is connected to identity. You need to know who you are. I really believe that you really don't know who you are, until you know who Jesus is. Jesus said if you lose your life, you find it (Matt. 10). I never quite understood that growing up, but I have come to realize that if you lose yourself in Jesus and keep a clear perspective of who he is, you won't ever forget who you are.

1 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." I go to a church called Bethel Church in Redding, California, which is an amazing community I'm proud to call home. Our pastor, Bill, once said, "The blood of Jesus actually changes our history into his story." I love that. His forgiveness and grace actually changes our past.

It's a truth that took me awhile to learn. When I graduated from high school I decided to do a little bit of community college. I decided to major in accounting, but I dropped out after a year and got a job at Target, living the dream, working the early morning shift from 4am to 12pm.

IF YOU LOSE YOURSELF IN JESUS AND KEEP A CLEAR PERSPECTIVE OF WHO HE IS, YOU WON'T EVER FORGET WHO YOU ARE.

One day, I remember coming home from work, exhausted, and I awkwardly sprawled myself over my bed, when out of nowhere I heard a voice. The voice itself was powerful and strong, both fearful and loving—the kind of voice you would hear from your dad. This was unusual for me, hearing God so audibly. It sounded so real to the point I believed someone was in the room with me. It said, "Israel, my grace doesn't excuse you. My grace enables you." That was it.

My goal isn't to convince you this voice was real or any of that, but to this day I believe it was God speaking. I didn't understand what I heard right away, but as time passed, I became obsessed with this thing called grace. I had to understand it.

As I explored this idea of grace, I began to realize that grace isn't just some ideology, philosophy, or doctrine. Grace is a person. It is so easy to abuse a system or set of rules. It is much more difficult to abuse a person or relationship. Author and Minister Jack Hayford once said, "Grace is God coming to man at their greatest point of need in the person of Jesus." That is beautiful and possibly the best description of grace I have ever heard.

I still remember when I first met that person. I was 13 years old, just making that awkward transition into a teenager. That day is forever embedded in my mind. I was home watching my 3-year-old brother when my mom came home, asking where he was. I was in my room, playing video games or something like that, and wasn't sure where he was. Great big brother, I know.

We looked everywhere but couldn't find him. We were starting to panic and began thinking the worst. I went outside and noticed my dog Raffles—yes that really was his name—was barking hysterically, tugging on his

chain, wanting to be loosed. I let him go and he rushed to the back of the house where our neighbor kept his horses.

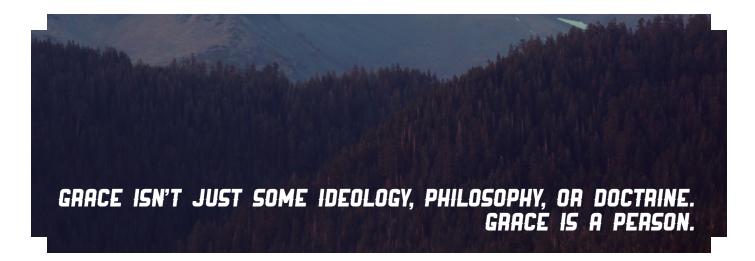
I ran right behind him until he finally stopped. I'll never forget what I saw. Lying in a massive puddle of blood was my little brother. I forced myself through the barbed wire, as it was cutting at my skin, and rushed to him, chasing away the horses that were around him.

I turned his body over onto my lap so his face was facing mine. That image is engraved in my mind. His skull was crushed in and he was barely breathing. Children should never have to experience that type of horror.

We rushed him to Harbor View Hospital in Seattle, Washington. I remember hearing the doctor talking with my parents, saying, "Mr. and Mrs. Ledesma. I want to be honest with you. Your son is in critical condition and is being rushed into surgery. Just be prepared for the worst."

I remember walking away down the hallway that lead to the cafeteria, angry with myself and angry with God. I kept walking. Then I stopped, leaned against the wall, and slid down to sit. The pain was so unbearable. I wanted it to be me, not him.

As I sat there, tears streaming down my face, I had a conversation with a God I wasn't even sure existed. I don't believe you really make deals with God, but I was only a kid. I sat there and said, "God, if you are real, please save him. If you save him, I promise I'll give you my life." It was strange, but it felt as if someone sat down next to me and put their arm around me. Love and hope filled me. In that moment, amidst this tragedy, I knew God loved my brother and that he



loved me. People can tell you, "Hey. God loves you." That's great and all, but it's completely different when God himself tells you he loves you; same words, different lips. The first is a fact, and the second is revelation.

I was gone for a while. When I got back, I saw the doctor talking with my parents. He explained that the surgery went amazingly well and that my brother would be out in two days. Two days! Not weeks or months. To this very day he remembers everything. He is completely normal and does everything a kid should be able to do. The kid's a living miracle.

By no means am I saying that God allowed something horrible to happen to my brother in order to grab my attention; we just happen to live in a world where bad things happen. But, amidst my pain, God reached out. I met the person of Jesus and my life was changed.

I didn't live a perfect life from that point on. I still made mistakes—so many mistakes that I would wonder if I was even saved. But when grace approaches you, you become transformed from the inside. First comes an internal change, which later turns into an external change. Religion simply cares about the external, and I hate religion.

It is vital that we as followers and ambassadors of Jesus understand what and who grace is. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of your

works, lest anyone should boast." Did you catch that? Grace is a gift. When you come down to it and see it for what it is, you begin to realize that the essence of our belief system is based on a gift.

The thing with a gift is that it ceases being a gift the moment the person who received the gift attempts to pay back the person who gave the gift. It is then no longer a gift, but a debt. Romans 4:4 says, 'Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace, but debt." The New Living Translation says, "When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned."

There is no "paying back." There is no "working for." There is no "earning" when it comes to grace. I believe that when we try to get what we already have by grace through our own efforts, we voluntarily put ourselves under the power of the law.

Still, there are so many people who don't realize that grace is a free gift. Some have this mentality that they need to first work on themselves before they approach God and ask him in. They say things like, "Don't worry. I'll come to God eventually. I just need to work on myself. I need to do my part," and God is just like, "Your part? Your only part is trusting me. Your only part is depending on me, leaning on me, resting in me. You have no other part."

I have a friend from Florida who raises horses. Weird, I know. Alligators I get, but horses? Weird. One day

he explained to me how he had a young colt who was stubborn and simply wouldn't pull the yoke that was placed on him. He just wouldn't budge. But when they decided put a much larger horse—who ended up taking up most of the burden—next to the colt, the colt decided to move alongside him.

We were not created to try to work for love, but, rather, from love. In Matthew 11:28-29, Jesus says, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you...and you will find rest for your souls." Our only job is resting in him and receiving the gift he wants to give. There is no effort.

Without an idea of what grace is, people can go their whole lives trying to earn God's love and burn out, never coming close. That, or they can live a ridiculous life expecting God to forgive them every single time Sunday rolls around. He does forgive every time, but there's more to grace than that. I believe Paul says it best in Romans 11:6 when he said, "And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace."

I must admit I still don't completely understand this idea of grace, but when I think of it, I think of an avalanche. I find avalanches so intriguing. If you could go onto my YouTube account and see my suggested videos based on my viewing history, you would find videos of lions versus hyenas, puppies, Ellen, and avalanches.

The thing with an avalanche is that there really is no escaping it once you get caught up in it. Avalanches can reach speeds up to 80 mph in as little as five seconds. Ephesians 1:7-8 says, "...the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us..." That word lavished means to bestow profusely. Profusely means abundantly, never lacking, always enough. Grace is like an avalanche that sweeps you away. The truth is that if you would just allow yourself to get caught up in his grace, you would go further than you could ever go on your own.

You might be reading this, thinking, "That's great and all, but you don't understand what kind of life I have lived. My life is just too screwed up. I'm nowhere near perfect. I'm just a hot mess." That doesn't matter.

WE WERE NOT CREATED TO TRY TO WORK FOR LOVE, BUT, RATHER, FROM LOVE.

Colossians 3:3 says, "You are dead and your life is hidden in Christ..." In other words, when God sees you, he sees Jesus because your life is now hidden in Jesus, and Jesus is perfect, therefore God sees you as perfect. The Bible is clear that where sin abounds, grace abounds even more (Romans 5).

The scandalous truth about grace is the belief that a perfect God would die for flawed humans. C.S. Lewis once said that the death of Jesus on the cross was completely perfect and completely humble. Perfect because he was God. Humble because he became a man. No one else could do what he did with his perfect sacrifice.

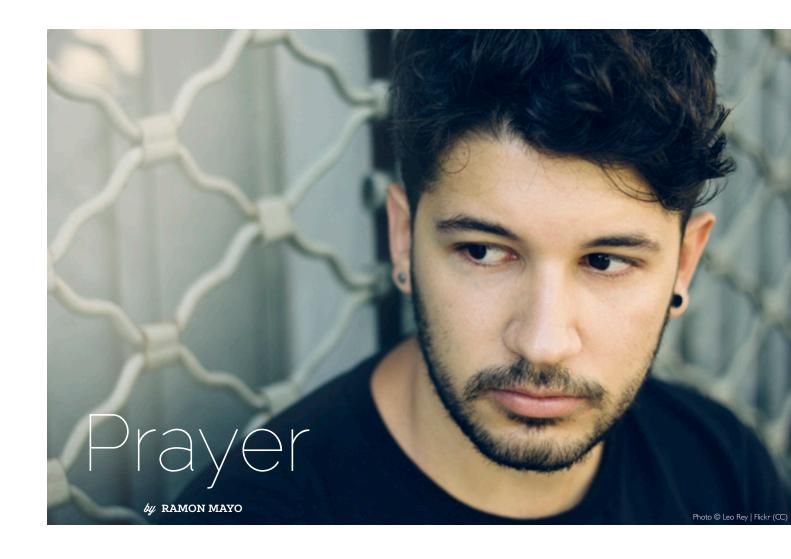
As I mentioned earlier, grace doesn't excuse you, but enables you. It empowers you to live the life you couldn't live on your own through works. Don't get me wrong, works are important, but we no longer do works to be saved. Rather, we do them because we are saved. I believe that when we embrace this avalanche called grace, we don't just get empowered to do what we can't do on our own, we get what we don't deserve too, the best gift possible—we get Jesus.





ISRAEL LEDESMA

Israel is a graduate of Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry at Bethel Church in Redding, CA and just recently finished an internship with the ministry Jesus Culture. He is currently finishing his B.A in Pastoral Studies from Simpson University in Redding, CA, where he also resides. His passion is to advance the Kingdom through the local church and see the name of Jesus made famous.



What is prayer? People from the beginning of time have prayed. Although it involves accessing the supernatural, it is one of the most natural things that we as humans can do. All religions advocate it in some form or another. Some have defined prayer as simply "talking to God." I can agree with that statement, but the biblical picture of prayer takes it one step further.

When it comes to the Bible's portrait of prayer, the narrative of the scriptures gives us another perspective. Prayer is not only talking to God, but it is also hearing God talk back. In other words, prayer is a conversation. A more visual analogy is that prayer is a two way street. We do not just talk to God in a monologue;

Prayer is not only talking to God, but it is also hearing God talk back.

Prayer to God is intimate communication. It is a back and forth between creature and Creator.

prayer is not a one-way conversation. Prayer is also being silent before God and listening for his voice. We can say that prayer is a two way street because on one side our petitions and our problems go to God, and on the other side his answers and guidance come to us.

The voice of God that we hear is not necessarily audible, although we do not want to count that out entirely because God works supernaturally and can do the impossible. More often than not, the voice of God comes through the words of Scripture. It is a confirmation, a repetition, or a fuller meaning of what God has already spoken in Scripture, applied to a particular individual or community. Even the answers to prayer are just confirmation of what Scripture already says God does, such as heal, provide, forgive, and bless. It's all there. God's voice is sometimes heard through the voices of others. Other times, it is heard through the elements of nature. The one thing that is for certain is that prayer is a reciprocal act.

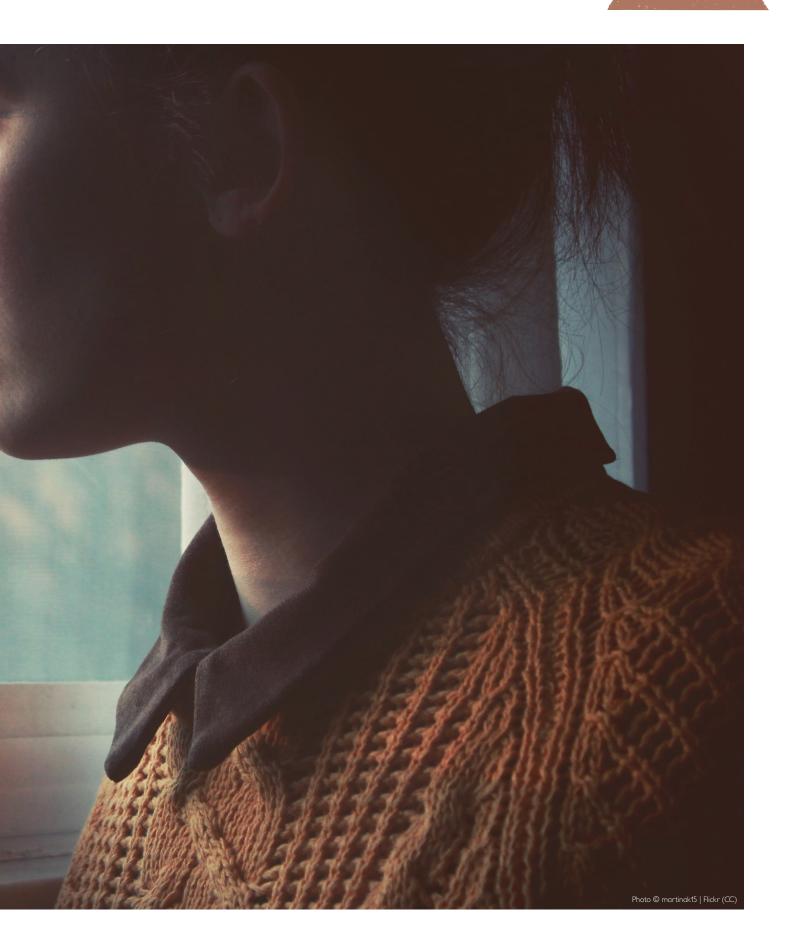
To think of prayer as just talking to God makes prayer out to be the same as shooting words up into the air only to have them meet the ceiling. It is like talking to yourself, and you know what they say about people who do that. But prayer is not an intimate chat with yourself, it is not an unloading of all of your

anxieties and worries. It is the verbal expression of a relationship with the God of the universe. Every relationship is bound together by communication. When this communication is one sided, the relationship eventually dissolves. It is no longer a relationship but an arrangement. This was one of the issues spoken about in the Bible regarding idols. In Psalm 115, the writer says "They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk, nor can they utter a sound with their throats" (Psalm 115:5-7). The psalmist makes a point that these idols are not suited for relationships. They are not alive and therefore cannot respond back. It is different with the God of the Bible. Prayer to him is intimate communication. It is a back and forth between creature and Creator. This is what it means to pray.

RAMON MAYO

Ramon Mayo is an author and speaker. He resides in Matteson, IL with his wife Yvette and his three children Kaydon, Syenna and MercyAnna. He recently published his first book, a Christian Black History Devotional, titled *His Story, Our Story*. You can check it out at Amazon.com. Also check out his blog at RamonMayo.com





few years ago my university put on a weekendlong conference titled When God Seems Silent.
With a title like that, the conference promised
to answer one of the questions nagging me
at that time: is God talking to me even when I
don't hear him? I attended only one session of the
conference because in my hectic college schedule I
couldn't make room for more. Secretly I hoped all my
problems could be solved in this one session. God
honors good intentions, right? God did open my eyes
during that session, but far from solving all of my
problems, he showed me just how little I knew about
God's voice, starting me on a journey of seeking the
Holy Spirit amidst the clutter of my plans.

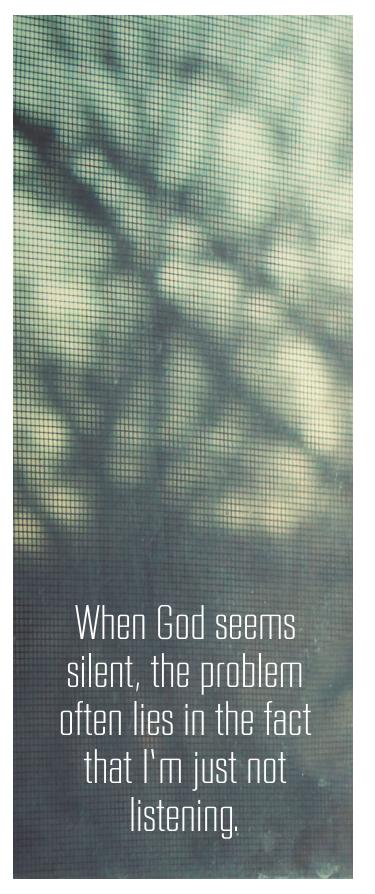
At any given church on any given Sunday, one may hear someone start a conversation with, "I think God is telling me..." or "God spoke to me and said..." For many years this troubled me because I never ever had a moment where God audibly, clearly spoke to me about some pressing decision. Hearing that other people had these moments made me incredibly doubtful about my salvation, and so for a few years I had a constant fear that I was not really saved or that I was somehow ignoring God, though I begged him to speak. I would pray for the Spirit to guide me, and then I would wait, expecting God to answer in my time, in the half an hour that I gave him before bed. In hindsight, I would call myself arrogant, but then, I could probably say that about myself now. I then began to notice a disconcerting trend. Those people who would

say with such certainty, "God told me to do this," suddenly were either not doing those things anymore, or those endeavors had failed miserably and left them embarrassed and sulky. It was easy for me to cynically write off anyone who claimed to hear God's voice because so often, it seemed like perhaps they were only listening to the promise of wealth and comfort. Yet I knew that Scripture promised that God would answer his people when they called on him, and I also knew that God sent his Spirit to guide us into truth and righteousness, so I began to despair. If the Holy Spirit is supposedly speaking to God's people, why can no one hear him? Why is it that my prayers meet stale, stifling silence? The speaker at the conference pointed out that often, when we can't hear God's voice, the problem might be us and not him.

"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Life demands a lot of us. Our relationships, our jobs, our ministries, etc. all depend on us to give up our time and energy to make those things flourish. God isn't calling us every Monday morning, nagging us to come visit; he isn't throwing us a deadline. Instead he says, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). He asks us to come to him; we have a choice. We aren't robots programmed to love God unconditionally.

We are faced with a challenge: to make God the center and purpose of our lives in a world of demands. God asks us to listen for his voice, and it's no wonder why he chose to speak to Elijah in a "still, small voice" in 1 Kings 19:12-13. He doesn't always shout at us because he wants us to choose to listen, to put other things aside so that all of our focus is towards discerning his will in the specifics of our lives. We have his will for us in general, as communicated in the Bible, which is to make disciples of all nations, to glorify the one true God, to serve no other gods, to love our neighbors as ourselves, etc., but sometimes we need to figure out how those general plans fit the specifics of our lives. Hearing God's voice is part of how we relate to him, but in those moments of uncertainty, quieting ourselves becomes even more important.

When God seems silent, the problem often lies in the fact that I'm just not listening. I do not have the time, or the patience, or the emotional energy left to "be still" and wait for him to speak. And I don't think I'm alone in that. Sometimes it seems like God is making things more difficult than they should be. If he would just be clear to me, I would do what he wants! But God desires steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6). Certainly there are sacrifices we must make when we give our lives to God, but the point is, God desires those sacrifices to come from our love and devotion for him, not out of a desire to manipulate his favor or save ourselves by righteous behavior. God doesn't want the outward signs of obedience if the inward signs of love are not there. Love comes in the moments when we must patiently work out God's designs, when we must wait on the Holy Spirit like a groom waits for his bride at the altar. By setting aside time for God, dwelling with him, seeking his voice, we learn more about him,



God desires [our] sacrifices to come from our love and devotion for him, not out of a desire to manipulate his favor or save ourselves by righteous behavior.

and just as we can love people more as we learn more about them, we can learn to love God more when we listen, which gives a whole new energy to discerning the Spirit's voice versus our own.

I spent years arguing with myself over my voice versus the Spirit's voice. At the conference, I learned another mind-blowing, but slightly unnerving, concept about the Holy Spirit's voice: if it doesn't contradict Scripture, it doesn't always matter if it's your voice or his. This might be a bit difficult to grasp (I know it was, and still, is for me), but basically it comes down to the fact that the word of God is our ultimate authority. If we ask for guidance, and we aren't sure that the feelings or thoughts we have are of God or of our own desires, our first line of defense is Scripture. Does it contradict anything in God's word as communicated through the Bible? Further, does it distort anything in God's word? Certainly, the enemy encourages our doubts sometimes, and those thoughts can sometimes seem like they are from the Holy Spirit, but we must trust that anything false will be revealed when we go to our refuge of the Bible. After all, God sent his Spirit to lead us into all truth (In. 16:13), and God's word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our paths (Ps. 119:105). The Holy Spirit is God, something explained in the doctrine of the Trinity, which holds that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one, and that they are of the same essence while performing different functions. Thus, the Holy Spirit

is not something we can use, manipulate, or ignore. He breathes life into believers, guiding us into truth, reminding us of our promised salvation, and dwelling within us, interceding for us in our prayers. He is with us, and we can trust him completely, but because he lives in us, it may be difficult to separate his influence from our own thought.

Ultimately, we may never know with absolute certainty that we have heard the voice of the Spirit versus our own, but we can know that God will guide our steps if we remain fixed in his word, and he will not let us stray. Like the shepherd who sought the sheep who wandered, God will seek us and return us to the flock if we have truly believed in him. If you don't know where to look, and it doesn't seem like flipping the pages in your Bible is giving you answers, do not despair! Many churches have great resources for answering people's questions, and pastors are usually very willing to meet with people who want to look further into God's word. Seeking help from others is nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed about because God gave us community so that we could encourage one another to grow! Another great way of navigating through the Bible is to look in a concordance at the back of most bibles, which groups scriptures by themes. This can be helpful if you have questions about what God says about anything from love to behavior.

Even if we can test the thoughts that come to us through Scripture, it still leaves us with those moments when we aren't sure what to look for. God created each person uniquely. He knows each of us, the way we think, feel, and react. The speaker at the conference proposed that God's intimate knowledge of each of his people allowed him to communicate with each person in the way that was best suited for them. My dad calls himself "a numbers guy." His brain processes numbers the way most people process words. He sees patterns in numbers, and he likes to play numbers games with birth dates, which I cannot explain because I don't understand it myself. After my first semester of college, I remember my dad telling me that he felt confirmation from God about sending me to school because of some numbers. He had a lot of misgivings about sending me to college, specifically financial misgivings because he wasn't sure how to afford paying for my schooling while supporting the rest of the family. He was flipping a house at the time (buying a house, fixing it up, and reselling it), and he had decided that whatever he made on the house, he would use to pay for my first semester. The amount he made on that house was the exact amount I needed for that first semester. To him, that was God's way of reminding him, "Hey, I'm the provider here, remember?" God doesn't always speak this way to my dad, and he certainly doesn't always communicate so blatantly, but the point is, God knows that my dad looks at numbers closely, and so for my dad, finding a pattern in those numbers was extremely meaningful in reminding him of something God said in his word, that we need not be anxious about what we will eat or drink because God provides (Matt. 6:25-34). God knows us, and he knows how we think. We don't have to be afraid of messages from unlikely sources, because those things belong to God, and he will certainly use them! We cannot expect him to always use those things, but it may be helpful, as we seek his voice, to look at the things that most connect with us. Even the mundane, everyday routine of our lives can be filled with God's voice.

Sometimes God will be clear with us, and sometimes he will not. Even in moments that feel certain, we need to have an attitude of humility and recognition of our fallibility. This means that even if we feel like God knocked us over the head with his message, we may

Even in moments that feel certain, we need to have an attitude of humility and recognition of our fallibility.

be wrong. We may have distorted his message or misunderstood his meaning. We can move forward in the direction we think he is pointing, but we must be ready for surprises. Rarely has anything turned out exactly as I thought it would in my life, and most of the time, if not always, that is a very good thing. When we seek to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit, when we listen for him, when we tell others about what we hear, we need to remember that God is beyond our full understanding. No one can completely know his ways. Better to say, "I think God is telling me this," than to say, "God said this," unless of course, you are quoting Scripture.

May the Spirit bless you and lead you into all truth. May his words be heard. May you listen with all your heart. May you love him more through the process. Amen.



SARAH MARIANO

Sarah Mariano is an English major at Biola University. She seeks to glorify God by communicating his truths through writing. She also leads worship and works in junior high ministries, hoping to let the Spirit work through her to create disciples. Her interests include baking, tea, good books, and spending time with her family.



I began serving at church at an early age, I believe 12 years old. My parents were both heavily involved in the church when I was growing up. We would go to church whenever the doors were open. We got there early and we left late. My friends were all from church and they are still close friends of mine to this day. Church was the heartbeat of my family's life.

When I grew up and left my home town for California—2000 miles away—I struggled with knowing where to go to church and how to really get involved. I ended up having a season in my life that was completely devoted to personal growth and reflection as I shied away from attending church every sunday, morning and night, and whatever weekday there was a service.

I counted both times in my life as refreshing and ultimately leading to a closer walk with my Savior. Now that I am through with college and into my adult life, I have again moved to a different state and am once again church shopping. It seemed like a great time to do some research on what church is really meant to do, how often I should go, and how involved I should be.

Acts is one of the main books in the Bible that talks about the church. This is where the beginnings of the church are written down. Thanks to Paul, Barnabus, Mark, and so many other missionaries and disciples of Jesus, the church grew in exponential numbers during this time in history. The whole book of Acts is brimming with stories, miracles, and guidance for the church.

The church is actually a community of people, not a building or an obligation.

One of the most important things about Acts and the following books of Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and Thessalonians is that each "church" was labeled according to their locale. For example, the church of Corinth referred to every believer in the city of Corinth. So the easy part is knowing that the church is actually a community of people, not a building or an obligation.

Now to the hard part: what is the church supposed to do, and what is your personal role in it? This part is an easy answer and is repeated throughout Scripture, but it is a difficult application. 1 Corinthians is one of the best studies on how the church should act. Paul is adamant that their church should not have divisions (1 Cor. 1:10-17). Unfortunately, that is one of the biggest problems with the modern church. As one part of a large body, your individual role should be to make peace. Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt. 5:9). Paul says that working together as one unit is the best aspect of the church. Knowing that you all have the Spirit of the Lord is what makes you kindred and should overcome any divisions within the church. This is a hard concept to fully practice, but it is what a church ought to look like.

1 Corinthians 12 is devoted purely to each individual's part of the church. Paul acknowledges that each

person, each family, and even each neighborhood may have some strengths and some weaknesses, but each person brings to the table something that was not there before. It is important to bring whatever you have to the church. Even if you are only good at painting your nails, that can be useful for some kind of ministry at your church. Your weakness will be offset by someone else's strength. This give and take, generosity, and community is a very important part of the church.

Now what about too much involvement in the church? This becomes a huge issue for pastors and teachers. I have been at that point before as a burned out church goer, and it is draining. In Galatians 6:9, Paul tells us to not grow weary in doing good, and we must always remember a key part of the Old Testament is to rest. Not only did God give us an example in the creation story where he rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2-3), but there is a constant reminder in the stories of Noah, Abraham, Joshua, Jacob, and the history of Israel that rest is important. That is why there are little things called "sabbaticals" that teachers often take and that some churches infuse into their systems. I recently visited a church whose head pastor was about to take a 3 month sabbatical to recharge and come back with a refreshed mind and heart. Know that even if you play a vital role in your church, you should not forgo resting from it from time to time.

In hindsight, after all my research, I found out why the hyper-involved season and the isolation season of my life were both refreshing and good for me. God calls us to be a part of our community and to love and respect one another, but he also enjoys our personal journeys with him. Either way, time spent with the Lord and with his people is a valuable and important activity that we should continuously be a part of.



JESSICA DUNCAN

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Of all of the words in the English language, the word freedom is one that may be the most open to interpretation. Freedom is often identified by a defining word placed in front of it: political freedom, religious freedom, personal freedom, etc. In these contexts, freedom deals with the concept of an expression of belief that is not restricted or controlled by anyone else. Or, as Webster's Dictionary explains in its first definition: "the absence of necessity, coercion or restraint in choice or action."

Freedom is often mentioned as a goal, even by opposing sides of the same issue. In America, freedom in regards to religion is a stated goal for those that practice a faith (freedom of religion) and those that do not consider themselves believers (freedom from religion). Freedom of religion comes from the belief that one should be able to put their beliefs into action with the utmost conviction. Those who don't subscribe to a certain faith see this freedom in a different light; to them, religious freedom is the ability to follow their convictions without another's belief system imposed upon them.

When looking at the scriptures on the topic of freedom, there are multiple examples using the words free, freedom, and even freely to describe an action. It is with this concept of freedom that we truly notice the context of the Old and New Testaments. The context where freedom is used in the Old Testament is very much literal. Much of the early recorded existence of the people of Israel throughout the books of Genesis and Exodus, they were enslaved by the kingdom of Egypt. To be a slave in this context was to the have every freedom taken from you: freedom to choose your living, your family, your home, and even your own state of mind. Moses, an unassuming leader, was chosen by God to help make good on delivering the Jewish people away from slavery to freedom in a land of their own. It is important to make a distinction here that the concept of being a slave in biblical times is not always the same. Most slaves in biblical times were workers that were indebted to someone and had no way of repaying except with their own labor. Once they paid their debt, they were released from their status as slave and were once again free. But sometimes, as was the case of the Israelites in Egypt,

"Freedom was a slippery thing for the new church, hard for the new believers to grasp and understand."

slavery took a turn for the worse, and reflected more of our horrific present-day slavery where people are taken unwillingly from their homeland, away from families, to the other side of the world to be used as property. It's good to recognize the context and type of slavery in each Bible passage and understand that the meaning of slavery can be notably different from one chapter to the next.

The concept of both slavery and freedom in the New Testament is more spiritual in nature. There was still literal slavery during the beginning of the Christian Era, but the words of many of the writers of the New Testament reflect freedom from behavior that would get in the way of true happiness. These behaviors at the time included, for example, literal idolatry, the worshipping of false gods and beliefs. This is similar to the things that many in the world today place in high regard, such as loving material

possessions more than loving our fellow human beings. Jesus spoke of this spiritual freedom many times in the gospels. In one instance, when he is referring to the Son, he is talking about himself, the one that delivers freedom from a life filled with instability by providing a spiritual home in him. "I tell you most solemnly that anyone who chooses a life of sin is trapped in a dead-end life and is, in fact, a slave. A slave is a transient, who can't come and go at will. The Son, though, has an established position, the run of the house. So if the Son sets you free, you are free through and through" (John 8:34-36 The Message). In the years after Jesus' time on Earth, the apostle Paul went throughout most of the known world at the time to share the Good News of Christ. He knew that the language of freedom and its opposite, slavery, was a clear way to help others understand the liberating power of a relationship in Christ. "Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you" (Galatians 5:1 The Message).

Rev. Kelly Chripszuk believes that the people that were forming this new church as followers of Christ related to this comparison because during the years following the time of Christ's earthly ministry, slavery and the freedom from it was a reality for everyone. Chripszuk says that "Freedom was a slippery thing for the new church, hard for the new believers to grasp and understand. Jewish converts in particular struggled with what freedom meant, having been required to follow strict laws in all matters of their lives such as circumcision of their newborn sons, eating only kosher foods, etc. A lot of the arguments in the New Testament were over the nature of Christian freedom (as they continue to be today)."

Probably the most evident example of the freedom found in Christ and the forgiveness that allows that freedom is the parable of the prodigal son. In this story, Jesus explains in very plain terms how the acceptance of his grace can provide the stability and

Freedom is the ability make our own choices; it is when we seek God that we have the freedom to make better ones.

the comfort in good times and bad that cannot be found on our own.

Jesus starts with the story of a son that sounds like any modern teenager. "Then he said, 'There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, "Father, I want right now what's coming to me." So the father divided the property between them. It wasn't long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had" (Luke 15:11-13 *The Message*).

It becomes clear that after the son has discovered that having all that money could buy and the freedom to answer to no one, he realized that it is not all that it seems to be. He decides to go back to his father broke and broken, with nothing to his name, only asking to be a worker for him and not as his son. His father does not see someone who can earn his good graces because it would be impossible to do so. But he welcomes him back fully and gives him more than he deserves. "But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up

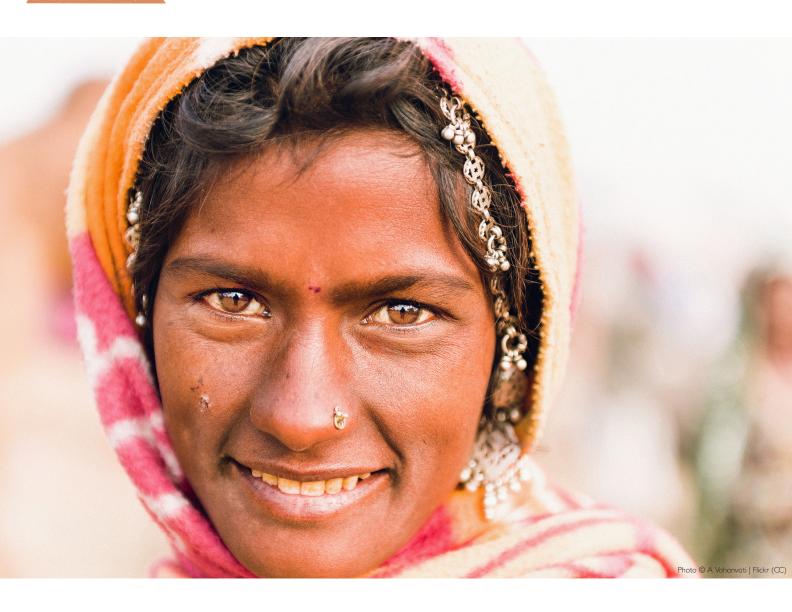
for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time'' (Luke 15:22-24 *The Message*).

As mentioned earlier, the concept of freedom is an idea that many people with different backgrounds seek and agree is a goal, even though the reality of freedom may manifest itself differently according to each situation. Rev. Chripszuk adds, "In my opinion, freedom is a fairly terrifying state for humans, particularly if we don't believe in (know with certainty) God's love for us, that we can trust God and that grace prevails over all. So, even when we get free, we automatically seek to attach to something else, even if it's just nice ideas about God or good behavior or a certain church or teacher we like." Freedom is the ability make our own choices; it is when we seek God that we have the freedom to make better ones.



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JOSHUA PROJECT

Partnering in prayer to reach the unreached

by Cailin Henson

oshua Project was created in 1995 to bring information about ethnic people groups of the world with the fewest followers of Christ to the public attention. Those behind Joshua Project believed it was important to understand which peoples were unreached to have the clearest perspective of the Great Commission and the task remaining, in order

to fulfill it. Christ says in Matthew 24:14 (NLT), "And the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it; and then the end will come." There's been much speculation about what "all nations" means, but many scholars believe that "all nations" are all the global people groups differentiated by ethnicity, language or culture.

"And the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it; and then the end will come" Matthew 24:14 (NLT).

Joshua Project collects and shares information about the different people groups of the world and the work efforts of different missions organizations tied to them. Joshua Project works hard to keep the data accurate and up to date. Among the people groups identified, there is a subgroup considered "Unreached" which means that less than 2% are Evangelical Christians and less than 5% identify themselves as a follower of the Christian religion in any form. This identification helps focus Gospel efforts towards those who are the least-reached.

Today, Joshua Project is ever expanding on the methods they use to bring the information about global people groups to the public. Joshua Project recently published a mobile app available for both iPhone and Android. The app, called "Unreached of the Day", shares information about a different unreached people group each day and encourages those who use the app to join in prayer with other believers around the world for the expansion of the Kingdom of God. You can download the app in the App Store or in the Google Play store.

In addition to praying for unreached people groups, you can also take a step further by learning more about a specific people group and sharing your passion for them with others, equipping your church by connecting with missionaries who are serving elsewhere, financially supporting a missionary or church planting effort, and also by interacting with people of different people groups in your own city, such as international students. There are so many way to be involved in reaching the unreached but the best first step is prayer.

For more information please visit Joshuaproject.net









HUNNILITY IS A SEED OF GRATITUDE, AND GRATITUDE GROWS JOY.

'm just going to say it: Thanksgiving doesn't get nearly the credit it deserves. It doesn't have the flashy colors and bling of Christmas. It doesn't have the sex appeal of Valentines Day or the explosive "In your face, America!" attitude of Independence Day. Nope. Thanksgiving is a humble holiday, dressed in neutral tones and turkeys.

But you know what? I like that about Thanksgiving. I like it because humility is a seed of gratitude, and gratitude grows joy, which, for a secular holiday, is pretty darn spiritual—don't you think? Maybe Thanksgiving Day is meaningful to you, or maybe it's little more than a vague, first-grade recollection of Englishmen, Native Americans, and—what was that boat's name, again? Somewhere along the way, the godliness of gratitude seemed to get smothered with gravy as the holiday became increasingly celebrated as secular. But, like many holidays, Thanksgiving was born of spiritual meaning in the church and immigrated to America.

As the story goes, in November 1621, just over 100 English Puritans and Separatist (groups who, for different reasons, opposed the practices and beliefs of the Church of England) anchored their journey from England to America. This was no easy boat cruise, however. The crew and shipmates spent two months blowing and tossing about the icy Atlantic in the rickety Mayflower. When they finally ported, instead of a warm, sandy beach, they were greeted by the rocky,

barren coastline of a New England winter. Within five months, half of the settlers died of starvation, cold, and disease. In spite of their loss and their ongoing hardships in the new land, they still recognized their blessings and gave thanks for their first year's harvest.

Maybe you, like the pilgrims, have experienced losses as dark and desolate as a New England winter. Do you feel much like being thankful this holiday season? This year, my family said goodbye to three family members taken by cancer. Among them was my grandmother, who learned last Thanksgiving season she had 6 months to live. I always knew my grandma as a thankful person, and—especially during those last months—nearly every labored breath was a praise.

How could the pilgrims and my grandma have the capacity for gratitude when their circumstances just plain . . . well, stunk? Because they took to heart the words of 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In *everything* give thanks, for this is the will of God in Jesus for you" (emphasis mine). That first American Thanksgiving wasn't spontaneous. It wasn't even traditional. Setting aside time for gratitude was a routine of the Puritan lifestyle.

In the early 16th century, the Church of England broke from the Catholic Church and its large calendar of holidays, which required people to attend church and pay for expensive celebrations. The reform reduced the number of church holidays from 95 to 27, but some



Puritans still weren't satisfied, wanting to withdraw from all imposed celebrations. The holidays were replaced with special days of fasting and thanksgiving in response to what the Puritans viewed as special acts from the hand of God: unexpected disasters or threats called for fasting, while special blessings called for days of thanksgiving. In everything, they acknowledged God.

The Bible is filled with similar stories. In Genesis, Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery out of jealousy of their father's favoritism. By God's grace, protection, and provision, Joseph is favored again, this time by the Pharaoh he serves. He rises to a place of power, with which he saves his land from death by famine. "What you meant for evil," he tells his brothers when they reunite decades later, "God meant for good" (50:20). Years of abandonment, slavery, and imprisonment suddenly had meaning and purpose. Joseph recognized this, because in everything he, too, acknowledged God.

Practicing intentional gratitude reframes the way we see our circumstances. It heightens our awareness of God's presence and, thanks-upon-thanks, is a declaration of trust in our faith journeys. And, how cool is this: it physiologically remaps your brain toward grateful behavior, meaning the more grateful you are the more grateful you become.

As you look back on your year through a lens of gratitude, what circumstances transform from bad to good—maybe even to great? How have you grown personally, professionally, relationally, spiritually? Can you start to make out the edges of purpose and meaning? This holiday season, don't wait for the turkey and the pumpkin pie to reflect and say thanks. Thanksqiving starts now.

LINDSEY A. FREDERICK

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CONTINUOUS THANKSGIVING TIPS

Count your blessings. Start small. Every night, write one blessing you experienced, or one thing you are grateful for that day.

Write a note. Each month or week, pick one person to write a note or email of thanks. Even better, give them a call or tell them in person.

Train your taste buds. I bet every time you eat a turkey sandwich you think of Thanksgiving. So instead of just thinking about the holiday, take that first savory bite to voice something for which you're grateful. I know it's not polite to talk with food in your mouth, but this time it's OK. (Plus, it's a game your kids will love!)

Take a picture. Take pictures of things that make you happy and post them on a Thanksgiving Pinterest board or make your own evolving photo collage on a cork board.

Be a good student. The Bible is full of passages on gratitude. Take a few weeks to create your own Thanksgiving Bible study.

Challenge yourself. Read Ann Voskamp's 1000 Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are and take the 1000 Gifts challenge.





Your Spheres of Influence and The Gifts You Take into Them

by Nicholas Sowell

've always believed I was born with big dreams in my heart. I'm sure some were accumulated along the way, but large aspirations and dreams have always seemed to be present within me. It's these dreams and lofty goals that I feel make up part of who and what I'm called to be. I was in Christian radio by 16 (shortly after feeling called to ministry), hosting my own radio show by 18, owning my own company by 19, and in full time ministry at the same age. Am I proud of my accomplishments? Yes. But I don't throw these things out so I can be patted on the back; I list these things because they've been both my calling and my career for many years. It's important to distinguish between the two, because they can be very different. A calling is something you're called to, you feel passionate about, you love doing, and that brings you life. A career can be the same thing, though many times isn't. A career is how you make a living or, rather, the vehicle by which you're able to continue walking out your calling.

While I have a hunger to run after my passions, I've also stopped to equip myself in helping others achieve theirs. This led me to training in this arena, and ultimately certifications in "dream coaching" and "life coaching." I've been a dream and life coach for over three years now and love it. I've seen people step into the destinies they'd always dreamed for themselves

The things that bring you joy and bring life, even if they're outside of the church, are many times the Lord's doing.

but didn't know how to make possible. This, on several occasions, has also led to a career change for them as well. It's important to note that how you view the passions you carry and the dreams you have will significantly alter whether you steward them or bury them. Many times we view the dreams we have as worldly or secular. Many are not aware it could be possible to have a dream in the business world or media world that is as important as preaching behind a pulpit or doing mission work overseas. Jesus says we were made in God's image, carrying a temple of both flesh and spirit. We were made in both aspects. For those of us who have received Jesus, we carry the presence of the Holy Spirit inside of us. This presence of God, the one and only, can be manifested through us in every possible way and in every possible realm of influence. What does this mean for us as Christians? It means, as the Bible says in Colossians 3:23, "Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people." We are both spirit and flesh as humans, carrying both a divine and earthly nature. Everything we do, we do as a spiritual act because we are spiritual beings. This means as long as we do something in Jesus' name, it can be an act of worship. Washing dishes, raking leaves, or taking a walk can be an act of worship if our hearts are on him and we are doing it in his name.

There's a very popular book called *The 7 Mountains* of *Influence* by Bronwyn O'Brien. The message of the book is that in order to change the world, there are seven mountains of influence that God wants to

permeate: Arts & Entertainment, Business, Education, Family, Government, Media, and Religion. The main idea here is that each one of us is called to a specific mountain, or several of these specific mountains, to bring influence. The idea I believe God wants us to get is that the passions we carry, even the one's we've thought are worldly or not Godly, often times are Godly. If you have a passion to be a professional basketball player, a stay at home mom, or the world's greatest plumber, these are all passions God has very likely placed within you to walk out. The things that bring you joy and bring life, even if they're outside of the church, are many times the Lord's doing. God hasn't called everyone to serve in the church or stand behind a pulpit. God has called us all to be ministers in every sphere of influence for his glory and kingdom! Understand that you are called to a specific mountain of influence, so the question isn't whether or not what you're passionate about is of God; the question is, how can I use this passion I have for God?

If we understand that our careers and our callings can both be used to bring Godly love and change to different spheres of influence, whether your career and calling coincide is irrelevant. Yes, it would be ideal for them to be one in the same, but all of us don't get the opportunity to have them be the same. For example, when I moved to Texas to take a job as a young adults pastor, it was only part time. I knew I was called to speak to the 20 and 30 year olds of my generation, but the church couldn't afford to bring me on full time. I knew God had called me directly to serve in that

capacity, but I wouldn't be able to do it and fully pay my bills as well. So, I got a part time job cleaning pools in the sweltering heat of summer and the frigid cold of winter. I dodged dog poo as I entered back yards, pulled out dead animals as I'd come across them, and often times run into snakes or scorpions. Did I enjoy my job? No. But I counted the cost of the Gospel and the people group God called me to. I knew that the sacrifice would be well worth the outcome of God's presence and fruit in their lives. It was a season of being in a career that wasn't life giving to me, but it was for a calling that made it worth it. The difference is that when you have a heart posture that says yes to the career God places in front of you, there will come a time when the cost you paid in that career sees your calling become a reality. It is good to dream, and putting together steps to help your calling become your career is ideal. Start planning now on how that could become a reality. There is both a time to dream and a time to be responsible. Most often, you'll have to walk out the "responsible" to make your dream become a reality. When is it good to dream and when is it good to be responsible? Your own well being and needs come before your dreams, and, if you have a family or children, that comes before your dreams as well. However, if you plan well enough and your dream is intentionally made a priority, it is extremely possible to do both. If your work can't be your calling, be sure to make time for the things you are passionate about.

Callings and careers, though different, can be one. Should your calling be your career? I think if it can be done, then emphatically, yes! A pastor once told me, "If you can find something you love to do, are good at, and can make money at—that is the sweet trifecta." Many times we have to have a career in order for us to finance our callings; sometimes, however, we don't. If you can make a career in the very thing you're called to influence and bring God into, going to your job or career every morning would be quite a life giving and enjoyable experience. One character from the Bible who started out with a different career and calling is that of David. Growing up, his career was as a sheepherder, but the destiny and calling over his life was to be a king. The career helped mold his maturity, develop him, and help him become a loving, humble king. Once he eventually became king, it's important to If your work can't be your calling, be sure to make time for the things you are passionate about.

realize that his career and calling became one. Ruling as king became his career as well as his calling. For Jesus, his career never merged into his calling. For over thirty years Jesus was trained to be a carpenter, born into the family business. It's most likely that anyone who knew him in Nazareth probably knew him as a carpenter. This was his background and training, but it never coincided with his calling. It's possible to do both, and it's possible your career and calling never coincide. Either way, it's important to have both in your life, to understand a healthy balance of both, and to seriously consider how to make your calling a reality. It might be that your career is the vehicle by which the calling becomes accomplished, and it might be that what you love to do also becomes your career. The most important part of it all, as Colossians says, is to "do it unto the Lord."



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