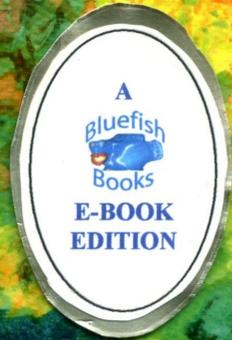


*Seasons
Along
the Way*

Book Three of *Along the Way*

by Barbara White



Barbara White



SEASONS ALONG THE WAY



Barbara G. White

**John W. Cowart,
Enditor**



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About The Author



Award winning newspaper columnist Barbara White, of Jacksonville, Florida, lives in a retirement community where she continues part of her Christian service in prayer and by visiting paralyzed stroke victims in a near-by nursing home.

Her popular column profiles her own humble walk with Christ.

For over 15 years at the *Florida Times-Union*, Barbara wrote a personal account of her spiritual journey. Thousands of readers followed her column, *Along The Way*.

"I write about trying to live the Christian life and failing and trying again," she said.

"God loves us just as we are — and too much to let us stay that way".

This book is the third in a series of Barbara White's *Along The Way* columns to be published by Bluefish Books. — jwc

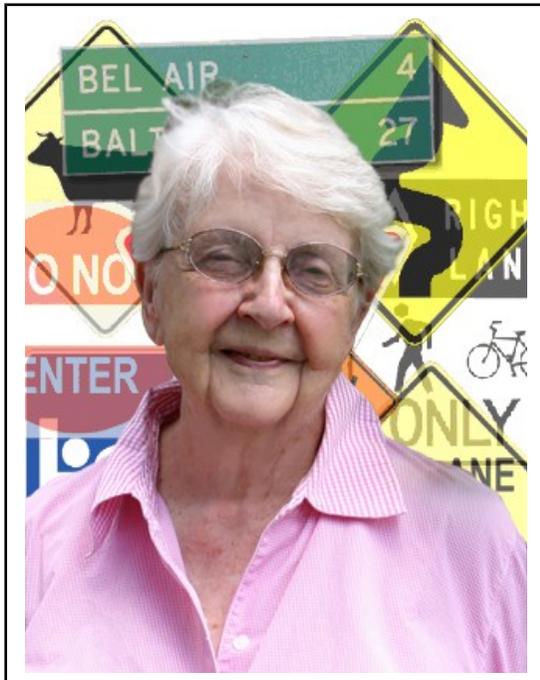
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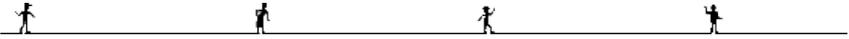
**To
my family
&**

To the Many Readers

**Who over the years have traveled with me along
the way.**

**You have helped me to see the road signs —
and to avoid at least some of the potholes.**





Introduction

By Barbara White



I started writing articles for the Religion page of The *Florida Times-Union* newspaper in the spring of 1978. They were published weekly, with a few breaks, until I retired in 1994.

I had been employed by the *Jacksonville Journal* in 1969 to produce a weekly magazine section called *Action*. It was to be for teenagers and I recruited high school students to be the writers. I wrote everything they didn't.

In addition to that I was later asked to fill the part the *Journal's* weekly Religion page that wasn't filled by church ads. Nothing personal, I was told, just news stories.

The *Journal* was the afternoon paper put out by the Florida Publishing Company, which still runs the *Times-Union*. When the company ceased production of the *Journal*, we staff members were merged into the staff of the *Times-Union*.

There was already a religion writer there, so I tried to insert myself as a columnist. It worked.

The timing for the column was important to me because I had only recently gone from being a member of a church, with intellectual interests in things religious, to being a follower of One who called Himself the Way with interests in how you actually did that, what it looked like, felt like and worked out in daily life.

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It wasn't exactly what you would expect to find in a secular newspaper. It wasn't exactly what I had expected to do. But it was what I did. It is, I suppose, a kind of diary of my journey along the process of becoming. It may speak to you on your own journey Along The Way.

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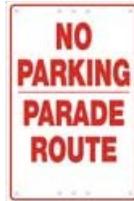
**The Lord Knoweth The Way
Of The Righteous
But
The Way Of The Ungodly
Shall**



The road sign said, CAUTION — WET CEMENT



SEASONS ALONG THE WAY



Palm Sunday¹

If I had been there that day nearly 2,000 years ago, that day when Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem, would I have joined the shouting throngs?

Would I have walked with the crowd or stood back to watch the parade go past — or would I have stayed safely inside and not have watched at all?

It's a silly question. I can answer anything I like and no one can refute me. I am not there.

Or am I?

¹ For 15 years award-winning journalist Barbara White wrote *Along The Way*, a weekly column for the *Florida Times-Union* newspaper, chronicling her personal spiritual journey — 15 Easters, 15 Mothers' Days, 15 Thanksgivings, 15 Advents, 15 Lents, 15 Fourth of Julys, etc.

Each column was to be read as a stand-alone piece, therefore they retain a timeless quality.

This book collects samples of these outstanding columns related to various holiday seasons as well as a generous sample of columns related to the fun, faith and frustrations Mrs. White experienced in her daily adventures *Along The Way*. —jwc

Along The Way



The parade began on Palm Sunday and continues in other ways today. We either walk with Him, watch the crowd go by or turn our backs on the whole question.

I can understand those who turn away. What nonsense it all seems — a person who is both God and man and whose death and resurrection would usher in a kingdom and a reign known only by faith. How impossible to believe. If I stay away, I won't have to make the decision of following or watching.

I can identify, too, with those who stood on the sidelines and watched. Stepping out in public, walking where everyone can see, with nothing left to hide behind — well, it could be very embarrassing.

If I stand on the side, I might be able to look like I'm in the parade to those who are walking, like a watcher to those who are watching, and not have to commit myself.

I could follow, like those who wanted an earthly kingdom, in hopes I would be safe from all enemies.

At least, with an earthly kingdom, I wouldn't have to rely so much on faith. I could see where I'm going and have much more control over my own destiny.

None of those who walked behind the Lord on that original Palm Sunday knew what it really meant, not even the disciples who were closest to Jesus.

We can't blame them too much.

The event which would make their understanding possible had not yet happened.

From this side of Easter and Pentecost, it would be foolish to make harsh judgments on those who

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knew something was afoot, but didn't know what. There are still persons like that.

I was one of them, but am no longer. I made my choice and make it new each day.

Basically I am a walker.

As the name of this column says, I am going along the way.

I know the Lord whom I follow. Sometimes I take my eyes off of the figure ahead and go a step or two aside, but He calls those who are His back to the journey.

So I sing Hosannah in my heart.



A Year-Long Easter

Tomorrow is Easter!

Tomorrow I will celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Do I really believe he died for my sins?

Do I really believe he was raised from the dead?

Do I really believe his resurrection makes any difference in my life?

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Is any of it true? Or is it only a story expressing the hope that somewhere, somehow there might be something or Someone able to make a difference?

There was a time when I believed, and then a time when I simply wasn't sure — which means I didn't really believe — and now again a time of belief, of faith.

After I heard God say he loved me, back when I was 14, and I joined the church, I believed everything I was told. I remember attending sunrise services at the old fort in St. Augustine, watching the day break and believing.

But as I grew older, I grew wiser — I thought — and I ceased to be sure what I believed. I wanted to know, to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was true, but I didn't know how to do that.

I had lost my ability to believe because the source of truth had been taken away. Those who taught me said no one knew for sure and man had to do the best he could with limited knowledge to understand what God was trying to say to us.

I don't remember any more exactly how I felt about Easter during those years before I began to know God himself, not just know about him. But I remember the longing to believe that I carried around in my heart, a longing like a deer longs for water.

I spoke to a men's group earlier this month, the first time I have spoken to a group of all men. I talked about God's desire and ability to reveal himself to us.

I shared that early encounter with God. I told them I didn't know how he did it, how he spoke the words "I love you." I just knew he did.



And I heard words, too. He did not simply bath me in warmth and leave me to figure out what the warmth meant.

But, I told them, I did not hear anything else. Just that one sentence. For years and years and years. And I didn't know anyone else who heard him, either.

It never dawned on me that he was talking to me through the Bible. That thought simply never crossed my mind. The Bible was a collection of different kinds of literature, such as poetry, history, parable and teachings. And while the writers were very probably deeply impressed with their visions of God, they certainly weren't speaking the words of God himself.

In an earlier, simpler time, many people believed God spoke through the Bible, just as I did when I was a child. But of course we put aside childish things when we grow older, don't we. We learn too much and are far too well educated now to accept such things any more.

And I found I could no longer turn to the Bible for anything more than vague inspiration. And even then I had to try to interpret that inspiration according to the best wisdom of men that I could find.

So, for many years I struggled to determine the best path to follow. I read all sorts of good books written by learned men. I thought they could help me discover who God was and what he wanted me to do.

But I no longer read the Good Book.

Although I learned a lot *about* God that way, I did not get to know him. And I no longer knew what to believe.

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Oh, I knew people who *said* they knew him and knew what to believe. I thought they were mostly narrow-minded and a bit strange.

Well, maybe some of them were, but some of us "intelligent, broad-minded" folk were a little strange, too.

The truth is, I think I was afraid to admit God still speaks to people today. If I believed God was speaking to me, I would have to pay attention to what he said. And other people might laugh at me.

I knew no peace and no joy.

But finally the God who had professed his love to me at 14 demanded that I choose between him and the world.

Finally I understood that for me it was going to have to be a package deal. The only way I was going to know God was through believing what the Bible said about him and the only way I was going to believe in the Bible was through believing what God said about it.

Since then I have gone quietly and stubbornly on my way, trying to live by that circular pattern of belief.

Now that I again hear my Lord speak, now that I know that what he said in the past is true for today and tomorrow as well, all of life is different. I know the most incredible kind of freedom imaginable. I understand that it doesn't look like freedom from the other side, but it is.

And I'm no longer afraid that science will discover something that proves it's all a mistake. Now if science turns up something that doesn't jibe with

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what God says, I will wait expectantly for science to turn up something else that will.

For the hope I have today is not a faint hope, but a living hope, made strong by the revelation of God himself through his word. I believe that the God I know raised Jesus Christ from the dead. And can raise me, too.

Now I know peace and joy. Especially at Easter.

For I know the prayer at the end of the Epistle to the Hebrews is for me, too.

"May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."



Thanksgiving At Grandma's

This year my house was grandmother's house. You know, as in "over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house we go."

This year the family, four generations worth, came to my house for Thanksgiving dinner. (The baby didn't eat any turkey, of course, but he was there.)

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It was a beautiful day in every way. And I loved every minute of it — not just the dinner itself, but everything — from getting up early enough to put the turkey in the oven by 6:30 to standing in the kitchen when it was over, scrubbing out the pan in which it had baked.

To prepare my house for visitors, I cleaned and polished, threw out things that needed to be thrown out and brought in good things to take their places. Not just "in general," but very specifically, I made ready for their arrival.

All of that — for one day.

But it was worth all the work — having those I love in my home.

Christmas is the day chosen to remind us of the birth of Jesus, of the fact that God became man and dwelt among-us.

What kind of preparations do I make for that?

How do I make my world ready for the birth of Emmanuel, God with us, make my life ready to receive Him?

Before Thanksgiving, I looked around and took stock of what had to be done to the house and what I had to bring in for the dinner.

As I dusted and swept, chopped and stirred, I found great pleasure in the simple actions. Washing up and putting away were just more of the same.

But the next day the house was quiet, dust began to settle again on the polished surfaces, and I noticed areas missed altogether in the flurry of preparations.

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My family came and stayed for an hour or two — and went away. When I clean and sweep my house I know it will be dusty again.

When I look at my life, to find what I must throw out and what bring in to make it ready for Jesus' coming, I know that if I start now and "clean" all day every day, I won't be "ready" for Christmas.

But He came as a helpless baby. He lived among us as one of us and He knows about dust — and worse — in houses and lives.

So I will begin my preparations, because when He is invited in to live, not just to visit, He helps with the cleaning. And after all, I only have to make it as clean as a stable to start with.



Hours Thinking

One day recently I spent about five hours thinking about how thankful I am to God. That was the focus of a quiet day I attended.

We thought about the goodness of God in creation and salvation. We thanked Him for making the world and us, for knowing us, loving us, saving us and changing us.

The attitude of thankfulness is one of the major characteristics of the committed Christian. He knows why he is giving thanks.

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As a matter of fact, according to Christian writer Watchman Nee, thanksgiving is a key to knowing whether or not a person has been converted.

If a person knows that his sins are forgiven and that he has received the Holy Spirit, how could he not be thankful?

The key, Nee says in *The Normal Christian Life* is that the Christian knows this has **already** happened, not that it is **going** to happen so he does not beseech God, he thanks Him.

One of my companions at the quiet day had never thought of being thankful to God for herself! She has always thought herself unworthy.

How wonderful that the Lord does not think so — and He knows her better than anyone does. He sees all the little hidden things, she has not even faced about herself. He knows that, by herself, she is unworthy.

He knows each of us that way, not only knows us, but loves each of us, as the song says, "just as I am."

But that is not the only wonder.

The real wonder is that, once we accept Him, how we are is not how we were — we die to the way we were and become new!

He knows the wonder of what we will become as He works His will in our lives.

If His death stands between us and judgment — and it does — and His resurrection gives new life — and it does — then His outpouring of the Spirit is in us the power to live that new life — and it is.

It is not going to happen.



It already has.

How thankful my friend and I — and you — can be about that.



Love And Thanksgiving

I was invited to a thanksgiving dinner last Sunday.

The meal was the traditional Thanksgiving Day feast: turkey, oyster dressing, whipped sweet potatoes with pecans, fresh pole beans, congealed cranberry salad, blue-berry muffins and pumpkin chiffon ice-cream pie.

But it was a thanksgiving dinner in another sense as well. All of us there gave thanks to the Lord for each other.

We have a special relationship. The hostess, another woman and I meet once a week for prayer and sharing. The host and two other men do the same. The guest list for the dinner consisted of the members of both small groups, plus a few extras: a spouse, a member of the church, my sister-in-law and the father of one group member, for a total of 10.

That day I was aware of laughter and casual sharing, of fun that was free from any shadow of judgment or condemnation.

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I remember thinking, "If those who think Christians are always sober, serious and long-faced could only see us now."

But I've been doing some more thinking about it since, and I wonder if those onlookers would have been able to feel the deep, abiding peace that made the fun possible. I wonder if they would have sensed the acceptance we had of each other, the joy we felt in being in each other's presence.

For there was Someone else there who made it all possible.

Each of us had asked Jesus to be in our hearts. It was this request that made our fun innocent and filled our joy with peace.

Here and there in the flow of our talk was the name of Jesus, not as a swear word, but as the touchstone of our lives, as the cornerstone of the structure of our friendship.

Psalm 45 says the bride will be brought to her king dressed in cloth of gold, arrayed in beauty. That day we were like that bride of Christ. We were a body of believers, dressed in the joy of His praise and arrayed in His love.

There must be times when the Lord looks at His bride and mourns the splotches and tears of her garments, the lack of love and acceptance among her people.

There has not always been that kind of joy, that kind of love, in my life. Sometimes now I let the world intrude and let cares and problems eat up my joy for a time.

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But it is there. It is real. It is more real than anything I know. It is a fruit of my life in the church.

And I am truly thankful.



A Thanksgiving Prayer

There is a prayer of thanksgiving Episcopalians say at the end of their Holy Communion Service that, if you really think about the words, can challenge the depth of your commitment.

Actually the Prayer Book has a choice of prayers of thanksgiving for use at that point in the service. But the particular one I'm talking about ends with a statement of the person's desire to serve the Lord "with gladness and singleness of heart."

I was reminded of this prayer this week because of my failures to do what it says.

It has seemed that for me singleness of heart, while greatly to be desired, has been hard to come by. My heart divides far too easily. I may be saying all the right words about serving the Lord but I am really trying to make that service meet what I believe are my own needs.

This has been an ongoing struggle. I guess it's good that I'm still struggling and haven't thrown in the towel!

This week, however, I became aware of a different problem — gladness isn't always that easy to maintain, either.

Gladness, like joy, is not the fruit of circumstances. It does not depend on things going

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welt or on life being without pain or problem. It is the response of the heart that knows the good news of God's provision for the salvation of sinners.

And this is not the intellectual kind of *knowing*. It is the sort that involves a response, that affects the way a person lives.

Anyway, I realized suddenly this week that I was in terrible shape. I had to acknowledge there was no gladness in my divided heart.

I was disgusted with myself — promptly adding guilt feelings on top of everything else — but I wallowed in it just the same. I'm obviously beyond help, I thought. I've never achieved singleness of heart so how can I know gladness? And I'm too old to change. Ill just be miserable for the rest of my life.

And there I sat, wallowing, until I turned to the Lord in the clear morning light.

And he reminded me that I can choose to be miserable or I can choose not to be.

But if I choose not to be, I'll have to work at it until the Lord gets the job done.

My work will be to *believe* in Jesus.

Some time ago, the Lord showed me a way to help someone who was feeling rejected and alone. At his leading, I suggested that she think of five specific things God has done for his Chosen People and five specific things he has done for her — to write them down if necessary — and then to read or remember them every time the world seemed about to roll over her like a giant wave.

But she had to choose to do it. She had to make a decision to recall the list or to find the paper on



which it was written. And after that, she had to choose to trust, to rely upon the Lord even when she did not feel his presence or see that he was doing anything in her life.

And that is what I must do, too. I must choose to rehearse what I know to be true about the cradle, the cross and the crown of Jesus of Nazareth — that God became man, that he paid the price for sin and that he established the kingdom in which he reigns today.

How can I have a divided heart when I remember that? How can I be anything but glad! Well, I'm human.

But I am more. I am a child of the Father, through the grace of the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The struggle to remember is not a one-time thing. The need to decide returns to some of us again and again. If you are so inclined, I would appreciate a prayer for God's grace that I might persevere.



My granddaughter Brittany as a Christmas angel

Feast Of The Annunciation

I've been thinking about Mary, the mother of Jesus. Last Wednesday was the Feast of the Annunciation in liturgical calendars. This feast celebrates the angel's announcement to Mary that the

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savior of mankind was to be born into the world — to be born of a woman.

Mary is often held up as an example of obedience to God, and justly so.

There is a companion story. An angel spoke to Joseph in a dream and told him to take Mary into his home and nurture her and the coming child. The angel told Joseph that very unlikely story was true: Mary was being the handmaid of the Lord.

And when Joseph awoke, he did what he was told to do. That's obedience.

Think about it. Mary and Joseph each made an act of obedience in response to the voice of an angel, a messenger from God. And they didn't know — as we do now — how it was all going to turn out. They didn't have anything but this call.

Afterward, they spent the rest of their lives walking out that obedience, living with the results of it.

We have no evidence they received continued communications from God through angels. There is no indication they received constant reassurance and consolation in this way.

Basically, it was more than 30 years before Mary knew the result of her obedience.

If an angel came to me, I'd be obedient. I mean, would you say "no" to an angel?

So as soon as an angel comes, I'll really hop to it.

Unless, of course, I'm so busy doing my own thing, I don't even hear the angel call my name.



My limited experience in obedience tells me that learning to hear an angel's voice takes a bit of doing.

So far, God has not asked anything major of me — other than the surrender of my whole life to Him. And so far the voice in which He has asked has only been my own thought voice.

But one day when a casual friend was in trouble, I responded to that voice and spoke to her, prayed with her, when it would have been easier to ignore the moment and not get involved. That was a little obedience — and the Lord blessed me by letting me see the results instantly. My friend turned again to Him.

Maybe it wasn't much. But maybe it was a great thing. I must not measure by the world's standards.

If sins, little and big ones alike, are sufficient to take us out of God's company, perhaps obedience, little or big, is a way to keep us close. For I do not believe it is possible to be obedient except when our eyes are on Him — as the eye of the servant girl is on her mistress.

Mary's eye was turned to God. Joseph's ear was open to His voice.

What a glorious example of what man and woman can be when they are obedient to their Lord.



Approaching Advent

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Someone else coined the prayer, but I'm afraid I have adopted it: "Oh, Lord, give me patience . . .and give it to me RIGHT NOW."

Our time and God's time are most often not the same. And it is in *His* time that good things happen.

Let me recount a story about patience and God's own good time. It is not my story, but it is a true one.

This friend said she was having trouble with her thoughts during the time she was kneeling, supposedly in prayer, while other members of her Episcopal congregation went up to the altar to receive communion and returned to their seats.

"I used to kneel there, watching people I knew and thinking, 'She really has gained weight,' or 'I can't remember the last time he spoke to anyone.'"

She realized, she said, that those were not the kind of thoughts she really wanted to be having — "especially at that time."

"So I decided to keep my eyes closed. That way I couldn't see anybody and wouldn't think of them at all! And then I could spend my time in prayer,"

This worked, for a while, she said, but was discarded when she realized that ignoring her fellow Christians was not right, either. Jesus would not want her to close out the world, even by shutting her eyes, she said.

"So I started keeping my eyes open, purposefully watching people come and go — and praying for them, thanking God for them."

What does this have to do with patience?

"Don't think that was three Sunday's worth of time," she explained. "This took about a year!" But, in

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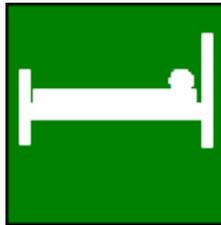
God's own time, by patiently trying and trying again, she learned what He wanted to teach her.

The Messiah came in God's own time: "In the fullness of time" is the phrase used to describe it.

We celebrate the fact of His coming each year in the season of Christmas. But how do we celebrate it?

Little children are often impatient for the day to arrive so they can open their presents. Many adults are impatient for it to come — and go — so burdened are they by the busyness of the season.

With Thanksgiving Day past, the pre-Christmas season is truly upon us. The world will begin keeping track of the number of shopping days. But for some, the coming of Christmas is into their hearts and that takes a different kind of preparation, a preparation in which patience is a primary ingredient, patient waiting upon the coming of the Lord. The season of Advent, which begins soon, is designed to help us not just prepare for Christmas, but to wait patiently for it.



Ready?

Are you ready? Are you ready for Christmas?

Most people who ask this question mean, have you bought all the necessary presents? Have you put up your decorations? Have you mailed Christmas cards?

But I mean, are you ready for Jesus to come into your life?

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I heard an Advent carol last weekend. It was not a Christmas carol about the celebration of the birth of Jesus. It was a carol about getting ready for his coming.

It was sung by the Rev. Peter Pierson and his wife, Mary, to a group of women at a prayer breakfast at All Souls Episcopal Church.

It had been written by a friend of theirs, which made it special to them. I didn't know the man who wrote it, but it became special to me through what he said.

The words are simple:

*Down they came, from Galilee/ Down they came,
through Bethany/ Down they came to Bethlehem/ A
tiny child was born to them/ But for him, there was no
room in the inn.*

*Could it be against the law? Could it be that no
one saw? Could it be that no one cared? Could it be
that no one dared? Or could it be, there was no room
in the inn?*

*So they found a cattle shed/ Joseph made a
manger bed/ Mary let her baby sleep, to the bleating
of the sheep/ In a barn, there was no room in the inn.*

*There he lay, the King of Kings/ Rich in love, but
poor in things/ There he lay, to man unknown/ A tiny
child, God's own true Son/ But for him, there was no
room in the inn.*

*Now he comes to us anew/ Now he comes, what
shall we do? Will we take him at his word? Will we love
him as our Lord? Or will we say, there is no room in
the inn?*

It's a simple, straightforward question.

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Are you ready for it?

What will you do?

Wait. Don't answer yet. Let me be honest with you. This is a trick question.

If you make room in your heart for the infant of Christmas, the next thing you know you will be faced with is making room for the King of Kings. You will face the question of what to do with the One who walks on water, who calms the storm, who raises the dead and who sits at the right hand of God.

But take comfort. He is the same one who sets the captives free, who makes the blind to see and the lame to walk, who will not snuff out a smoldering wick or break a bruised reed, and who knows the condition of our hearts and loves us anyway.

Even so, I know it's scary to think of making room for him. The baby may lie in a manger, but the King will sit on the throne.

But once again — over and over again — the question has been asked.

Are you ready?

Emmanuel is at hand.

Will there be room in the inn?



A Christmas Piece From The 1970s

Along The Way



I hollowed out a place in the living room for the Christmas tree.

"Hollowed out" may seem an exaggerated way to describe moving a chair into the back bedroom, but I emptied a space to make room for something else to come in — and that's hollowing out.

The manger in which Mary and Joseph laid the new born baby may not have been the wooden holder we so often see in crèche sets. As the stable may have been, in part at least, a cave, so the manger may have been a hollowed out rock.

The Christmas tree I bought has a very crooked trunk. Getting it to stay upright in the stand is going to be a real problem. But the outer shape is excellent, so once we have mastered the stand, it should be just right.

I bought the tree at my favorite nursery because they keep them in good condition there, each in its own bucket of water. It is important to me that I get one whose needles will last through the first week in January.

Actually, I don't keep the tree up through the 12 days of Christmas just for religious purposes — although January 6 is when the church traditionally celebrates the coming of the wise men bringing gifts to the infant Jesus. The Feast of Lights or Epiphany, as it is called, the statement that He is the Light to the whole world, the gentile as well as the Jew.

No, I would keep my tree up forever if it could stay fresh and green that long. My living room is totally transformed by the addition of a Christmas tree.

What is so special about a Christmas tree?

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Perhaps it's the ornaments. Many of mine bring special memories of the persons who made them or the years they were added to the tree. Perhaps it's the smell of the pine, that wonderful, fresh smell of out-of-doors come inside.

Or perhaps it is the lights.

The coming of Christ into the world throws a sharp light on that world, outlining in stark detail all its frailties — but chasing away the darkness and showing the way.

The coming of the Christmas tree transforms my living room. The coming of Jesus transforms my life.

But I had to move enough stuff out of the living room to make room for the tree — and out of my life to make room for Him to come in.



Perfection must wait; Christmas is here

Christmas is almost here!

Sometimes getting everything done on time at Christmas just seems impossible. This year, even the crèche that is usually put in place at the beginning of

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Advent was not set up until this week. Joseph and Mary won't have to be on the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem - from one side of the table to the other - for as long as usual this year.

Small children may find it hard to believe, but Christmas *does* finally come. It comes whether we are ready or not.

And that is good and bad.

It is good because finally the frustrations of trying to get it all done is over and what was not finished is just left undone. Whatever the consequences, the time for getting ready is finally over and we are freed from the pressure of trying to make everything perfect.

It is bad for the same reasons - in reverse. What we most wanted to make perfect, we haven't now time to perfect. It is too late and we must face those consequences.

Every year when I turn from the preparations to the event itself, I am overwhelmed by a combination of tenderness and awe - tenderness at the thought of the young mother in the stable, the husband standing by the baby in the manger: awe at the angels and their message, the star and the fact of Who the baby is.

We celebrate the birth of a baby, a baby born nearly 2,000 years ago. But what enters our hearts and lives now is the mystery of God made man, God loving us so much He came to be one of us, to die for us and to live again that we may live, too.

Jesus came into the world as a baby, but it was as a man that He spoke the words and did the deeds that have changed our lives.

Barbara White



If you nearly close your eyes and look at the Christmas star, you can see a cross within it

On Christmas Eve Good Friday is so close. But then so are Easter and Pentecost.

Have I done enough? Although I've tried, have I done the things I should; not done the things I shouldn't? No, but He has and I rest in Him.

As I stand by the manger scene with the tiny figure of the baby Jesus in my hand. I am filled with joy at the knowledge that I am held even more surely in His hand.



An Early Christmas Gift

My son needs a new clutch on his car, and my daughter must have a root canal.

When I offered to help with the expenses, I told them it would be their Christmas presents.

But I didn't mean it.

A Christmas present shouldn't be just something you need, like dental work or automobile repairs. It should be something wonderful, something that fulfills a dream, assuages a longing, makes the day brighter and gladdens the heart.

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Of course, most of the gifts I give don't come anywhere near that. Most are perfectly ordinary things like clothes or books or popcorn poppers.

If price did not matter, what would I buy my loved ones for Christmas? If I could give them anything I wanted to — anything at all — what would it be? What do I think would fulfill their deepest longings and gladden their hearts?

Right, my son thinks a new car would do it. But it wouldn't. Pretty soon it wouldn't be new anymore and he'd want something else.

What is the perfect Christmas gift? The one that satisfies forever and is always new?

God thought the perfect gift for mankind was Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of John says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

God gave his son. He made a gift of Jesus Christ to us. We celebrate Christmas because it stands for the day when the perfect gift arrived.

I accepted the gift of a Savior when I was only 14. I knew even-then that I needed a Savior and I was glad God had provided one for me.

I didn't understand that in accepting the Christmas babe I was also accepting a king. I didn't know much about kings and I didn't really like the little I knew, so I just ignored that part.

But I did wonder what kind of a gift I could give God in return for my salvation.

Since I saw the Lord only as a savior, all I could give was my thanks. But it's hard to be always

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thankful, even to one who has saved you from a burning building. You can only say "Thank you" so often and stay sincere.

But through the years, as I pondered the meaning of the cradle in which the figure of the Baby Jesus lay, I was reminded that he also lay upon a cross. And over his head was a sign proclaiming his kingship.

As I acknowledged Jesus as a king, I discovered another gift I could give.

One of our most precious treasures, as Americans, is our liberty. We prize our freedom to do what we want, to go where we want, to say what we want. We guard these freedoms fiercely and feel sorry for those who do not have them.

But while I give a Savior my thanks, I can give this king much more. I can give him freely what he already owns by right of purchase — my liberty, my freedom, my right to go where I want when I want to, to say what I want when I want to, to think what I want when I want to.

We both know I can't do that all the time. We both know I will fail.

But I *want* to do it and he helps, because he wants this, too. He provides me with a brand new life in which I can serve the king.

In First Peter, it says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time."

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Because Jesus was born, I can be born, too. I can have a new birth into a living hope and into an inheritance.

A living hope is that hope which makes us wake up every day — not just Christmas morning — expecting something wonderful.

My inheritance is my portion or allotment of the completed kingdom of God. And I can have part of it now. "For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

A living hope and righteousness, peace and joy make me able to surrender my life to the King.

No wonder angels proclaimed Jesus' birth. No wonder Wise Men followed his star.

I cannot give my children such things for Christmas. I can only give them some little something to remind them that we exchange gifts because of what God has given us.

But I can accept again the Savior and King whose birth we celebrate — and give myself in return. My will, freely surrendered. My obedience, joyfully given. And my repentance, honestly expressed when I fail.

For it is my firm intention to do what the king says when he commands, "Follow me.".





Rescue Me!

I've heard a lot of people say they are absolutely thrilled that Christmas is over for another year. And I must confess that, while I did enjoy the holidays, I did not mind at all when Christmas 1986 passed into history.

A lot of people get depressed during the holidays. I had my own down time this year. It started when I caught the flu — or was caught by it — the week before Christmas. It ended when I accepted what was, instead of what I wanted to be.

The first day I tried to return to work after being sick, I was not able to stay all day. As I drove home, sort of hanging on to the steering wheel, I began a litany of questions to which I had no answers. "What's the point?" "What is worth the effort?" "Why do I keep trying?"

I crept into the house and put myself back to bed.

The next morning, when I awoke, I could not think of a single reason for getting up.

But as I lay there, asking myself why I should bother to move and what possible reason there could be for me to get out of bed, I suddenly felt a greater aversion to my own questions than I did to a world without answers.

So I told myself to shut up and get moving.

"Don't ask questions," I said to myself. "Don't wait for answers. Just get the body out of the bed. That's all you have to do right now. Just turn back the covers and put the feet on the floor.

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"After all, it may not feel like it, but this IS a day the Lord has made and you're not in charge of it."

And somewhere between putting the feet on the floor and fixing the first cup of coffee, something wonderful happened. I stopped being depressed. I stopped asking questions. I stopped fretting about the things that hadn't been done while I was sick.

In fact I simply stopped worrying about anything at all.

And I haven't been able to work up a good worry since then. But I have been able to do what was before me to be done.

I'm not sure why I was so down. Or why so many people hover around depression at a festive time like Christmas.

It may have something to do with expectations. Christmas can be accompanied with such high expectations that only a few of them can possibly be realized. And all those unfulfilled expectations can easily lead to a feeling of dissatisfaction or even depression.

In my case I think it has to do with a specific expectation: that I will be perfect. Otherwise I see it as failure.

Even in such things as gifts and Christmas cards, I have to find the perfect gift and the best card or I am not satisfied.

I try, of course, but I don't succeed.

And this year, since I had NO energy at all, I knew I couldn't do all that stuff. In fact, I wasn't sure I could do any of it.

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But nobody but me said I had to be perfect. And once I gave myself permission not to be in charge, I felt like a prisoner released from bonds.

I think what made the difference this year was I finally understood something I heard at a recent conference.

At first it didn't sound like good news when Bob Mumford told us that God is an enabler, not a rescuer.

I wanted a rescuer.

I wanted to know that if I didn't get it absolutely perfect, somehow God would save me.

No, Mumford said. Oh, God will *try* to direct you in the right paths, but if you insist on following the wrong one, he will let you. If you insist on building according to the wrong plan, he will allow the building to fall in, too.

But. Mumford said, when he has brushed aside the mess you made, he will ask if you are ready to start again, this time following the directions.

And, he continued, even when you do it wrong, you won't fall any farther back than the foundation. He won't let you fall into the pit.

And suddenly it didn't matter if I didn't give the perfect gift this year. It didn't matter if I didn't find the perfect Christmas card. I knew I could try again next year.

And then I realized that wasn't really what I was worried about.

Underneath the other questions, I had been asking:

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Will we perform our search duties exactly right and get the perfect minister next time?

Will we find a way to agree about how to worship in just the right way?

Will we welcome the next visitors with just the right amount of warmth, enough but not too much?

Will we heal all the sick and feed all the hungry and find all the lost?

I know the answer is, Probably not.

But now I also know we can get up and try again.

For our God isn't a bit shocked at our failures.

And although he is not a rescuer in the way I wanted him to be, he truly is an enabler.



More Than One Day

He came.

Did you see him?

Christ came as promised.

The light of his coming was brighter than the tinsel.

Brighter even than the biggest star on top of the tallest Christmas tree.

And yet some people did not see him at all.

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They saw Santa Claus, Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, Scrooge and the spirits of Christmas past, present and future.

Now, for them, Christmas is all over. The tree is coming down this weekend. The wrapping paper and boxes will be put out for the trash men to pick up and carry away.

And they missed the greatest gift of all

They saw the baby in the manger. But only in the manger.

The Dec. 11 issue of *Christianity Today*, on its Reflections page of classic and contemporary excerpts, carried this quote by Corrie Ten Boom, "If Jesus were born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I would still be lost."

It isn't enough to see the Christ Child in the cradle. You have to receive Christ into your heart.

But this is a gift exchange. You have to give him that heart completely in return.

It's more than an even trade. We are the winners every time.

But this is like words on Christmas cards.

What does it mean?

In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, Jesus speaks of the gift of God.

He has asked the woman for a drink and she has responded with surprise that he would even talk to her, much less ask her for a favor.

He replies, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is who asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

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This gift, properly imbibed, will give the consumer a new kind of life.

"Everyone who drinks this water [from the well of Jacob] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

That is what having Jesus living in you means. It means having that spring of living water welling up inside, producing eternal life now and forever.

This is the reason he came. To give us new life. To enable the lame to walk, the blind to see, the prisoner to be free.

It's called salvation.

And he still gives himself to those who ask. He becomes in them a spring of water that can quench all the arid places in their hearts, that can satisfy their thirst for love and for meaning in life.

There is a catch. You knew there was.

He only gives himself to those who ask.

The gift is there, poured out for all to receive. But we have to invite him in.

It isn't hard. All you have to do is admit that you need him — need his living presence in your life — and give him your heart for his home.

Obviously, things change after that. When you give your heart away, things aren't the same any more. You aren't the same.

It's risky business, giving away your heart.

But, like the Samaritan woman, you will find it worth the risk.



The story goes that she ran back into the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"

She had heard the voice of one who knew her intimate history, who knew the worst there was to know about her, and who was still willing to give her the gift he had come to give.

Scripture says Jesus *had* to go through Samaria. He had to go because there was a woman there who was ready to be found by him.

Did you see him when he came this Christmas?
Were you ready?

If not, don't despair. It's not too late.

Christmas is more than a day. He came to stay.



A Hard Time At Christmas

I have a hard time with the Christmas holidays.

Every time the newspaper runs one of those "How to survive the holidays" articles, I read it.

I'm not sure what the problem is. I just know I tend to develop a cloud of sadness around me at Thanksgiving every year and it lasts right through the 12 days of Christmas.

It may be that I have this picture of the perfect Christmas somewhere in my mind and the present ones never come up to expectations.

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It may be the contrast between the worldly and divine celebrations.

It may be the inadequacy of my response to the overwhelming gift God has given us — being born a human child to ransom us from sin and reunite us with himself.

Whatever it is, it *feels* a lot like hopelessness in what is billed as a Season Of Hope.

Well, last weekend I was given an early Christmas present. The gift came from God. The package was a sermon.

The preacher said he was basically an optimist — that is, he could hope for good things to come. But he said that sometimes our hopes are dashed by the world and for a time we find it hard to hope again.

"What I want is a gutsy hope that sees beyond the world's promises," he said.

I want that too, I thought.

Gutsy hope needs encouragement, he said, and that is best found in Scripture.

And he cited Chapter Eleven of Isaiah as an example.

This passage is one of those Christians believe foretold the coming of Jesus and what that would mean.

The passage speaks of the shoot that will come from the stump of Jesse, the branch that will grow from his roots. It says the spirit of the Lord will rest on him and he will "not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear," but will judge with righteousness and justice.

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It says that in his day "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb . . . the lion shall eat straw like the ox," and "they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

And it says that the Lord "will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people," and "will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth."

And I thought, How does this vision of a not-yet-completed promise offer encouragement to hope? I grow sadder and have less hope when I think of the promise and look at the reality!

I did not say it out loud, but the preacher answered me anyway.

He said that we are dragged into hopelessness: by the pollution of the world. We breath pollution. He hear pollution. We live surrounded by pollution.

But Jesus did not breath the pollution we breath. The passage says that "with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked" and that's pure breathing.

And, because we are in him and have been restored — "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17) — we, too, can draw in the pure, sweet breath that Jesus draws. By his grace, we can know the delight of God's presence.

The passage also says God will restore creation — how else could the lion learn to eat straw? That should encourage us, the preacher said, for a God who can do that can surely take care of the messes people make.

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If the child and the viper can be brought together, so can the mother and daughter who are estranged or the neighbors who have quarreled.

Through this Root of Jesse, we will be restored, creation will be restored and so will history, the preacher said. And that's encouraging news, too.

A person may feel that his life is set on a course and cannot be changed, but the God who will "reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people" can also reorder things that seem hopelessly lost in our lives.

We can't do any of these things by ourselves. But because he can, we can rest in the hope of the promise.

Ah, I thought as the sermon ended, while I remember this, the sadness diminishes. Although I suspect it will not go away completely until the promise is fulfilled, hope remains, and stronger now than before.



Holiday Decisions

There are so many decisions to make this time of year. What shall I get Russell for Christmas? Shall I buy a "real" tree or an artificial one? Shall I delete this name from my Christmas card list, now that postage is so high? And how am I going to fit addressing cards and shopping for gifts into my busy schedule anyway?



Decisions face us daily, not just at the holiday time, but long before and after Christmas. But the crush of them now makes this a good time to consider how we make decisions.

Last week my Sunday school teacher commented on decision-making. Citing C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*, which describes the moment of choosing heaven or hell, she noted that there are no "big" decisions, only a multitude of little ones.

"Even that mother in Jonestown who carried her baby up to get the poison drink did not make a sudden, big decision at that moment," my teacher said. "She made it in a hundred little decisions over past days, months and years."

Is it true that what we are, what we do, is the fruit of all the little decisions we make, and make without even thinking about it in so many cases?

Is it possible that the decision to smile or frown at a clerk in a busy store during this holiday time can reveal how we really feel about people?

When a "major" moral issue requires a decision, what little decisions have paved the way? What base do we recognize for the way we live?

Our lives are so busy we can hardly pause to think about decisions. We make one on the spur of the moment and rush on to the next.

Decision-making would become an impossible task if we had to stop to weigh each one before acting. We need to have something always present in our lives that undergirds those little daily decisions. We need to have the Spirit of God so alive in our lives that He is at the heart of our decision-making.

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It isn't just that we are busy (He will be in the busy-ness with us if we let Him); it is that we have filled our lives and our hearts with other things — ambition, self-interest, a belief that "I can do it by myself," or anxiety about the present or the future.

He won't come in where there is no room for Him, no welcome.

There was no room for Him in the inn, either.



Light Came Into The World

There is a new lamp in my living room, a Christmas present from myself.

It makes a world of difference.

Some time ago I bought a new dining room table and put the old table, a round one, in a corner of the living room next to an easy chair. The round table was too tall for all of my lamps, but although light was needed so the easy chair could be used for reading, I wanted just the right lamp. So the corner remained dark for a long time.

During the holidays I found exactly the right lamp. It is blown glass, a crystal-clear green, with a squat, wine bottle sort of shape, a black base and top



and a textured shade. It is big enough to look right on the table and short enough to keep the light out of your eyes when you sit next to it. It is altogether perfect.

And when it is turned on, it changes the whole room.

I had not realized how dark that corner was — or how far into the room the darkness actually reached.

Jan. 6 is the day traditionally set aside for celebrating the arrival of the Wise Men with their gifts for the infant Jesus. It is called the Epiphany, which means "manifestation" or "showing" because the coming of the Wise Men shows that the Messiah is for the Gentile as well as the Jew, that he is the Savior of all mankind.

Jesus is the Light of the whole world, not just the original people with whom the covenant was made.

The coming of the Wise Men with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh is full of meanings. The gifts themselves, for example, have special significance: gold represents kingship, frankincense stands for divinity and myrrh for death.

But the story as a whole has a meaning for today that stretches over the entire world — and fills dark corners.

The news of the arrival of the king came to the Wise Men in mysterious means. That good news still comes into individual hearts in mysterious ways, but those who already know it are called to help spread the word.

This does not mean everyone has to be a full time, professional evangelist. But it does mean that

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everyone who knows the Word has His light within them — and maybe all they have to do is let it shine in their own dark corner.

(John Inserted this☺)

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(See Matthew 2:1-12)

12-24-2002



Holiday Depression

Are you depressed now that Christmas is over?

Is Christmas, once past, simply a thing to be forgotten as quickly as possible?

There is a slogan that goes: "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."



But there is another saying, found in the Epistle to the Hebrews, that says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever."

We change; He doesn't.

That's a thought to take you from Christmas into the new year, into the new decade, into tomorrow.

On Christmas afternoon my favorite radio news-type show (*All Things Considered* is more than just news) carried interviews with people on how they were feeling now that Christmas morning in all its glory was a thing of the past.

Without exception the people the announcer interviewed — by choice or by chance — were all feeling down, sad, left-over, even a little depressed.

Expectations had been deflated. The thrill was gone. Presents were already set aside to be returned. Toys were already broken.

Nothing remained but turkey carcasses, torn wrapping paper — and bills.

How sad.

But it needn't be, because it isn't true. The good part is not over.

The Joy of Christmas lives yesterday, today and for ever.

Christmas represents the event in history that changed time for all time. God came to us in a specific way then and He will live with us still, in a special way if we will only let Him, and then all our todays will be different.

So today is the first day of the rest of your life. But without Him, the rest of your life will be just more

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of the same. And Christmas afternoon will always be depressing.

With Him every day is new, as He makes you His new creation.

The time for making New Year's resolutions is at hand. What will you resolve?

If you don't already have one handy, let me make a suggestion: Resolve to live each today with a God who is eternal, to walk each today with a Lord who loves you, to serve each today a King who reigns forever.

Christmas isn't over.



A Weekend Of Love

I went away for the weekend with a lover.

Don't be shocked. I mean, I recently spent a three-day weekend having a love affair with my Lord.

The love affair did not start then, actually, but new dimensions were added to it.

Don't worry. I'm not going to tell you all the details of the weekend. I simply want to tell you something of what it meant to me — and continues to mean, especially now as we celebrate His birth.

I was 14 when I found the God who loved me enough to die for me so that I might live now in Him.

(Oh, I know I was the one who was lost and He found me, but that was the way it seemed.)

Barbara White



I spent the next 30-plus years trying to respond to that love, while keeping a firm grip on my own life, before I finally surrendered to that God. I accepted Jesus Christ not only as Savior, but as Lord and Ruler of my life. I acknowledge that He rose to rule not just in the past or the future, but in every aspect of life today.

He loved me, but I still had no idea how to go about loving Him back, how to be His beloved.

I could let God love me in the abstract, but not through His people here and now.

I could call upon my church family when I needed help or comforting or things like that, but I had not yet learned to let them give me love.

I learned how that weekend.

More than 60 women attended what was really a sort of cram course in what it means to be a Christian and in practical Christian living. It was not a retreat, though we "retreated" in the sense that we went apart from the busyness of the world for a time.

What we did was dare to be the church for each other.

I cried a lot in the process, tears of pain and joy. It was hard for me to accept a love totally unearned — and that would not go away. But I don't mind tears, they remind me of God's love. No matter how many tears you cry, more are waiting to be shed.

Now, I have returned to the world, but not alone.

I didn't just have an emotional bath of tears. I found a Lover.

I don't mean I expect all those women to become close personal friends. We not only came in all

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ages, but with every possible personality, interest and situation.

And I'm not foolish enough to think as the months go by when I see those weekend companions I will feel exactly the same way I did at the end of the experience.

But though I may not *feel* emotional about them in the human sense, I *will* love them. Ours was not a natural experience — nature alone does not produce such fruit — and now I know they are the body of my Lord.

And the love they offer me, I will joyfully accept. What a wonderful Christmas present!



A World Made Ready

When the time was right, God came into the world to redeem the world.

He came as a baby, born in a stable, born of the line of David the King, born in a place and at a time that were perfect for the working out of His purposes.

As God made the world ready for the coming of His Son nearly 2,000 years ago, so He makes us ready now for the coming of Jesus into our lives.

And He does it every year, sometimes more often.

God risked so much on the cooperation of human beings. He risked so much on the faith of one



young woman, Mary. He risked so much on the obedience of one man, Joseph.

What if...

But they did and He did and it has been done.

When the time was right, God came into my life to redeem it. He came, born in me to meet my great need, born for my ultimate surrender, born in a place and at a time that were perfect for the working out of His purposes, and He made me as a newborn baby.

As God made me ready for the coming of His Son years ago, so He makes me ready now for the continued coming of Jesus into my life.

And He does it every year at this time — and sometimes more often.

God risked so much on the cooperation of one human being, one with so many weaknesses, so little capability, so much self-centeredness, so few natural talents. He has a plan for me, a plan that needs my cooperation, my faith and my obedience.

What if?

The other night I watched that television show about the couple who adopted all the handicapped children. I felt so inadequate when it was over. I couldn't do that — I don't even want to try.

Is it really all right with the Lord for me to be weak, self-centered, incapable and inept?

It is all right in that He loves me anyway. While I was yet a sinner, He died for me. But it is not all right to use that as excuses for doing nothing.

My Lord never asks me to do anything He does not equip me to do.

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I do not know the plan God has for me. He does not seem to be asking me to do what He asked that couple to do.

But if I take the faith He has given me and am obedient to it, I may be one with Him this Christmas — and more often — in working out His purposes for the world..



A Time-Shattering Event

In the midst of Christmas shopping, I found myself pondering a question that has nothing to do with my gift list. It is a question once asked by the psalmist.

"O Lord, what is man that you care for him, the son of man that you think of him?"(Psalm 144:3.)

The psalmist had his own answer: "Man is like a breath, his days are like a fleeting shadow."

But something has happened since the psalmist wrote. Christmas happened.

The veil of the temple was torn in half when Jesus died, when his task on earth was accomplished. With the veil torn and Jesus raised from the dead, man may now come before the face of God, a place he has not been since he left Eden.

It was a time-shattering event. We fall from it as the halves of apples fall from a knife, on one side or the other. There is no neutral ground. And the knife edge is the person of Jesus.



The cutting edge comes now at Christmas time in the question: Whose is the birth we celebrate?

The answer to every other question — every one that matters — rests on the foundation of the reply to that question.

I reply to the Psalmist: Man is the creature made in God's image, in whom God became visible. No wonder God regards man and thinks of him. Man is not only God's creature, it is as man that God made Himself available to creation.

We celebrate the birth of Jesus, God the Son. God made man.

Before the incarnation, man was just one of God's creatures. A special one, I grant you, made in the image of God and chosen by God for relationship with Him.

But now man is even more. He is brother to Jesus, and child and heir of God.

How can all this be?

Mary asked that question long ago. Her answer is our answer.

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of, the Most High will overshadow you," the angel said to her. "Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."

When we profess Jesus as Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised Him from the dead, the Holy Spirit comes upon us, and what is born in us is called holy, the Son of God.

I confess, my dear Lord, that I still can't imagine why You should love us so. But I am thankful that You do.



Blessed Babe; Risen Lord

It's Christmas Day.

The baby Jesus lies in the manger of my small nativity scene once again. His mother and Joseph are at His side. Shepherds kneel close by. Wise men worship Him. The angel hovers overhead.

Jesus' birth was terribly important. The very idea of God reduced to helpless human infant is staggering. The wonder of a love willing to go that far takes my breath away every time I think about it.

His birth is the moment that divides time.

But today, as I think about Jesus, I am conscious not of the baby born so long ago but of the God/man I am coming to know today.

It has been almost 2,000 years since Jesus was a baby or since He was the man who walked the roads of Galilee with a band of followers, the teacher, the preacher or the example.

Now He is the risen Lord, who sits at the right hand of the Father and who will come again in glory.

It is so tempting to keep Jesus a baby. That way I'm still in control. I can do good things for Him — and ignore who He really is and my utter dependence on Him.

Barbara White



The joy of Christmas is not simply the birth of Jesus. It is the fulfillment of the promise of that birth in my life — and in the lives of all who receive Him.

Why did He come, that baby in the manger?

He came so we might be set free from sin and live with Him forever.

Scripture says He came because God loved the world so much that He sent His only son so all who believe in Him would not die, but would have everlasting life.

Christmas bells ring as an expression of joy, to proclaim the good news of that birth in Bethlehem and of that promise.

But today I am reminded of another sound — resounding gongs and clanging cymbals.

If I keep Jesus a baby — if I acknowledge Him as anything less than the Son of God, the Living Word, King of Kings and Lord of Lords — then my life will ring like a clanging cymbal.

My peace, my joy, my life now and forever, are not bound by swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. They were, for a time, but no longer.

The baby is now my Savior and my Lord.

Now peace and joy come from the Spirit who dwells within, the Spirit who reveals Jesus to me and who makes it possible for me to grow in knowledge of Him and to follow Him — from the manger to the cross beyond.

Along The Way



After Christmas — A New Year

Christmas this year was among the best ever for me. I had lots of family at my house for Christmas dinner — all of my immediate family, my son, daughter, grandson and mother, and my brother and sister-in-law, a nephew and an aunt.

I paused during one trip back to the kitchen for extras and took a deep breath. What a joy it was to have them there.

It isn't often we recognize happiness while we are in the midst of it.

Then other thoughts entered my mind:

Better enjoy it while you can.

It isn't really this good.

Look at all the pains hidden under the smiles and laughter.

Remember the troubles that must be faced tomorrow or the next day.

Don't believe in this too much.

This isn't real. And if it is, it won't last.

You've never known real happiness — something has always come along and spoiled it — so this can't be real, either.



For a moment, I was shaken.

But only for a moment.

I understand why I allowed this train of thought some room in my mind.

There have been plenty of hard times, of difficult days and even long walks through various shadowed valleys in my family life in recent years. I might easily have begun to believe that *they* were the reality and the present joy a deception.

The glorious assertion that the living God loves me and is present in my life broke the hold those morose thoughts were trying to have on me. The joy of that day was real — and I knew it while it was happening.

The peace and happiness that bubbled close to the surface of my life that day will not last forever, true. Problems and pains, hard decisions and separations will come, and they will also be real. They will arrive in their turn and demand my attention. And they will hurt.

But they are not the only reality of my life.:

The peace that lies deep within me will stay. It is the eternal gift of a loving Father to His child. And the joy that comes from knowing Him will be as present in my bad times as it was in that good Christmas Day.

I won't try to hold on to that day's happiness, to live forever in the past. It is a false life that stays in the past.

I won't fear the future either. For the same Lord who reigned over that lovely Christmas dinner is the Lord of my future.

Christmas Day is over now.

Along The Way



The new year is already two days old. Family members have all gone back to their own busy lives.

I have, too. But not alone.



Christmas Tears

My granddaughter didn't much like her first visit with Santa Claus.

I have a wonderful, funny picture of the result.

It was taken earlier this month.

It is one she probably will hate when she is 14. I won't show it to her until she is old enough to have developed a sense of humor about herself.

She isn't sitting on Santa's lap.

She isn't even sitting next to Santa. Her mother is in between, trying to coax her into smiling, or at least not crying. To no avail She sobbed the entire time the camera was clicking.

Barbara White



I cry at Christmas, too, but not about Santa Claus. I can't seem to help myself.

I cry at stories like *The Littlest Angel* and at movies like *The Bells of St. Mary's*.

You might think I would be so familiar with these things by now that they couldn't touch my heart. And it is possible that these are shallow, sentimental tears.

But if I stop a minute when I look at a manger scene, at the little baby I pictured there and think seriously about what it means, I always get choked up.

Not because I am so touched by infants. Babies are cute and precious and all that, but they don't make me cry.

I weep because every time I look at a manger scene —really look at it — I see the cross.

I am reminded that the baby lying there represents the truth that God became man — a man who would die an undeserved death so the world might live.

That is the image I see in every Christmas tree light, in every star and candle flame.

God stooping down to us so we might be lifted up to Him.

That is the message I hear when carols sound, when bells ring, when greetings are called out.

Every Christmas, the wonder of God's love takes my breath away.

The outpouring of God's love is not limited to Christmas, of course.

In fact it is unceasing.

Along The Way



My awareness of it varies, however. Sometimes I am filled with the awe and wonder of the Living God who is present with me. Sometimes I am barely conscious of his presence. And sometimes it is as if I am alone, as if he is not there.

It's a real fight to remember him in this season that bears his name. Someone, I can't remember who, once said, "If Satan can't make you bad, he'll make you busy."

I will use that tearful little picture of my tiny, almost 2-year-old, granddaughter to help me in the struggle.

I will cry with pain and frustration, too. At a world full of people who do not know — or knowing, do not care — that he came to be with them. I will weep for each inn in which there is no room.

But crying can be a healing process, too. And I will shed tears of joy and wonder for a God who loves the world so much.



We Are Not Alone!

Sometimes there is so much going on in my mind that I'm not able to think of a single thing.



I'm filled with bits and pieces of ideas and themes, but I can't seem to take just one thought and pursue it to its logical — or more important, it's spiritual — conclusion.

Usually I can count on the Lord to drop a fairly good sized thought-pebble into the pond of my mind. Then I just let the ripples come and go until they form a pattern.

Eventually something I already know is strengthened so it leaves a deeper imprint on my mind or a new thought is formed.

Everything has been right on the surface lately. And the surface has been decidedly choppy.

Instead of one or two good-sized ideas, all I've been getting are bunches of tiny gravel-like notions. They cause brief bursts of mental activity, but never seem to go anywhere.

I have started a dozen columns only to have the thought slip away before it could be grasped.

I like it when there is a tidal wave of mental activity, for I hope for an earth-shaking conclusion. But sometimes there is only the least little ripple.

I have learned, however, that you cannot always tell how deep the water is by looking at the surface movements.

For example, a woman stopped by my desk recently to drop off a notice of church activities. She apologized for interrupting me and said she was delivering the notice in person because she wanted to thank me for my column.

I assured her I wasn't doing anything she could interrupt, that I was beginning to wonder what my

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column would be for this week. I said I had asked the Lord what I was to write about, but that so far, I had received no answer, or had missed it.

She responded that when she has to write a notice for the church, she also asks the Lord for help.

"And he always gives it," she said brightly.

She talked for a minute about the joys of being able to rely on the Lord.

"People ask me how in the world I can go off to Pensacola all by myself," she said, then laughed. "I tell them I never have gone anywhere by myself in my whole life."

As she walked off, she was still smiling to herself.

And I was left thinking, She knows she is never alone because she knows God is always with her.

Is that my column theme?

It isn't a great thought. In fact, it's rather a cliché.

Only it wasn't a cliché to her — and it isn't to me.

She greatly enjoys the fact that she is never alone. Actually, she was relishing that fact that her Lord is always with her.

She was not questioning this. She had not raised it as an item for theological discussion. She wasn't interested in arguments about whether God stays with you when you don't stay with him. She didn't want to discuss what it means to be yoked with Jesus. She wasn't in the least interested in talking about how you know God is present with you.

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She was as unconcerned as a loved child whose parent has never let her down. Like that little child, she trusted that what she had found to be true was the truth.

And she had been glad to share her joy with me.

She had identified me as a sister, a child of the same Father. She did not bother to explain her meaning.

She was sure I would understand what she meant, that I would have experienced the same thing.

And she was right.

It's not a great thought.

But it is a deep one.

It goes all the way down to the bedrock on which we have built our lives.

We are children of the same Father and lovers of the same Lord.

We spent only a few minutes together, but it was enough.

She recognized me.

I recognized her.

It reminded me of home.

Oh, we probably could have found areas of differences if we had tried. Brothers and sisters often do. But I don't believe they would have hurt the joy of our sharing, the joy of knowing we are family.

Suddenly it seemed to me that all I had been doing recently was fuss with the differences. It is easy to do, especially when you are busy covering organized religion as news.

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I am no longer fussing. I am remembering how often my Father has blessed me with glimpses of our family, his and mine.

And I am thankful to him for dropping that tiny little moment into my day.



New Year; New Me

It isn't a New Year's resolution, it's a new me!

I am watching the Lord change me and the change He is making right now concerns what it means to mean what I say.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says to let your yes mean yes and your no, no. Mean what you say.

Keep your word. If you say you will do something, do it. If you say you won't, don't.

Words are so important.

God said . . . and it was.

One of the names given Jesus is the Word. The Gospel of John begins with the beautiful description and designation of our Lord as the Word.

This all started when I almost didn't go to the office party. I had said I would be there, but earlier in

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the day before the party I decided I would like to go out of town over night to visit family. I packed an overnight bag, stashed that and my needlepoint in the car and headed south.

Then I began to think about having said I would be at the party. It wasn't a big deal, I thought. There will be plenty of people there and I probably wouldn't stay long even if I went. And they'll understand my wanting to be with family.

But I had said I would be there. Saying yes had been easier than making a decision as to what I actually would do. I had said it, but I hadn't really meant it. I had taken the easy way out, planning to make a decision later.

Let your yes be yes, I heard myself thinking, repeating the line of Scripture recently read.

So I turned around and went home. And went to the party.

Nothing earth-shaking happened. It was a nice party and I stayed a while and went home.

But I made my yes mean yes.

Since then I have found myself aware of how often I hedge, how often I take the easy way out.

I'm not proud of this. In fact, I'm shocked. I thought of myself as a truthful person. I'm finding out how far I am from what I want to be.

It isn't easy to admit, either. But I must, because I want to share the change that is being made.

Who do you suppose is teaching me, changing me, making me into a new me? Who is making me aware instantly now when I have not let my yes mean

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yes and my no, no? Who is helping me think first so I may only say what I mean?

The Lord who loves me even as I am is also remaking me in His image.



The World Grows Older

The world is another year older. It is so hard to remember that I don't see time as my Lord does.

A thousand years in Your sight are as a watch in the night, says the psalmist to the Lord. But it is still a thousand years to me.

Time as I know it can drag or fly by. Einstein said it is relative. What it really is, is the Lord's.

Learning to live by His time is hard. It takes patience and trust, fruit of the spirit not easily come by.

When the Lord has a task for me to do, I am always blessed if I do it. The trick, if I may call it that, is in identifying the soft voice that speaks so like my own mind thinking — and then in acting immediately, not waiting for answers to questions I shouldn't have asked.

For example, last Sunday I read in our church bulletin that anyone wanting prayer would find people waiting to pray with them after the service. I also noticed there was no one waiting at the appointed place. Someone needs to be there, I thought. I took the fact that I noticed as God's soft voice sending me — and I went.

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Even as I moved, a friend passed me going in the same direction. We talked and were led by the Lord to share a problem in prayer.

If I had not moved the minute I felt His urging, the friend would have passed by before me, and gone on, the prayer perhaps unsaid.

Or someone else would have answered God's call and met the friend's need — but I would not have known the blessing of obedience: "Thou good and faithful servant."

When I want something — even something good — I tend to want it in my time, which is usually immediately. But He is the one who knows the right time.

I prayed for healing for someone, for healing of mind, body and spirit. Three years have passed and while there has been improvement, there is much yet to be healed. I sometimes grow impatient for its completion.

But if the physical healing came at the wrong time, the healing of mind and spirit might not come at all. My Lord knows the right time.

Patience comes from enduring, and I learn to endure by having difficulties to live through. Trust comes from learning He is trustworthy. I learn that from experience, by throwing myself off the precipice of visible support into the invisible hands of Jesus.

So I am learning slowly to live in His time, learning to wait patiently and act immediately.

Time is the tablet on which I practice these lessons.



New Year

Is it a new year after all?

1986 is three days old now. Is anything different? Or is it just the same old year with a new number?

I'm not a bit surprised to find that this year looks just like last year around my house. I look just like I did before — inside as well as out.

I've decided that I have a problem with wanting things to be new. I believe it springs from the conviction that the new will be better than the old.

You could call it a Fairy Godmother Complex. Not that I think I am anyone's fairy godmother, but that somewhere there is a fairy godmother for me who will wave her magic wand and make all things better.

And I won't have had to do a thing to deserve it.

I was told something a week or so ago about how we go about deserving favor from God.

Barbara White



It was after an interview I did with the Rev. Andrew Shashy, a Syriac Catholic priest who ministers to Arabic Catholics in Jacksonville. He asked me what denomination I belonged to. I think what he actually said was, "What persuasion are you?"

He was prepared to find I was not a member of his flock.

He said he asked because, as a regular reader of this column, he was curious. But that our persuasions weren't the important thing.

"I believe that, in the end, we will be judged on what we have done with what we have been given to understand," he said.

Take notice — not how much we have understood, but what we have done with what we have been given to understand.

What have I done with what I have been given to understand?

Too much of the time, I go about seeking someone who can teach me something new. The pursuit of new knowledge can keep me so busy there is no time to worry about what I am doing with what I already understand — and it's so much easier than living by what the Lord already has shown me.

But not productive of changed life.

Well, then. In this new year, I shall shift my focus. I shall make it my primary purpose to be a doer of the word, and not a hearer only. I shall pay attention to what I am doing with what he has given me to understand.

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How will I do this? Well, I will ask my Lord to make his word clear to me in the area of my life he knows I need to change.

When the Holy Spirit opens God's word to me and gives me a new understanding of what it means, I will choose right away whether that word is for me. I will not wait until I find myself in the middle of a test.

I will wrestle with every day to put my will in subjection to my Father's will. Nothing can change if I am not willing to give up having my way.

I will rely on the Spirit to make me able to do what I have willed to do. I cannot rely on my own strength or on my native talents. They will let me down every time.

I will be on guard. The Enemy will try to lure me back to my own wishes — and the comfort of familiar habit will work with him. I will stand fast.

Is this an impossible task I have chosen for myself? Can I do it? Shall I really try?

I must try.

Knowledge will pass away. Reflecting Jesus into the world will not. And if I am not for my Lord, then I am against him. If I am not following him, I have turned away. I am either a disciple or a deserter.

And after all, the only really hard part of the task — and it truly is hard — is the first, the battle with my will.

But he who is my strength and my shield, the spring of living water that wells up within me, will be with me. He will lift me up when I fall. He will break my heart by showing me my failure and he will forgive me for it when I lay that broken heart at his feet.

Barbara White


It's going to be a new year after all. I know it is.



No New Resolutions

I had just about decided to enter the next decade with as little fanfare as possible.

And no resolutions.

I had decided not to make any new ones, at any rate.

Or to revive any old ones, either.

I had decided I definitely wasn't going to brush off last year's list and give them another try.

In fact, I had decided to approach the new year as a free spirit, with nothing to tie me down. Just to let the new year happen however it happened.

Then I told my friend Pat about my decision and she changed my mind.

Resolutions are not rules and regulations, she said. They are intentions. And you intend to do some specific things next year, don't you?

You're going to keep going to Weight Watchers until you finish losing the weight you want to lose, aren't you?

I admitted that I was.

And it's true. I intend to hang in until the job is finished. I am firmly resolved to do so.

Ooops. There's that word.

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OK. So I have made at least one resolution for the new year.

And the intention — the resolution, if you insist — will stay in force even if I miss a meeting or gain a pound in the process. I will continue to resolve to eat the way I have learned to eat.

At least most of the time.

At least enough of the time to get the weight down and keep it down.

Now, that wasn't so hard, was it? With my friend's approach to resolutions, maybe I can make some more.

The key is knowing what you already intend to do and then resolving to do it. It's knowing what you want and then framing resolutions that produce the desired objective.

And there I was, thinking that New Year's resolutions were supposed to be promises you made to do something you thought you ought to do: something good and worthwhile, but something you really had no desire to do at all.

Like writing letters.

I know I ought to write letters because I don't want to lose touch with friends, and people simply won't keep writing if they never get a response.

But after writing all week at work, I find I have nothing to say when I pick up a pen and piece of paper. So I did not want to resolve to write letters.

However, I guess I could resolve simply to keep in touch — and not say how. Then I could drop notes, send cards and make telephone calls — all things I intend to do anyway!



Say, this works.

In fact, it's a piece of cake!

I'll bet I can come up with lots of this sort of resolution.

But wait.

Resolutions about my physical health and my social life are fine and dandy, but what resolutions do I want to make about my spiritual life?

Where is the Lord in all this? In what way is my life in this New Year to be related to his?

Well, the key still is knowing what you want and then resolving to do it. And what I want can be best stated in the words of this verse in Philippians:

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."

That is what I want.

What do I intend to do to make it happen?

Paul says it for me in the very next verse: "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."

Press on.

I can resolve to do that.

True, I don't know all that will involve in the coming year. It doesn't matter, however.

Losing weight involves beginning each new day with the intention of eating properly — and the intention of getting back to eating properly quickly if I slip.

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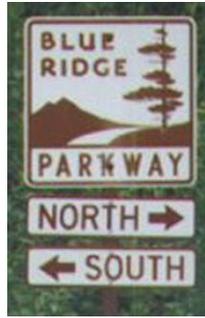


That's what pressing on means in terms of weight control.

And it means the same thing in the area of spiritual growth.

It means beginning each new day with the intention of giving my life to the Lord and following him every moment of the day — and of getting up and following some more if I trip.

Thanks, Pat, for your help with my New Year's resolutions.



Vacation On The Mountaintop

It isn't true that you are closer to God on a mountaintop — but it can seem that way.

That's where I was last week. On the top of a mountain in the Appalachians.

The Psalmist, when he was searching for help, said he would lift his eyes to the hills. He knew his help would come from the Lord, but he didn't say he would only find God there and nowhere else.

There is something about mountains that can help us remember the one who made them. Just look at the words we use to describe mountains — majestic, eternal, over-arching. Those words describe God, too.



In any case. I was in the mountains and I did feel very close to God there.

(I wonder where people who live in western North Carolina go when they want to get close to him? Do they go to the ocean?)

It is true that God can seem closer at some times than at others. A vacation can certainly be one of those times. And a change of scenery can sometimes help.

Several things contributed to the development of that feeling of closeness during this vacation. I had more time to spend with him in the mornings, more time for reading the Bible and a more relaxed life.

And I had something else that made this time very special — a Christian friend with whom to share it.

My sister-in-law, Becky, and I decided to spend our morning devotional time together and it was a great blessing. We asked the Lord to be with us, then we took turns reading portions of the Bible to each other and shared our thoughts on the meaning of the Scripture. We prayed together for ourselves, our families and other concerns.

A person who starts her day that way has been helped to keep her mind on Jesus all the day long.

And we did. As we made our daily trek to the Post Office (not for mail, just to have a destination), he was part of our conversation. As we bought groceries for homemade soup, he was with us. As we shopped for Christmas presents, we were aware of him. As we drove through the mountains, looking at all the shades of new spring greens, we were especially conscious of his presence.

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Nothing in life is apart from the Lord. If he is in your heart, he is in everything.

Vacations can be times of refreshment. At their best they can be times to renew tired bodies, to relax tired minds and to renourish tired spirits.

Now, of course, I am home again, back at work again. Instead of a slow pace, I have a fast, demanding one. Instead of extra time for reading, I must fight to keep the short time I have set aside for reading Scripture.

The biggest difference is that I no longer have someone with whom to share a morning time with the Lord. I miss that very much.

But I still have the Lord, and sometimes being alone with him can be the very best of all.

I had a wonderful vacation. I am content to be back.

All of my times belong to him. He provides me with times of work and times of play, times of serving and times of being served, even times of fellowship and times of solitude. He knows all my needs and cares for me.

Psalms 121 starts with that look to the hills. At the end the psalmist says, "The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore".





On The Mountain

You aren't actually any closer to God when you're on a mountain than you are anywhere else. He is every bit as present in the valleys or the cities as he is on a mountain.

But you may *feel* closer to him on a mountain because you are farther away from your everyday world. I spent a vacation in the North Carolina mountains recently and looked for the Lord there. I sought him every morning as the sun rose over a nearby mountain.

And I found him, too.

Every morning as I sat with a cup of coffee in the quiet, nearly dark dining room of my mother's house, I felt his presence close to me. I wasn't aware of him in any new or extraordinary way. I knew him by the peace I felt both within and without.

As I relished the dawn and the knowledge of the Father's loving presence with me, I wondered why I was so much more conscious of him in that dining room than I had been in recent weeks in my own dining room back home. So, naturally, I began to ponder why this should be so and what I could learn from it about living as a child and servant of God.

I had a pad and pen with me. If I came up with any profound insights, I could write them down and then share with all the flatland folks back home.

But when I arrived back in the office, I couldn't find the notes. Now, facing the computer, all I have are memories.

That's OK. My musings weren't very deep. But they were significant. Probably because I needed to

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bring back into my consciousness something I had been forgetting.

It is wonderful to find a new and exciting truth about the Lord. But in my search for the new and the different, I often overlook the simple truths on which my relationship with Him is based.

One of those truths has to do with expectations.

I guess I always expect to find myself closer to the Lord during a vacation. And, of course, several factors about vacations make that likely. For one thing, I didn't have a deadline for my quiet time. I didn't have to get dressed and leave for work by a certain time.

But a vacation lasts for only a short time. What about all the other days? Isn't it important to know how to draw close to my Lord during all the rest of my life as well?

And mountains are wonderful, especially when the air is cool and crisp and it has been so hot at home. But what about when I'm not in the mountains. What about all those places where I live and work? Can't I know him there, too?

Absolutely. And perhaps that was why it was so important for me to remember that he is as close in the city as he is on the mountaintop, as close during my daily life as he is during my vacation.

Where I spend my quiet time is not the key to how well it works at bringing me into God's presence. The state of my mind is much more responsible for that.

Do I come expecting to meet him?

Or do I pause briefly to nod to the empty space I feel around me and then rush off to my day?



Another of those truths has to do with God's purpose for me.

When I ask for a new revelation and don't receive one, it usually means I am not living by what he has already shown me.

Until I learn to live daily with the simple truth that he is always with me, he cannot teach me how to draw closer to him in new ways.

It isn't a matter of feelings.

It is a matter of fact.

It is not a question of whether I feel his presence, but whether I can stand firm on the truth that he *is* with me, whether I feel him or not.

Standing firm on that truth means that I remember that he is Lord, I acknowledge his lordship over my life and I act as if I have surrendered my life to him.

Which leads to the third of those truths, one of which has to do with my will.

I do not have to let the business of my daily life get in the way. If I want a "vacation" kind of time with my Father even when I'm not on vacation, I can do my best to set aside my own agenda and ask the Spirit to do the rest.

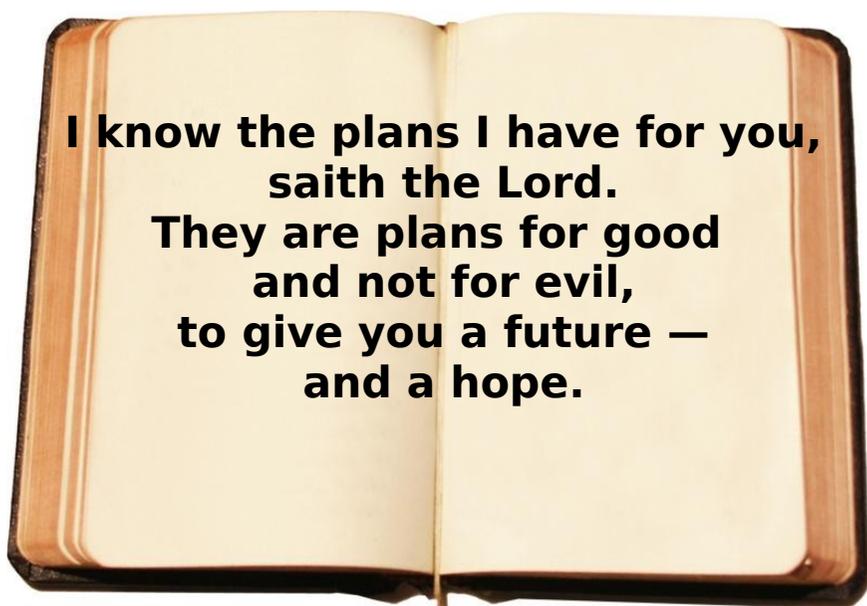
These aren't new thoughts.

They are basic truths.

They aren't profound, either.

In fact, they are very simple truths.

Not easy, of course, but simple.



**I know the plans I have for you,
saith the Lord.
They are plans for good
and not for evil,
to give you a future —
and a hope.**

Decisions And Choices

It is a little unnerving to read the Old Testament prophets while trying to settle personal problems.

There is nothing like the pronouncements of Jeremiah for example, to put your aches and pains in perspective.

I mean, here I am faced with decisions and choices that will affect the rest of my life — or less — and there I read of a God who planned a 70-year period of exile for His chosen people, as part of His plan to make them the nation He intended them to be.

Seventy years!



And Isaiah talked about the suffering servant who was to come — and I know He came — but that was 700 years later.

God's time is really something else, isn't it? Here I am worrying about what is going to happen to me tomorrow and God is dealing with eternity.

My first reaction is a combination of shame and resentment: shame for my intense involvement in small matters compared to the grand plan of God, resentment over God's willingness to expend my life in His eternal design.

As usual, both my initial reactions are simply human ones. But neither is appropriate and, in His generosity, the Lord is dealing with them seriously.

For my humanity and God's eternity are not mutually exclusive.. My tomorrow is part of God's forever.

That isn't all of it.

It is all right for me to prepare for tomorrow — but not all right for me to stop with that. It is all right for God to take as long as He chooses to work out His plans, for He is also here with me now.

Oh, I know it is presumptuous of me to pass judgment on God's plans.

He does not need my approval, but I need to give it.

I need to know that He *is* God, that my lack of understanding does not change things, that I may trust Him still.

I need to know so I may surrender willingly to that eternal plan. Then I may release my demands that

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things work out in my time frame and accept that they will work out in His.

For when that happens, I find it easier to make those decisions and choices.

Some of them aren't exactly insignificant, but they aren't really all that unimportant, either.

Others are extremely important, for they touch on God's eternity, and my place in it.

The perspective of history is a good telescope through which to examine life — when God's time is the lens.



Breakfast Date

I was stood up one morning recently by a friend who had a date with me for breakfast. I realized from examining my reactions how enormously fortunate I am to know, really know, that I am loved.

You might even called it being blessed. You know, like in the Beatitudes where it says, "Blessed are those who . . ."

I had been drinking coffee and reading the paper for about 15 minutes when the waitress came to deliver a message from my friend. She sent word that she had forgotten the date and, obviously, was not going to be able to make it in time.



My first reaction was disappointment. My second was a feeling of rejection. This was absurd.

My friend was not rejecting me at all. She just forgot. Everybody forgets stuff. I know I do.

But, well, I guess I did wonder if it meant anything that I was the one forgotten.

She could have fibbed about it, I thought to myself. She could have said her alarm hadn't gone off or something like that. Did she have to be so honest that it hurt?

Of course she did, I thought. She knows that I know she is my friend.

I immediately felt very foolish, very small. How hard it is for some of us to believe we are loved. How easily we read rejection into all sorts of circumstances.

But then, most of us have experienced rejection.

People have told me they loved me before. And they meant it to the best of their understanding of what loving means. They tried to the best of their ability to keep loving me, too. But they weren't able. Their abilities weren't enough.

So I guess I have developed some automatic reactions. I flinch even when nothing is going to hit me.

At that point in my musings, I remembered the Lord and wondered what he would say to me about love and rejection. After all, this week is the commemoration of his rejection by men and his pouring out of his love for them anyway.

I was reminded the other day that the first words Scripture records the Father saying to the Son while he was here on earth were a message of love. At Jesus'

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baptism, God said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke record this important passage in very much the same way. And the Gospel of the apostle John records John the Baptist telling his disciples when they ask about Jesus that the Father loves the Son.

Over and over again people rejected Jesus, but he always knew he was loved. I believe that is what made it possible for him to keep on loving in spite of the rejection.

He did not doubt that he was loved. He believed it enough to be able to go to the cross in obedience to the request of that love.

I should know that I know, too. The first words my heavenly Father ever said to me were also a message of love.

As a 14-year-old girl who did not even know if God really existed, I had cried out in the pain of adolescent rejection to ask if there really was a God like the one I had read about in books, a God who loved people enough to die so they could live.

And the Father, who always answers such cries, had impressed upon my aching heart a message I have never forgotten — but have sometimes ignored. He spoke to me in a way I cannot explain, but I know I heard the words, "I am and I love you."

I don't know why I heard him and some people don't seem to. Maybe they hear and refuse to believe. I just don't know.

But I believe that accepting God's word that he is who he says he is — which is, in fact, his very name



— is the mark that identifies the confident Christian. I believe this because the only time I feel uncertain is when I forget that he loves me. When I remember, nothing can shake my certainty.

Paul points out that if Jesus was not raised from the dead, our faith is in vain. But since it is true that Christ died and was raised to life again — and sits at the right hand of God always interceding for us — nothing can separate us from the love of God.

If you have never heard God say, "I love you," today is a very good day to do so. For today we observe the anniversary of Jesus' death — for our sakes. And we look ahead to the glory to follow, the glory of his resurrection, of his rising again to life. Life that he shares with us, because he loves us.

Ask him if it's true. And receive his answer with joy. Not because you deserve it. What does that matter? Simply because he says it is true and he is who he says he is.



Being Loving Beats Being Right

It may be better to be right than be president, but it isn't better to be right than to be loving.

Paul said it in his letter to the church in Corinth. He said that having all knowledge (being right) wasn't worth anything if you didn't have love.

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Jesus lived it. He did not condemn the woman taken in adultery. He knew she needed to be healed of deep spiritual hurts first, to know that she was not rejected, before she could be told to stop committing adultery. He loved her first and taught her afterward.

I know the principle, but putting it into practice is something else.

Recently, a Christian friend and I found ourselves on opposite sides of a moral issue. I don't want to be judgmental, Pharisaical or unloving, but there are things the world says it's all right for us to do, and which my reading of scripture tells me it's not.

I truly believe I am right in this case, and can cite scripture to back up my position. But is asserting my "rightness" the best way to help my friend see this?

What is the truly Christ-like thing to do?

The key to acting as Christ acts is to be lovingly sensitive to what is going on in the other person's behavior, what is causing the behavior, and to keep praying for the opportunity to tell the person, not in legal terms, but in loving terms, what scripture has to say.

Simply stating principles and laws is not the answer.

Instead of preaching at my friend, I can pray for the teachable moment to come, that moment when the Spirit can enter the situation, can convince and convert my friend. And I can pray for sensitivity to that moment, to any change in my friend, so I may be a channel for His action.

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Also, I can allow time for the scripture my friend already knows to work in her life.

What is important is not how right I am, but how much I am trusting the Lord to be the Lord of the situation and to work on it in His time.

The Bible is not to be used as a self-righteous text but as God's counsel to bolster prayer for the person and for an opening so the Spirit can step in and do the convincing.

And, last but not least, I can acknowledge that I may know an area in which my friend wants to run things, but that I don't know all the areas in my own life in which I want to do the same thing.

Neither my friend nor I will surrender our wills to the Lord just because someone or even some passage in the Bible says we should.

But the more I know of His unconditional love, the more I desire to love Him in return. And the only way I know to do that is by trying to be what He wants me to be.



My Mother, Louise Green

Almost Independence Day

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It's almost the Fourth of July. It is time for me to take my annual whack at the true meaning of freedom.

Personally, I *need* an annual examination of what it means to live as a free person. It is a difficult, elusive concept and just when I think I have it neatly squared away in a form I can understand — and control — it changes shape on me.

That, of course, is because as one who has surrendered my life completely to the control of Jesus Christ — at least in theory, we're still working on the actuality of that — I will never be free in the sense that most of us mean most of the time.

I have chosen not to be free to choose for myself, but to accept the choices the Lord has made and will make for me.

Well, this year my look at freedom comes from a particular perspective.

I am coming up on the first anniversary of my mother's death. And I have learned some things about the meaning of freedom while trying to deal with the meaning of the grief I have known in the past year.

Those of you who have read this column on any kind of a regular basis in the past months have observed, although not perhaps identified, a thread of pain.

Something was hurting and hurting very deeply.

I wasn't always able to keep the pain from showing.

Sometimes I didn't even try.

I have always intended to be as honest as possible here, as naked as possible, in the spiritual

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sense. So when I was hurting, it seemed false to try to cover over the pain with glib phrases.

But I also have not wanted my pain to be harmful to anyone else. I have not wanted anyone to assume that because I had questions, I was rejecting the God who seemed to offer no answers.

And while I was in the middle of my grief, it was not easy to get all that into words. So sometimes I didn't try that, either.

I had not expected Mother's death to hurt me so much. I had expected to miss her, of course, but I had not anticipated the depth of one particular abyss that opened up before me, one specific sense of separation.

Although I had not lived at home since I was a teenager, the boundaries of my life had been set by that tiny woman. Her ability to influence — even direct — my actions was far greater than her physical size would indicate.

She had a certainty about what was right and what was not that did not allow for question.

But we are questioners, we were made that way. And I had more questions than I was willing to reveal to the acid test of her certainty. Perhaps I thought that if I did not actually hear her answer, I would be free to make my own decisions.

But learning to make decisions for ourselves is a necessary part of growing up. So I learned. And I don't mean to imply that she tried in any way to stop me from learning.

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She *wanted* me to make my own decisions. She just wanted them to be right decisions — according to her understanding of right.

Of course, I was free to make any decision I wanted. I just had to be willing to live with her disapproval if I decided incorrectly.

And I took that into account in every decision I made all through my life.

For a time, I had believed that a "wrong" decision would mean she would stop loving me. I came to know that was never true. Her desire was only to keep me from the painful consequences of foolish choices.

And that was her desire right up to the end of her life, too.

When she died, I felt for a time adrift in a wide, wide sea — with no anchor for my boat.

But her influence remained, because she never really was the anchor. God always has been. And my best choices, the ones that could not bring shame to either her or me, were all based on his choice.

So I am no more free to choose today than I was a year ago while she still lived. And I no less free today than I was then.

The freedom I have comes from love freely given and restrictions freely accepted.

Not perfectly given or accepted. I hold back sometimes. Sometimes I am not open to receive. But there is the blessing and joy of repentance.

And my heart's desire is that my life be freely given to God and that God's choices for me be freely embraced.

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Through my grief, God has led me to a deeper understanding and appreciation of Mother's love for me and of the ways she gave herself to me.

Through this grief, the Lord has also increased my ability to accept and respond to his love and gifts for me, things seen and unseen, felt and not felt, present and yet to come.

So today I am able to thank the Lord for her life and all it has meant and still means to me — and for his presence in her death and the grief that followed.



Independence Day and Slavery

Independence Day is a time to think about what it means to be free and what it means to be a slave.

America has a Bill of Rights. I wonder if we wouldn't be much better off with a Bill of Obligations. My rights may infringe on yours; yours on mine. How can both of us be happy? It would be different if we both accepted our obligations.

The pursuit of happiness does not seem to bring happiness when the pursuit is attempted through the exercise of rights.

There is a description of heaven and hell that goes like this: in hell there is plenty of food, but the

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handle of the spoon is so long you can't get it in your mouth, so you starve; in heaven the same thing is true, but someone else feeds you and you feed someone else.

Obligations.

It won't work unless everyone is doing it, you may say. Perhaps. But nothing else will work at all.

Obligations freely assumed and carried out can bring that elusive happiness pursued so diligently. It is slavery, but only voluntary slavery will suffice.

Voluntary slavery of man to man is not what I mean. Man may give himself in slavery to many things — out of necessity or to serve some end of his own — but slavery to anything other than the perfect good cannot bring happiness. Eventually man will cease to be a willing slave. Then, with the desire to be free will come the binding, chafing kind of slavery, because we cannot be free that way.

Voluntary slavery is possible only to a Sovereign God, when to be His servant is the greatest imaginable good. Then obligation becomes the source of happiness and perfect freedom.

So Independence Day is the day one voluntarily surrenders his life to the Lord. In His service is perfect freedom — and joy.



Freedom In The Mountains

You just about have to consider freedom on the Fourth of July.

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I found a bit of freedom in the mountains last week. Since I was on vacation, I was free to do what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it.

Well, almost.

My sister-in-law Becky was with me, so I modified my freedom to keep it from treading all over her needs and desires. Of course, she was doing the same for me, so it wasn't a problem.

That's a funny thing about freedom. You're hardly ever free to exercise it completely. We have grown up with more freedom than many people ever know. We are citizens of a nation that prides itself on the freedom it provides its inhabitants. But that freedom is still limited — like on my vacation — by other people's rights.

However, it is one thing to surrender some of your freedom voluntarily. It's another when the limits are forced on you.

That is bondage. That's the opposite of liberty.

You hear a lot about liberty and bondage these days.

The part no one ever talks about is the fact that no one ever really is free. Everyone is in bondage to something or other — or someone or other.

But I didn't really begin to understand freedom until after I surrendered my life to the Lord.

It wasn't an easy thing to do. I did not want to acknowledge that Jesus was Lord and Savior. I didn't want to give anyone — even God — control of my life.

Foolish me. I thought I was in control. I knew I wasn't doing a wonderful job with it, but I thought I was doing it.

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And the truth is I didn't trust God. I was sure the day would come when he would command me to do something I didn't want to do. He would force me, would compel me to do it. And that's bondage, remember. And I thought I was free.

It worked just the way I thought it would. Only somehow it was different.

I remember the first time I found freedom in my voluntary bondage to the Lord. Every Sunday morning, before I surrendered my life to Jesus, I would go through the process of deciding whether or not to go to church. It was a no-win situation. I would either feel guilty if I didn't go or deprived if I did. After all, there was always something else to do, even if it was only sleep late.

That particular Sunday morning I realized I had been set free in a very special way. To go or not to go was no longer the question. I would go to church every Sunday because I wanted to be there.

I would no longer have to decide. The decision was made. I was free.

That doesn't sound like freedom to you? It sounds like slavery?

You're right. It is.

So is love. It's exactly the same. A lover is in slavery to the beloved.

It really pays to choose your beloved carefully, doesn't it?

Sometimes I forget how well I chose. I forget and fall back into forced bondage.

I was reminded of this during my time on that mountain. I had allowed some cares and concerns to



tie me up in knots and had become weighted down by them.

In fact it wasn't doing anything to or with myself. It was forgetting myself and concentrating on the Lord. Freedom came when I remembered who he is — and remembering that I belong to him.

Now, that's real freedom.



Freedom of Conscience

James Madison is quoted as saying that the religion of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of the individual.

Note that he said it *must* be, not that it *should* be.

That's because religious conviction will be what it will be, not what it is told to be. It simply is whatever the person who holds it believes it is.

Some denominations pride themselves on not having a creed, or statement of theology, on which all members must agree. Some denominations pride themselves on having creeds and on the efforts to which they have gone to produce these clear, concise expressions of their beliefs, for their members' use.

But I'm not so sure there is as much difference between these two groups, as they seem to think.

Churches without formal creeds expect a certain amount of agreement among members in some basic

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areas of understanding. And churches with formal creeds cannot be absolutely certain that everyone who says that creed has the same understanding of what it means.

The fact is, no matter what we say, each of us really believes only what we hold as true in our hearts. Everything else is mental assent without heart conviction and is easily subject to change and alteration.

Sometimes, of course, we don't actually know what we really believe. We think we believe what we say. But if we would watch ourselves — or better yet, ask the Spirit to give us eyes to see ourselves as he does — we might find out.

Madison also said it is the inalienable right of every man to exercise his religion in the way his convictions and his conscience may dictate.

What he means, I think, is that no one can do it for us or not do it for us. It depends only on ourselves.

And so we do what we believe. If we don't do it, we don't really believe it, we just think it. It isn't a conviction, it's just an idea.

Do I act as if the Son of God lived in me? If not, I don't really believe he does.

Do I try to love my neighbor because I can't help trying? If not, do I believe Jesus really cares how I act?

It's a question of whether or not we are convinced.

If our religion really is only that which we hold by conviction, then our conscience must be our guide, as Madison said. For only our conscience really knows our



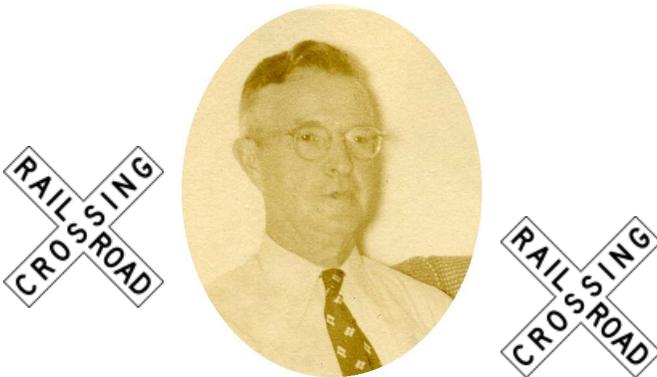
convictions. Oh, the Lord knows! But if our conscience can't tell us, we have a hard time hearing any other voice.

And our conscience only works if we have a sensitive conscience, one that has not been so dulled by lack of use or by misuse that it no longer pinches when we stray from the path of our real convictions.

A good conscience is a tough master. It seems to infringe on the very freedom of religion Madison was proclaiming. It seems to take our choice away. But it is really the servant of those convictions. So if we really want to live with religious liberty, according to our own convictions, not according to the idea of people around us, we need a good conscience.

One last thought — some bad news and some good news about consciences.

In a world like ours — and a very worldly world it is, too — a conscience can get dulled very easily. But it can be restored, made soft and clean and sensitive again, by the One who renews hearts. All you have to do is ask — but, of course, with conviction.



Two Years After My Father Died

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It has been two years since my father died — I still miss him very much. One day recently, I found myself missing him in an unexpected way.

Having lived away from home since I left for college, I have thought of myself as an independent person, capable of handling my own problems and not leaning on others.

That's not completely true, of course. In the middle of a time of decision-making recently, I wished Dad were here to make the decisions for me.

It isn't that I expected my father to solve my problems; he really didn't do much decision-making for me. But just by being there, somehow, he gave me a sense of security, gave me the courage to walk through whatever problem was facing me. I knew that if things got too bad, I could always call on him for help.

But no earthly father can be always with you, making the right decisions, giving you courage, peace and love. Those of us who have had good fathers are so terribly fortunate. Our earthly fathers provide our first understanding of what our heavenly Father is like, so we fortunate ones have been blessed with good first impressions.

My father was not perfect, of course. But everything about him that was gentle and loving, that was accepting and giving, that was firm, directive and supportive — all those things and more were reflections of the Father.

Today courses are being offered on "fathering" (and evidence of the need for such learning is everywhere). But there is only One who can teach this



truly. Jesus can teach us what the Father is like; seeing Jesus is the only way to see the Father clearly.

The loss of my earthly father is a human sorrow. It will have an end. I miss his gentle laughter, his tender tears, his strength — bought at great cost, for he hated to hurt anyone. But when he was here, I knew that his strength was only human, that the real strength we both needed came from Another — That One is with me always.



New Parents

A couple of my coworkers, who are husband and wife, have a new baby — their first. Their joy in the new life is a delight to see and a blessing, too. I watched the father's face recently when someone asked about his new daughter. She is sleeping almost all night now, he replied, waking only for her 2 or 3 a.m. feeding and going back to sleep.

"So it's easier than the first week," he said. Easier, but not better in the sense that the other was bad. Everything about his first child pleases this mid-30s parent and he is already planning to see that he keeps on enjoying her.

"She's a real blessing for this 'middle-aged' couple," he told the person who inquired. "Now I've just got to see that I stay healthy for the next 20 years."

I guess I was eavesdropping on their conversation, but I couldn't help it. My attention was

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caught by the light that shone from the new father's face, the delighted, tender smile that broke the minute the question was asked.

When, I wondered, have I seen a father so totally thrilled to be taking on the expense of raising a child in today's economy and the prospect of guiding a child through the physical, mental and spiritual problems that lie ahead? When have I seen a parent so thoroughly ready to have his "freedom" taken away and replaced with responsibility and care for another's life?

He is not without grave concerns about all these things, but still he delights in being a father. Fatherhood does not seem to be simply the result of something that happened months ago. He seems to find it an asset of great value.

My friend's very evident joy in being a father carries a message about fatherhood — and childhood.

We call God the Father because Jesus tells us it is right to do so.

That means He is the Father and I, when I am born again, am His child.

The love, delight and anticipation I see on my friend's face is a reflection of the joy my heavenly Father feels for the fruit of this new birth.

Jesus tells us we must come to Him as a little child. A child is loved, protected and cared for.

I'm sure my friend will make plans for his daughter's well-being. He will do all in his power to keep her safe and bring richness and blessing to her life.

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My heavenly Father will do all in His power, too, and all power is His — except the one He has given into our keeping, the power to refuse to let Him be our Father.



My parents, David & Louise Green in a photo taken about 1950.

Mother's Day — Father's Love.

Sunday is Mothers' Day.

Most of us will find a way to thank our mothers for all their tender loving care. And that's certainly appropriate. Where would we be without mothers?

Mother love has acquired a pretty bad reputation in recent years. It has been blamed by everybody from novelists to psychologists for causing many of the ills of the world.

For example, I heard an "old saying" the other day that was new to me. It went: "Show me a happy family and I will show you a mother and son."

It was new to me, but the message it carried was as old as ancient Greek dramas.

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And Christian author C.S. Lewis acknowledged that mother love is sometimes "smother love."

In *The Great Divorce*, his novel of the way we choose either heaven or hell in the decisions we make, he writes about a couple of mothers who would rather stay in hell themselves or see their children stay in hell than lose their personal relationship with — and control over — them.

The truth is, mother love that isn't based on Father love isn't much good.

That's Father as in God.

Like many human mothers, God the Father was willing to pay the price to redeem his children from the consequences of their sins.

Unlike some mothers, he was and is willing to let his children pay the temporary price for the mistakes they make so they won't have to pay that eternal price.

Human love wants to alleviate all human suffering now. Divine love wants to alleviate eternal suffering, but is willing to allow temporary human suffering for the purpose of bringing the sufferer to the point of accepting God's provision God's way.

I don't think for a moment that God delights in even temporary human suffering. Look at the compassion Jesus showed for those whose suffering he saw.

But look also at the grief he expressed over the blindness of the Pharisees and over the people of Jerusalem to the message he brought of the kingdom.

I believe his grief is deep today over all who think as they did. And I believe he is as determined

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today as he was then — in spite of the grief — to allow us to make our own choices and suffer the consequences.

I was a 23-year-old intellectual snob when I got into an argument at a conference over the primacy of social action and evangelism in the church.

We had been asked what was the most important thing we had to do for others.

A retired admiral said you had to feed the starving before they could hear the message of the gospel. I said the most important thing was to tell them about God's plan of salvation.

He wanted to ease everyone's current suffering, to give jobs to the jobless, homes to the homeless and dignity to the downtrodden. I wanted to save them from hell.

After the argument, each of us still held our original opinion. The best we could do was agree to disagree.

By stopping there we missed an opportunity to understand the full meaning of loving God with all our hearts, minds and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. We missed the chance to see how that all fits together in the completeness of our Father's will for his children.

Rather than fight about who was right, the admiral and I should have agreed to work hand in hand, as our Lord intended us to do. We should have begun to tackle the task of loving the Lord's people in the way he had directed each of us.

Of course, we are to try to alleviate human suffering. Of course, we are to preach the good news.

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When Jesus told us to clothe the naked and feed the hungry, he meant we were to provide earthly food for empty bellies as well as the Bread of Life for starving souls.

Even if we try very hard, we won't do away with hunger, pain and loneliness, or with unrepentant sin.

But we will have done what the Lord commanded. He wants us to love with the best of mother love and Father love, too.



Honoring God And Parents

I was thinking the other day about what it means to honor your father and mother, I know it's the fifth of the Ten Commandments, but what does it really mean?

And now that both my parents are gone, do I need to think about it any more? My father died 10 years ago; my mother last week.

In fact it was while I was sitting by her hospital bed that these questions came to mind. There was little I could do for her. Mostly I just sat there.

And thought.

And wondered.

Have I honored her? Have I respected her properly? Have I given her the reverence due her as my mother?

I haven't always done everything she wanted. Sometimes I thought she was wrong. And although we



did not often argue about it, we did not always see eye to eye on everything. But is that a lack of honoring?

God obviously thinks this business of honoring our parents is important or he wouldn't command it. But why? What is the significance of the act of honoring two specific people?

Well, I reminded myself, the Ten Commandments were not given as arbitrary laws set down to make our lives miserable. So although we may not always see it that way, they were designed for our health and well-being. They were given us by our Creator and who should know better what is good for us?

I know I cannot comprehend the mind of God and I know obedience is more important than understanding, but I believe God reveals a certain amount of his thoughts to us as we strive to obey his commandments.

As we limit our worship to him alone, we open ourselves to God. As we reject man-made images of him, we see that he cannot be limited by our understanding. As we use his name properly, we learn more about what his name means. As we keep the Sabbath holy, we grow in understanding of what it means to be in relationship with God.

As we rein in our desires to murder, commit adultery, steal, lie about our neighbors or covet what is not ours, we learn about the character of God, the character we will have when we have been remade in the image of Jesus.

That's four commandments about our relationship with God and five about our relationship with each other.

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And in between is one about our relationship with our parents.

In a special way this commandment bridges the gap between the two, for parent/child relations are both human and divine.

As we live lives that reflect honor on our human fathers and mothers, we learn something of what it means to be children of God. As we learn how to live with honor for these close family members, we learn something of what it means to live with all men and women.

Jesus honored his mother at the wedding in Cana when, at her command, he turned water into wine.

Did the Son of God dishonor her later, when he rejected her call to stop teaching the crowd and come to her?

Jesus said, in Luke's version of the story, that everyone who heard God's word and practiced it was his brother and sister and mother. Did that dishonor her?

I don't think so. Mary knew the importance of hearing and obeying.

Before I came to know God, I based my behavior on what I knew my mother would approve. There were things I simply did not do because I knew she wouldn't like it. And I both loved her and feared her displeasure.

Later, as I began to know the Lord and to try to follow him. I found I was doing the same things for him I had done for her.

She had taught me — and showed me — more about him and his ways than I had known at the time.



Mother is gone now. She is no longer here to know whether I bring honor or dishonor to her name.

But my relationship with my Heavenly Father is eternal. And whatever I do that pleases Him, honors her.



On Honoring Unlovable Parents

A couple of questions have come in the mail about my column on the meaning of honoring one's father and mother.

First, I was asked if I hadn't ignored the basic meaning of the Fifth Commandment, which is to respect and care for one's parents, not just to live a life that reflects well on them.

And next, I was asked what you do when you have indifferent, selfish, manipulative or downright mean parents. How do you honor them?

After looking back at the column, I decided perhaps I had paid too little attention to the caretaking aspect of the commandment. Of course we are to take care of our parents. What people usually want to argue about, however, is how we do it.

This was true in Jesus' day, too. Mark recounts that Jesus used the approach to this commandment as an example of the hypocrisy of some of the religious people. He chastised the Pharisees for honoring God with their lips but not their hearts.

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"You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" Jesus says in Mark 7. "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban [that is, a gift devoted to God], then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother."

We find our own ways of doing the same thing today!

Next, it is true that some parents are hard to honor because they have not behaved honorably themselves!

This, too, was true in Bible times.

In her commentary on the commandments, *Smoke on the Mountain*, Joy Davidman reminds us that Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, restated the Fifth Commandment and added, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger."

Writing in the early 1950s, Ms. Davidman saw society changing. She wrote of people who decide not to have children because children interfere with personal fulfillment. She also wrote of the separation of people by generation, with little or no communication across the gap. These things have not gone away. Ms. Davidman saw a possible benefit in all this change, however.

Now that children are no longer an economic asset and families are not actually necessary, we may be able to cherish each other as an act of love.



"Now at last we might do for love what our ancestors did for self-interest; now at last it is possible to honor our parents genuinely, because they no longer have the power to kill us if we don't," she wrote.

And that is what we do with the parent who is not really very honorable.

We love him or her anyway, just because we want to. Not because we think they deserve it, but because the One who loves us — and we don't deserve it — loves them.

There is no formula for how this is worked out on a daily basis — except the formula of yielded hearts directed by the Lord.



A Mother's Heart

I was thinking about mothers' hearts the other day.

Almost everyone I've talked to recently has expressed deep concern for their children, for their current or future health and happiness.

This is not to say that all my friends' children are in trouble. A few are in one kind of tight spot or another, but none, fortunately, is in serious trouble right now.

But mothers' hearts can ache about basically good things that haven't even happened yet — they're funny that way — because they know that nothing in

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this life is an unadulterated good. For every good thing there is the potential for a bad or harmful alternate.

And I thought of some of the mothers mentioned in Scripture and of their concerns for their children.

God made mothers' hearts, but he certainly did not make things easy for mothers.

Take Eve, for example. Eve knew that one of her sons killed the other. Imagine knowing that!

And think of the mothers of all those children killed at the command of Herod, killed in the effort to slay the infant Jesus.

And what about that most favored mother, Mary. Didn't someone tell her that a sword would pierce her heart, too?

I found when I looked it up in Luke 2:21-35 that it was Simeon, a holy man who had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before seeing the Lord's Christ. When Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus to the temple to present him to the Lord, Simeon saw them and recognized the infant as the one he had been waiting for.

Simeon took the baby in his arms and praised God. And when he had finished, he gave the baby back to his mother and said to her, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

And he was right, over and over again.

Surely Mary's soul was pierced 12 years later when the family went again to Jerusalem and she discovered on the way home that Jesus was not in the



caravan with herself and Joseph. And when she found him in the temple and he was not a bit repentant about scaring her.

And what about that incident when she and Jesus' brothers and sisters were concerned about his well-being — he was preaching some pretty strange things and causing a lot of controversy — and they went to try to bring him home. And he rejected them all — including his mother — with the words that those who did the will of his Father were his mother and brother and sister.

Any mother's heart would be pierced by such a remark.

And then that awful moment when she stood at the foot of the cross and watched her son die an agonizing death. What could hurt worse than that?

Did she wonder if the original promise had been true? Wouldn't that make your heart ache?

And again at the empty tomb. Not even his body was left for her to cherish.

How we mothers cling to our children. How we long for good things for them, for an absence of pain and conflict and for comfort and happiness in overflowing measure!

But Mary's heart did not break. And she was there with the disciples in the upper room waiting at Jesus' command for whatever was to happen next.

She was there when the Holy Spirit filled the room and all the people in it — and her.

How her heart must have rejoiced — even with the sword still in it.

Mothers' hearts are tough.

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At their best, they are an image of the love of God.

This is a love that loves without cause, in spite of everything the children do to turn the love away. This is a love that grieves over wounds and rejoices over blessings. A love that plots and plans how to make good things happen.

Not everybody's mother is able to love with love, of course. We are only human.

But it seems to me that when we do it right even when it hurts like a sword has pierced our souls — then we reflect that love into the pain of the world.



My First Mothers' Day Without...

Pearls are formed when something irritating gets into the soft interior of an oyster.

The oyster tries to do something to make the irritation go away. It covers the irritating presence with a slick substance, but it still hurts. So, it applies more of the covering substance — and still it hurts. And so it goes.

Because an oyster is made the way it is, the "substance" it applies to the irritant is, if not soothing to its interior, beautiful to our eye.



And we value the fruit of the oyster's discomfort.

Good relationships are somewhat like pearls. They involve covering over small irritations with the material of commitment — and doing it over and over again, until something beautiful — and valuable — has been made.

I have a few of these pearls — not enough perhaps to make a whole pearl necklace, but enough to make a pretty good showing on a gold chain.

And I value them. They are precious to me.

But they are not the pearl of great price Jesus spoke about in the parable in Matthew 13.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

One day I found that I could have a personal relationship with God through belief in his Son, Jesus, the Christ.

But to have that relationship, I would have to sell all the others.

God is a jealous God and will not have me putting anyone or any thing above him.

Although I said I was willing to give it all up for him, it did not appear at first as if I actually had to do so. If I "sold" all these relationships, God left them with me.

I did not know that, in the economy of the kingdom, the Lord uses our human relationships in shaping our relationship with him.

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Last Sunday was my first Mother's Day without my mother. Naturally I thought about her and about what it was like to be her daughter.

When I was growing up, she was the final arbiter of what was right and wrong, what was acceptable and what was not. And I wanted her approval, not her disapproval.

In fact, whether or not mother would like — or approve of — something was one of the criteria I considered in making decisions. This was true long after I ceased to be a child.

That does not mean I always made the decision she would have approved. Oh, no. I made a great many I was pretty sure she would not be pleased about. I just tried to make sure she did not find out about them.

Now, I'm not talking about the spectacular sorts of misbehaving. Just stubborn rebellions of small kinds — just doing things my way.

And I suspect she knew about many more of these decisions than we ever talked about. We just covered them over with love and went on. We made a pearl.

Now she is gone, but I still have a mother-child relationship. Only in this one I am the mother.

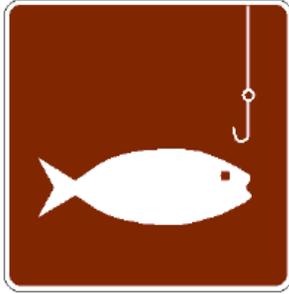
My children and I are making nice, thick pearls, thank you. We've had to. Our relationships haven't always been fun — in fact, sometimes they have been painful — but I wouldn't trade them for any others.

I don't know if my mother learned anything about the Lord through her relationship with me. I



know how much the Lord has taught me about his kind of love through my relationships with my children.

And the first lesson was that I had to love him more than them. I had to give them to the Lord and receive them back as his gifts to me. That made all the other lessons possible.



The Gift Of The Spirit

I have always wanted God to love me in a special way.

That's pretty childish coming from a grown woman, I'm afraid, so I have kept the thought carefully hidden — even from myself most of the time.

After all, I knew God loved me. And not just a little bit, either. Enough to die for my sins so that I could come into the presence of God and live with him forever.

That's pretty special, isn't it? What more could somebody want?

Nothing. But I did, anyway. It was just that he loved everybody that way. He loved everybody in the whole world the same way. Sometimes it just didn't seem very personal

Anyway, I kept this a secret longing. I didn't even talk to the Lord about it, because it seems so

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childish, so ungrateful after all he has already done for me.

Then recently I had the opportunity to show someone else I cared about her.

I was doing my absolute best to try to discern the right thing to do on her behalf. I wanted to help her in a time of need to feel cherished and loved — and still to encourage her to trust in the Lord and wait patiently on him.

And I realized that, although this friend was truly very special to me, I wasn't doing anything for her that I wouldn't try to do for someone else in her situation.

Would it appear only that I was doing the usual thing, the thing I would do for anyone? Or would she believe that I really cared?

When Jesus was teaching his disciples how to pray, he gave them the words of the Lord's prayer and then he told them a couple of stories about giving gifts to people.

One was about the man who asked his neighbor for bread in the night and was finally given it because he kept on asking.

The other was a comparison of earthly fathers and God.

"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:11-13)

Barbara White



I was giving this friend the best that I knew how to give — trying to balance compassion with strengthening comfort. If I, being evil, could do that, how much more can my Lord give to each of his children?

And that includes me.

I have asked for him to be with me always — the most special gift I can have. And I have his word for it that he has not given me a stone or a scorpion. He has given me his Holy Spirit.

Earthly fathers and earthly friends can't be with every child and needy friend at the same time. Jesus showed us the Father's love, but even he, when he was on earth, could not be with each of his disciples, much less everyone in the whole world at the same time.

But the Holy Spirit can. That is the very special — and very individual — gift of God to each of his children.





On Observing Halloween

Some friends of mine have been trying for the past few years to convince their children that Halloween is not for them.

They believe that if the observance of All Hallows Eve — from which we derive our present Halloween — was ever innocent, it no longer is.

It hasn't been easy in the past. But this year the struggle became even more difficult. Not only were they dealing with their kids, they were dealing with their church as well.

"I'm really angry with the church," my friend said. "They are taking the young people to a haunted house."

The announcement of this upcoming treat, as made by the children, constituted a direct challenge of the parental stand. They said, in effect, "You must be wrong because the church says this is all right."

The challenge was clear. Would they disagree with the church? Would they refuse to allow the children to go? Could they convince the kids that it was really the wrong thing to do?

One of these friends takes a strong stand on things occult because before she became a Christian, she had allowed such things to have a strong influence in her life. When she committed her life to the Lord, she came to see this fascination with the occult as something God has forbidden and she cast it away from herself.

Now, as parents, she and her husband want to keep their children safe from things they see as clear dangers. And to them, Halloween, with its emphasis on



the occult, including witches, goblins and various aspects of the demonic, is a danger.

The church leaders must not see a trip through a haunted house as posing a spiritual danger. For if they did, surely they would not subject their young members to such a risk.

I don't know what my friends decided to do about the haunted house, but I believe my friends could use this time of decision making as an opportunity to teach their children about the responsibilities that go with a personal relationship with God.

Their — and our — ability to walk with the Lord could be greatly strengthened if they understood the process by which they make decisions — especially in those areas where Christians do not agree. And they are legion.

Let me digress a moment to consider whether my friend or any other parent should impose his understandings on his children.

Eventually everybody's children will have to decide such issues for themselves. No one can answer to God for anyone else's choices.

But guiding children in the process of learning how to make decisions is one of the major tasks of both parents and churches. Guarding them from unnecessary danger is another. And all teachers, including parents and church leaders, will have to answer for how well they have tried to fulfill these responsibilities.

But are haunted houses and Halloween goblins really related to our faith?

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Well, God is either a very present reality in all aspects of our life or he isn't God at all. So we need to know where we stand and why we stand there even on something as silly-sounding as haunted houses.

Let's consider some questions.

Do we believe God cares what we do? Can something be wrong for one person to do, but OK for someone else? And how do we know who is right?

Have we asked God to reveal his will in this matter? Or have we avoided asking because we don't want to hear the answer?

According to my dictionary, the occult refers to "matters regarded as involving the action or influence of supernatural or supernormal powers or some secret knowledge of them."

My friend has personal experience to consider. She says God has shown her that to open her life to anything like that is to dishonor God. Ours is a jealous God who is opposed to anything that takes away from his place as the only Lord of our lives.

She also turned to Scripture and found that God has specifically warned his people to avoid all sorts of occult practices and not to have anything to do with them. She also found that he said his people are to be set apart for him and are to worship him alone, and that Jesus said Christians are to be in the world, but not of it.

All of which are behind her decision about Halloween and haunted houses.

Once God has revealed his will to us concerning something in our lives, it becomes rebellion to go in any other direction but the one he has set.



But what if he hasn't revealed this particular thing to somebody else? What if they have searched the Word for themselves and do not see it this way?

Again, it's simple, but difficult. I can only walk the narrow path laid out for me. I can, however, guide where God has given us the right and responsibility to guide. For the rest, I can only continue to love and to pray.

Paul talks about this sort of thing in Romans 14, although he focuses there on whether it is OK to eat meat sacrificed to idols and on how we handle our different opinions about which day of the week on which to worship.

He says the solution to the problem is for each one to obey the Lord in all he does.

"Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind," Paul writes. "He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."



Say It In Your Last Will And Testament

I was talking recently with some folks about wills and revokable living trusts and that sort of thing.

The discussion reminded me that I once wrote a column about making a last will and testament.

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And as I recall, I received quite a bit of comment on it at the time.

It seemed I wasn't the only person who needed to update a will — or tell a family what was important.

This is probably as true today as it was a dozen years ago.

So, I believe I will share my thoughts on the subject again — some of the original ones, anyway, and some that are more recent.

Since I am not a lawyer or an expert on inheritance taxes, the will part of a last will and testament is not really what I want to talk about.

It's the testament part.

Have you ever wanted to make your family sit down and listen while you told them what you believe life is all about?

If you have ever actually tried to do this, I suspect you found in short order that everybody had something terribly urgent they needed to do.

Family members can come up with as many excuses for not attending your party as the folks did who were invited to the banquet in one of the parables Jesus told.

But there is one time when I believe most people can count on their family members listening to what they have to say — when their will is read.

And while those family members are listening to what you have to say about the disposition of your worldly goods, they will — if you have done your part — also hear what you have to say about what is important in life.



That's the testament part of a last will and testament, simply a statement of what you believe.

And since the reading of the testament will be followed by the part about your worldly goods, it's a pretty good bet that those present will hear what you had to say.

I made my first, will when I realized that if you become a parent, even if you think you have no worldly goods, you need a will to handle the guardianship of your minor children.

I made my second one when I became a single parent.

Neither contained a testament.

My children have been adults for some time now — although I occasionally wonder — and my desire to leave them more than stuff is even greater than before.

Stuff, as the Rubber Maid commercial and the economy have made clear, comes and goes. I will give them what I have when the time comes. It may make a difference in their lives. Or, it may not.

But opening to them my deeply held beliefs, well, that *could* make a difference in their lives for all eternity.

It was quite a challenge, trying to summarize my faith, putting down in a few words what I want to tell my family about my faith. But I've worked on it for some time now and I think I can do it.

Even if I can't write say everything, perhaps I can say enough to let them know how important this was to me. It just may make them look for more on their own.

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Anyway, this is what I want to say to those I love:

Believing as I do that a loving God created the world and all that is in it, and that He put me here to have a relationship with Him; and believing that He became a man so that I could know Him, love, and serve Him, that He died and rose again that I might be forgiven for my sins and live with Him forever; and believing that He sent his Spirit to live within me, to teach strengthen and lead me, I have desired to live according to His will, loving and serving Him and my neighbor.

I long ago surrendered you to His loving care and direction, asking that His will for you would be accomplished. I leave you now with my blessing in His hands, with thanksgiving that He will continue His loving action in your lives and will bring you to a closer relationship with Him, which is the greatest treasure of all.



Some Reader Response

Every now and then, I find an interesting letter or two among the press releases and church bulletins in my mail.

A while back, a woman responded to a column about leaving a statement of your faith in your will so your heirs will hear it when the will is read — a time when I thought they would be paying attention.

Barbara White



"What makes you think your children will survive you?" she asked.

All of hers had not. But we do tend to think they will, even when we know there are no guarantees.

She shared briefly some of her private pain over the loss of a grown child and a grandchild.

And she wrote simply of her struggle to recover her relationship with God:

"She was a beautiful Christian and thousands of people prayed for her, but she died. For weeks I couldn't understand why God wouldn't spare her and let her live. Slowly I'm coming back into peaceful comradeship with my Heavenly Father and trying to cope with the heartache, regrets, guilt, etc."

No answers to her questions. Just a growing sense of his peace.

Near the end of the letter, she said her hope and prayer for me were that I would never have to endure such heartache.

Then, in closing, she said that it was nice to see such an article in the paper.

I haven't known the pain she had to bear. I have known others, but I will not attempt to compare them.

What stood out in her letter for me was the simplicity of her statement of reconciliation with God.

Our pains are too real to ignore, but so is the reality of his presence with us.

God does not often tell us "why." Instead, into the middle of our pain, he slowly makes his presence felt.

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Another recent letter came from a man who was sorry to tell me I could not really be born again, that I could not, possibly understand biblical salvation and that it was questionable where I would spend eternity.

He seemed genuinely sorry, saying how often he had enjoyed my column and found insights and wisdom in them.

But then I wrote about a person of a particular church, a young woman who had decided to become a Catholic nun.

And, he said, since Catholic priests teach that salvation is through one's own good — and I promoted such false teaching — that meant I could not know it really comes from the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

Mother Teresa's good works will not save her, he said. Good people will be shocked when they find out what their eternal destiny is, he said.

"We are not changed from bad people to good people by the blood of Christ, but from spiritually dead people to spiritually alive people, from death to life."

He did say he would pray for me. And I'm grateful. We all need prayer.

He might stop praying, however, if he knew how often I find spiritual truth in the speeches and writings of people in other denominations than my own and occasionally even in other faiths.

I don't know what that young nun believes about salvation.

I was impressed with her strong sense of God's presence in her life and her willingness to obey his call on her. I thought, and still think, that was worth sharing.



Jesus had several things to say about separating the saved from the unsaved. He separated sheep from goats according to who had served him in the needy. He also told some who did wonders in his name that he never knew them.

I believe that Jesus is the door of the sheepfold, the way into the kingdom. I believe his blood is the only thing that can wash away my sin.

But I believe that those who seek the truth seek him, whether they know it or not, and they will find him eventually because he seeks to reveal himself to us.

I leave to the Lord the determination of which ones among those who call him Lord have had their sins washed away and who haven't.



Writing Ministers To The Writer

Some weeks I really don't want to write a column. Either too much is going on and I don't have enough time to sort it out.

Or too little is going on and I don't have anything to write about.

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Or a lot is going on, but I'm in a fog and can't see it clearly enough to identify it, much less write about it.

This is one of those weeks.

I'm not real "up" this week and I hate to write "down."

Also I just don't want to talk about it.

Not now.

Later.

Maybe.

But the Lord requires one thing of me in this column. Honesty.

So let me try to be honest with you about what I do when I find myself blank-minded and a bit numb.

I remember that this has happened before — the blank-mindedness and the numbness, that is — and I hang on.

I trust that this, too, will pass.

I remember that the sun has broken through the dark before and I believe it will again. I believe flowers will bloom again and birds will sing again..

I even believe I will laugh again.

What it amount to basically is that I trust the Lord.

Not to make it right. Not to make it go away. Not even to explain it to me.

I trust him to be there.

I know he is here now, but since I can't feel him, I trust him to let me feel him out there somewhere later.

Barbara White



The first time I went through a dark valley, I had no such confidence. I thought the darkness would last forever.

If I had written a book at that time, it might have read like Keith Miller's *Intimacy* or Joyce Landorf's *Unworld People*.

Maybe such books do minister to some people. But I'm not so sure.

Chances are the writing of them ministered to the authors, but I don't know whether they lead the readers out into the light beyond the shadow. Both books spend most of their pages on the down side of the situation, although they end on a hopeful note.

Well.

I, too, hope.

And I remember.

And lifting me up and carrying me along are not the details of other people's sorrows, but the voices of tough-minded people who persevere.

As my wonderful little mother said to me recently — after giving a deep sigh at the options facing her — "Well, God never promised me a rose garden."

True.

But she has managed to make it look like one. She has acted as if roses grew around her.

Even if they did have some thorns.

Well.

That was more than I thought I had to say.

A glimmer of light already!

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Thank you, Lord.

See. He *is* faithful.



My Credentials

Somebody asked me recently what my credentials were for writing about the Christian faith. She wanted to know where I had studied and how I had gotten "so wise."

I told her I majored in elementary education at Duke University, which did little to make me wise about matters of faith. I did minor in religion, but most of the courses I took had little of faith and much of philosophy in them.

I told her I thought that if I have any wisdom, it must have come from the trials and troubles I've been through. And I rattled off a list of things, major and minor, that have happened to me and those I love.

My questioner looked a little nonplussed. But she accepted my answer and we both let the matter drop there.

I have thought about our exchange since then and realized *I was* wrong.

If I have any wisdom in matters of faith, it is not because I have known a bit of pain and stress.

It's because I asked for it..

Barbara White



And then I looked to see what the Lord was saying to me.

All good things, including wisdom, come from God.

We don't generate them.

We don't earn them.

We don't even deserve them.

He gives them as he chooses.

I suspect, as a matter of fact, that he offers wisdom to all of us — more of it than any one of us can grasp at any given time.

After reflecting on how God has answered my prayer for wisdom in knowing him and how to love and serve him, I think I may have spotted one important means he has used. If anything specific has made the difference for me, it has been the writing of this column.

For the past 10 years, I have had to look at my life on a regular, daily basis to see what is happening in it that speaks to me of the Lord. Otherwise I would never have known what to write about.

I have had to listen to hear what he has been saying. And I have had to evaluate my actions in the light of what I have seen and heard — and read in the Bible.

It was this process of relating everything to the author and finisher of my faith, not that list of aches and pains, that produced whatever wisdom I have.

Some people think that growing old will make them mature.

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But some people live and learn and some people just live.

And some people suffer and grow, while others just suffer.

The difference is not what we do, but what we let God do in us.

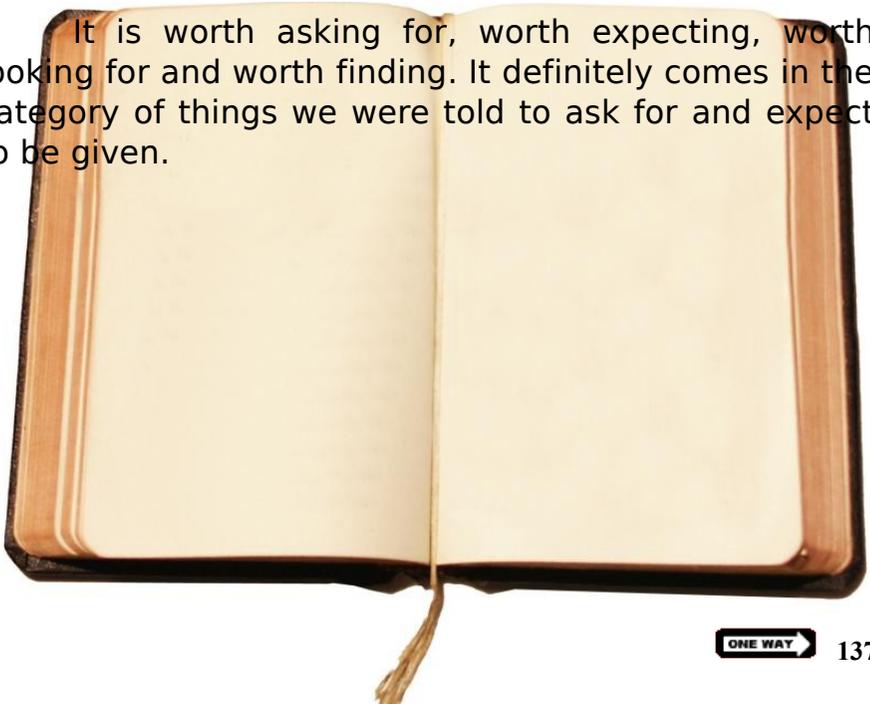
I want to get back to that lady who asked the question in the first place and tell her I was wrong. I want her to know that she doesn't have to set out to suffer to grow wise about God. If that were true, few of us would search out the road.

Of course, it may involve some pain. After all, we are at war with an enemy who would destroy us. So life is like that.

Also, I must admit that I often won't learn a particular lesson until I hurt.

But the great joy that comes from knowing God, not just knowing about him, is worth the grief of the trials we go through.

It is worth asking for, worth expecting, worth looking for and worth finding. It definitely comes in the category of things we were told to ask for and expect to be given.





**Behold,
I send an Angel before thee,
to keep thee in the way,
and to bring thee into the place
which I have prepared.**



The Work Of A Christian

Last week I wrote about the lack of gladness in my life and about my decision to work at trusting the Lord to provide for me.

I am happy to report that it worked!

Scripture says that the work of a Christian is to believe in Jesus Christ. And that is what I have been deciding to do. I have been deciding daily and

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sometimes more often than that, to believe he is who he says he is and that I can trust in and rely on him.

The result has been a growing sense of peace — and gladness.

I can remember the thoughts that dragged my spirits down prior to that decision. I can remember them, but I don't give them much of an airing right now.

All this past week, when they popped up, I grasped them firmly, thrust them away with a determined, "Not now!" and turned just as firmly to something else.

I turned to choose from among the things I know about the Lord that build me up rather than the things I know about myself that tear me down. Each time I thought about one of those things, I found it easier to thank the Lord for who he is and to rejoice in what he has done for me.

And I was able to decide — one more time — to trust the Lord with my life. Today's life and tomorrow's.

Having told you in last week's column that I was going to work at believing in Jesus, I thought I would report back that I did work at it, and the results have been really fantastic!

Nothing has changed, of course. Except me!

But since I am different, so is everything else.

And the more I trust, the more I am able to trust. The easier it becomes to say, This IS the day the Lord has made. I *will* rejoice and be glad in it. The easier it becomes to choose to rejoice as an act of will rather than wait for it to happen as an emotion.



Besides, grumbling is refusing to rejoice in what God has given today. And it doesn't produce good fruit. Check out what happened to the grumblers among the Hebrews in the wilderness.

Am I merely promoting the power of positive thinking? Am I suggesting that if we reject negativity and think positive thoughts, everything will come out right? Do I think I can make things happen the way I want them to by the thoughts that I think?

No. No. No.

I am promoting obedience to and trust in God, not in self.

This does not involve making up positive thoughts about myself or pretending I am something I am not. It involves focusing on the Lord rather than on self. This is not pumping myself up or cheering myself on. This is reminding myself of who is God and of what he has said.

This is refusing to grumble about the day the Lord has given me — even if it's in a sorry state. It is refusing to give a home to anxiety and fear — not because there is nothing to fear, but because I believe I belong to the Lord forever.

And this decision opens me to the power of the Spirit of God. He is the one who makes things come out right — right in the eyes of the Lord even if not in the eyes of the world. He lines my will up with the Father's will — even if I have no idea what it is.

But then the Lord is not as concerned with where I am going as he is with how I go.

Last week in *My Utmost for His Highest*, daily readings from the works of Oswald Chambers, I found

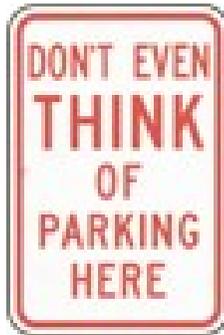
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this: "God's training is for now, not presently. His purpose is for this minute, not for something in the future. We have nothing to do with the afterwards of obedience; we get wrong when we think of the afterwards.

"What men call training and preparation, God calls the end.

"God's end is to enable me to see that he can walk on the chaos of my life just now. If we have a further end in view, we do not pay sufficient attention to the immediate present: if we realize that obedience is the end, then each moment as it comes is precious."

That's the work of believing.



Resentment

It was quite a shock to realize I was harboring resentments.

Resentment has a way of hiding. It can change color the way a chameleon does and can blend in with the surroundings so well it is not even noticed until it has done a lot of damage.

It can even look like righteous indignation.

I discovered my hidden resentment the usual way. God revealed it to me.



I was busy trying to show someone his own need to deal with a resentment that may have gone unnoticed by him but was pretty obvious to me.

I won't go into details. Let me just say that my friend was offended at something that hadn't even happened to him; it had happened to someone else.

But the very fact that it happened at all had made my friend angry inside.

That's what being offended is — feeling violated, transgressed.

I reminded my friend that the Lord's Prayer makes it very clear that we are forgiven in the same way we forgive.

My friend said he understood that, but that since nothing had happened to him, forgiveness didn't enter in.

The trouble was, he said, that he just didn't want to have anything to do with the transgressor.

While I was marshaling my next round of arguments, so I could show my friend how wrong he was, the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to myself.

What offends you? the Spirit whispered in my ear.

What sin have you decided is so terrible that you cannot bring yourself to associate with those who commit it — even if the act was not aimed at you?

And I knew immediately what it was. I could see it as plain as day.

People who leave their spouses to marry other people offend me. I don't want to have anything to do with them.

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And I knew why. That happened to me.

I thought I had dealt with all that, so it was a shock to find the secret cache of resentment. By avoiding those who offended me, I was able to avoid having to deal with myself.

Suddenly, I realized that by my action, I was judging God. I was saying that I thought God was making a mistake in forgiving those who did it — and making a bigger mistake in asking me not only to forgive, but to love such people.

Then I realized it wasn't God who was making mistakes.

Now my problem was not my friend's problem, but *something* offended him, and being offended will eventually have the same affect on him that it has had on me.

How about you? Is there anything — anything at all — that you consider so bad that those who do it cannot be borne?

Well, whatever it is, it isn't too much for Jesus. He bore it all, all those things that offend us. He bore it all to the cross and forgave those who did it.

Not only that, he gladly associates with those I don't want to associate with at all, and he loves those I would rather ignore.

So if I'm going to follow him, I'm going to have to associate with them, too, and I'm going to have to do it in love, not in grudging fellowship that is not fellowship at all.

But how?

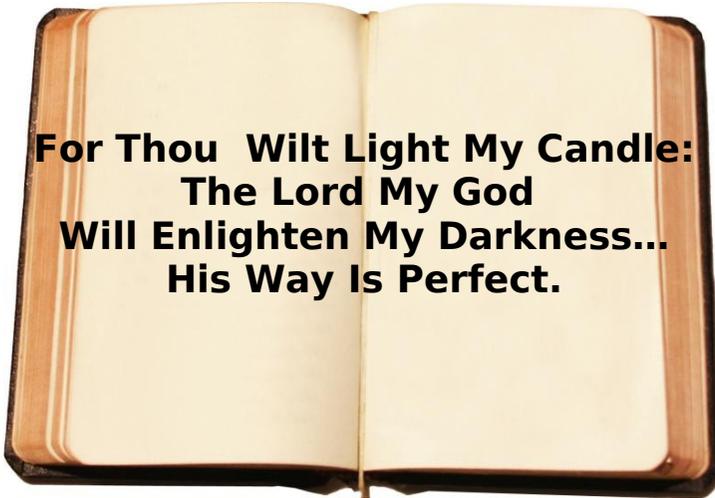
It won't be easy. These are not light matters, and I must not treat them lightly.

Barbara White



The place to begin is with a deep, true sense of gratitude to God for the fact that he is not offended with me. I haven't done the thing that so offends me, but I have done plenty that offends a holy God.

Why doesn't God find me so offensive that he avoids me completely? It's because the price of my offense has already been paid. He looks at me through the grace of his Son's death on the cross. As long as that truth is real to me, I will be able to look for ways to love those other sinners.



Keeping A Journal

People sometimes ask me what is involved in keeping a journal. I usually share a few items from my own efforts in trying to convince them that journal

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keeping does not have to be great literature — or even significant theology. It just has to be real.

Perhaps some of you have thought about keeping a journal, but have hesitated because you "can't write" or don't think you would have anything worthwhile to say.

But it only has to be worthwhile to you. And it will be, I promise.

I enjoy turning the pages of my spiral-bound notebook, dipping into my entries, laughing sometimes, rejoicing sometimes that the problems of that particular day are now long gone and the pains redeemed by the Lord.

Let me show you what I mean:

One Saturday, after reading Psalm 138, I wrote: "What are today's decisions that they should trouble me? The Lord hears my call and makes me bold and strengthens my soul, like the psalmist, my heart is full of praise and thanksgiving for the gift God has given me of knowing him."

On Wednesday of the same week, I read Psalm 142 and wrote: "Life is certainly a complicated mess, Lord. In this psalm, David was surrounded by complications, but he knew enough to cry out to you. You know my way, he said. And you know mine, too."

Then I catalogued some family troubles, ranging from a son-in-law out of work to an ailing pet, and continued: "But you, O Lord, know my path. You are my certainty in a world of uncertainty. You are my companion, the light in my darkness, my shelter from the winds and rains. You care for me and your mercies are new every morning. How great is your faithfulness!"



And I felt better.

Sometime later, after attending a funeral, I write: "As I sat halfway up the packed chapel, I thought how little thought we give to the matter of life and death — how most of us manage never to think of death at all.

"And I thought that, in a world which works very hard at ignoring God, the one time that seems impossible is at a funeral."

And one morning, after watching *Larry King Live* the night before, I wrote, with more heat than usual: "I wish I had called Larry King and asked Episcopal Bishop John Spong a question. Only I couldn't think of which question would really pin him to the mat!

"But I believed it had to be something related to the meaning of the crucifixion. I kept remembering that passage in First Corinthians 2 where Paul talks about the wisdom of men and the power of the Holy Spirit and knowing only Christ and him crucified.

"But would a question about the fruit of the crucifixion slow Spong down for a moment? What is there to be atoned for that needed a sacrifice? What is sin if not lawlessness from within? And where is the law if not in Scripture? Is it really there in the best minds of each generation? Or the worst?

"As Pilate said, what is truth? It is beyond our ability to define narrowly — but not, I believe, beyond our ability to comprehend more and more as we attempt to live out what we already know of it."

Later when a friend was in trouble, I wrote: "Lord, I lift up ... and I ask your blessings on her. It seems to me, Lord, that she has lost her conviction that you are her God, her Savior and her place of

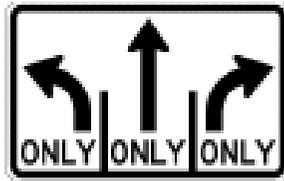
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healing and refuge. Lighten her darkness, O Lord, and bring her to a place of joy and peace."

I continued with simple prayers for this friend almost every day for a month and intermittently after that. Now, a couple of months later, I see changes beginning to happen in her life. Did I have a part in that? I think so.

A couple of weeks ago, I paused only long enough to scrawl: "O Lord, your kingdom *is* planted. I *am* yours. That is the rock, Jesus, on which I stand."

Now, you know you can do at least that sort of thing. And you might be able to do lots more. Try it. You'll like it.



The Duplicates Of God

Every now and then I find an idea I have used in a column popping up in other places. My minister will preach on the same subject, or I'll hear somebody on the radio talking about the same thing.

At first I felt a bit funny about it. I thought people would think I was picking up the ideas from other people and not giving them credit.

But I finally realized that's not my problem — what other people think, that is. If they ask, I can always explain. And if they don't ask. I don't have to worry about it.

Barbara White



Then I began to look at it in a much more positive way. It dawned on me that it just might mean that the Holy Spirit might scatter understandings around like the seed Jesus spoke about in the parable of the sower and the seed.

In that case, it just means that those other folks and I were all listening when the Holy Spirit scattered a particular understanding about. We all received it and it produced fruit in all of us.

So now I feel all warm and friendly when such a "coincidence" happens.

Well, it's happened again. Only this time it was a reader who was listening, too.

Terry Long of Palatka said my column of two weeks ago was very similar to something he wrote a couple of months ago. He sent me a copy of his article and he was right. There is a great similarity between them.

Perhaps it took me longer to percolate this particular idea through to usable form.

Anyway, here is his version of the theme of my column. I wrote about how clouds can reflect the glory of God on one side and their own dinginess on the other — and of people who can do the same. Terry used the theme of sunlight on the St. Johns River to produce a similar thought.

"Last Saturday, my wife and I were having a leisurely after-breakfast chat about living and life and how people become the way they become.

"I happened to look across our front lawn to the St. Johns River, about a mile across where we live.

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There was a light breeze blowing which produced a slightly choppy surface on the river.

"It was near mid-morning and the angle of the sun caused the surface of the river to shimmer and sparkle like a beautiful gem.

"I looked, with wonder, for a few moments and then realized that underneath the surface, there was trash and mud and other unsightly and unsavory things. But the light shining on the surface made it look like a gem. I further thought that if you get close, and at the proper angle, you can see the trash and mud and other things that lie below the surface.

"We can choose the angle at which, or the perspective from which we wish to look at things, including other people.

"If we really want to know ourselves [and we all should want that], it would be wise to choose the angle which gives the clearest, most undistorted view of what lies beneath the surface. Then we must honestly and objectively acknowledge what is there, say yes, that's me, and of that which we do not like, change what we can and accept the rest.

"We must also be willing and happy to view ourselves from the perspective that makes us shimmer and sparkle like a gem, and acknowledge, accept, appreciate and make the most of those facets of ourselves.

"It is so often easy to see the trash and ugliness in others as the revealing light of daily activities shines upon us all.

"But we should also remember, and practice looking for, the perspective which reveals the gem-like quality of others. And we should remember with



the greatest of gratitude and joy, that our Creator sees each of us who believes in and follows his precepts as gems."



Emotional Hazards

Feelings of unworthiness aren't the only ones that get in the way of our daily walk with the Lord.

Emotions create many hazards.

Last week I talked with a friend who was holding back from ministry because she felt unworthy.

This week I talked with a young man who is wrestling with conflicting desires: to be only what God wants him to be and to be important.

If both desires were not so deeply imbedded in his heart, he would not be in such pain. He would accept more easily the idea of setting his sights on the goal God has picked for him. He would begin to crucify every other desire.

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He would know in his heart as well as his head that his joy and his peace are to be found in this. And he would rejoice that this was so.

And, I believe, he would also find fulfillment.

But he has disguised his desire to be important behind several masks.

One is self-condemnation.

When, for example, he prays and nothing seems to happen, he charges himself with failure as a Christian. He believes God could not possibly have forgiven him for his past sins. He recalls them all — and they were many — and sees himself as far too dirty ever to be made clean.

But I wonder. Is this another version of being important? If you can't be the best, is it better to be the worst than to be somewhere in the middle?

If so, I can empathize with my friend. I bear the scars of the same struggle.

Scripture says we are to be building blocks, fitted together by the Holy Spirit into a dwelling for God (Ephesians 2:22).

We aren't the cornerstone, either.

Jesus is the cornerstone, the stone rejected by men but precious to the Father.

Like my friend, I didn't want to be just one more block. I wanted to be special. To stand out and be noticed.

I thought I had to have this affirmation from God and man to prove my worth.

What I wouldn't admit was my fear of mediocrity. Of just being average.



Now I believe the Lord sees this in a different way. He has helped me catch a glimpse of his vision through Scripture and some letters by C.S. Lewis.

In Mark 10, we are told that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, asked Jesus to let them be more than average. They asked to sit at his right and his left hand in his glory.

They wanted to be special, to have the places of honor and to stand out in front of the other disciples.

They didn't want to be just building blocks even for the spiritual house in which God would dwell. If they couldn't be cornerstones, they wanted at least to be the stones on either side.

When Jesus asked if they could drink the cup that he would drink and be baptized with the baptism he would know, they said they could.

How little they knew.

But Jesus did not mock them for it. He simply told them those places belonged to those for whom they had been prepared.

And when the other disciples reacted angrily to their request, he told them all where true greatness is found — in servanthood and slavery.

I don't know for sure about my young friend. I do know how I felt about being a servant.

Lack of desire to be a plain ordinary servant was one of the things that kept me from accepting the forgiveness for past sins that Jesus had already gained for me from the Father and from trusting God in my daily walk.

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But what about those past failures? Even if they have been forgiven, don't they speak loudly of my weaknesses, of my true character?

In a collection of C.S. Lewis' letters I found this paragraph, written in 1952 to an unidentified woman:

"I certainly believe ... that a sin once repented and forgiven is gone, annihilated, burnt up in the fire of Divine Love, white as snow. There is no harm in continuing to 'bemoan' it, i.e., to express one's sorrow, but not to ask for pardon for what you have already — one's sorrow for being that sort of person. Your conscience need not be 'burdened' with it in the sense of feeling that you have an unsettled account, but you can still in a sense be *patiently* and (in a sense) *contentedly* humbled by it."

Humbled, but not burdened. That's the trick.

Only patience with myself and contentment with my God can make that possible.

And, perhaps, with them I can learn to be a servant.

I have been what I have been. I am what I am. And I will be what I will be.

But God has seen and forgiven what I was. He knows me intimately now and leads me. And he sees my end and works to prepare me for it.



My Daughter Mary

Who Is That? Is That My Daughter?

Admittedly, I don't have very keen eyesight. Anyone who knows me at all well can testify to that.

But maybe other people, even those with better vision, can identify with one of my problems. I have been known to mistake a total stranger for someone I know very well, especially from the back.

When my daughter was younger, I would see many girls about her height and weight, with about the same amount of long blonde hair reaching to about the same spot on their lower backs, clad in blue jeans and shirts, who looked like Mary to me.

If I were in a car and the girl was walking, I would have to get quite close to be sure. Frequently, in fact, I would have to get at least parallel, so I could see the profile, or pass the person, so I could see the full face before I could make an accurate identification.

In fact, my judgment in this matter was so poor — I made so many wrong guesses — that I learned not to expect it to be the one I was looking for at all. I learned to glance and shrug and look away.

As a result I sometimes drove right past her without seeing her.

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I believe there are lots and lots of people who are as nearsighted as that in another area. They can't see God for all the gods around. They can't see Jesus for all the imitations. They can't see the Holy Spirit for the overwhelming crush of spirits speaking to us these days.

Now I don't think everybody has to see God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit the way I do. I don't think all of us would see my daughter the same way, much less God.

But I do think there is one real, true, honest-to-goodness God to be seen.

That is my starting point. God is whoever and whatever He is.

A friend of mine is affronted because, she says, I speak as if I know God's character and what I say does not match what she believes.

It's true that we all see the reality that is God through a glass darkly at this time. I know what a difference just cleaning my glasses can make and I'm only cleaning away simple things like dust and fingerprints. Imagine what it will be like when we clean away the frailty of mankind!

Also, our perspective changes as we grow. When I was a small child everything on the mantel seemed small and far away. As I grew older, those things came within easy reach and did not look the same any longer. So it makes good sense to use caution when accepting someone else's view point as the right one.

But while my friend rejects what I have to say about God, she would accept my description of my daughter. She understands that I have seen her and



known her for years. Besides, she has seen pictures of Mary and Mary herself.

What she is not at this time able to accept is that I have seen God's hand at work and heard his voice often enough to begin to recognize him now — even without seeing his face.

Where do I get my certainty, my friend asks.

From the Bible, I reply.

Oh, I don't read the Bible, she says. It was only written by men who were doing the best anybody could at relating what they thought they knew about God. That's no better than what I think today or anybody else thinks. It's not reliable.

And there we stand, on either side of a dividing wall.

For I believe God desires to be known and, desiring it, makes it happen. And I believe he does this primarily through revealing himself to individuals through his word, written in the Bible, lived by Jesus and brought to life now for us by the Spirit.

I believe the God who made the world and holds all things in being was able to so inspire the writers of the Bible — and the readers of it — that He can be seen more clearly there than anywhere.

I don't know why I trust this revelation and she does not. I don't know how to quicken what I believe is truth to make it real to her.

But, she says to me, you don't understand what I do about the science and the nature of the mind. And it's true. She known much more than I about those things.

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All I can do is pray that the Spirit of God will open her spiritual eyes — not so she will accept my understanding of God, but so her own will be increased. And keep loving her.

It's OK with me if she prays that he will make me more concerned about caring for the mentally ill as well. And keeps loving me.



Building What Lasts

I guess everybody learns it eventually.

A young man I know just learned it sooner than some.

This friend told me recently that nothing lasts.

And he was shaken by the knowledge.



He has built boats. Now he realizes they will all rot or rust or sink.

He is building a house for himself and his wife. It will get termites or burn down or wear out eventually.

He has recently finished a major creative project at his workplace, meeting a tight deadline. The work was so good, the department has been funded to do another similar project next year. But the products won't last.

What's the point? And where is the challenge? He already knows how to do all these things.

And even if he looks for another challenge — learns how to build a different boat, if he were to build another house, if he tackles another creative project — they won't last either.

What is there to look forward to, he asked.

"Digging a ditch has as much meaning as making films or any other job," he said, flinging wide his arms to show the width of meaninglessness.

Life is, he said, exactly like it says in Ecclesiastes — vanity, vanity.

Is this just a mid-life crisis?

My friend is a little young for mid-life crisis — He's only 32.

I suspect he is physically, mentally and emotionally drained from the process of meeting his deadline at work.

And I believe that's exactly the kind of time when testing is apt to happen.

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God uses such times to bring us face to face with what we truly believe about him and our relationship with him.

However, Satan also uses the same time if he can, to make us question those very same things.

And the outcome is always in the balance.

Will this young man decide nothing has or ever will have any meaning, which would lead to depression and despair?

Will he decide that while nothing man makes lasts, everything — however temporary — that God makes has meaning because God made it so?

I pray he will choose the latter. For this will help him learn to hold things and works loosely and to concentrate on being, on becoming the kind of person God wants him to be, whatever he is doing.

This earth is made of things that don't last, like the lilies of the field. But I believe they please God anyway. I think he enjoys all the works of his hands — however brief their earthly lifespan.

Did you see the movie *Chariots of Fire*? One statement by the young Scottish missionary/runner has stayed with me. He said that God had made him fast and that when he ran, he felt God's pleasure.

I believe God made us. And I believe our greatest challenge comes in doing whatever he puts before us to do with all our heart, all our mind and all our strength — in other words, with all God has put in us.

When we do, we give God pleasure.

And we know it. That's part of having fellowship with him.

Barbara White



I hope my friend will see this other facet of the truth he has observed.

I think he will. He said that the only time that had any meaning was time spent sharing the love of the Lord with Christian friends or serving others.

In a sense, of course, those things don't last either. We may influence a few people today, but will anyone remember that in the years to come?

But in another sense, they may last longer than anyone can imagine. They may be among the things with which we build our spiritual lives that survive the final testing.

Paul talked about these things in 1st Corinthians 3:

"No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."

Who we are is revealed in how we do what we do. If we reflect Christ while building boats or houses, completing creative projects or writing articles, the products may not last, but the character will.

And we will receive our reward.



Small Choices, Big Consequences

The power of small choices to exert great pressure on the direction of our lives was brought home to me recently.

Obviously some choices are made at major intersections in our road of life. For example, I wonder sometimes what my life would have been like had I attended a different college, for example. There is little likelihood I would have married the man I did, for I met him at the college I did attend. I might have pursued a different career had the college of my choice offered a different curriculum.

But I made a choice at that fork in the road and I understand that my life has a particular shape today because of it.

What I often overlook — as I was reminded recently — is that choices of much less seeming significance can also make deep, permanent imprints on the shape of my life.

My reminders were a series of small, but in their way painful injuries I inflicted on my body.

First I nearly shut a heavy oak door on the index finger of my left hand. It bled and turned black and blue and was very sore. A couple of days later I made a small paper cut near the nail of the ring finger of my right hand. A few days after that, while barefoot in my bedroom, I walked into the foot of my bed and bruised one toe. The following day I made another paper cut on my right hand, this time on the ball of my thumb.



And I realized my whole life had become an effort — unfortunately a futile effort — to keep from inflicting more pain on any of my already sore digits!

I was holding paper awkwardly because of my sore finger when the first paper cut happened. I was trying to protect my finger instead of trying to regain my balance as I wobbled on my way back to bed in the dark when I hit my toe. And I was holding paper even more awkwardly, trying to protect two sore fingers, when the second paper cut happened.

And each of these injuries was related to the choice I made to grab the door by its edge rather than by its knob when I shut it! It was a small choice, surely, made without conscious deliberation and with no thought of its possible ramifications. But look at the results.

As I took my morning walk today I reflected on this course of events and on the truth that, in just the same way, one small moral choice can branch out and lead to other choices being made in other areas of our lives.

Some of these choices seem so small you would think they could not really hurt. But if you are walking on a straight line and veer just one small step to the side, consider how far away you will be after walking even a mile in the new direction.

The almost immediate result of even small wrong moral choices is that they interfere with the closeness of our relationship with the Lord. The possible long-range effect is their ability to determine our eternity. In one of his writings, C.S. Lewis said that a person's road to either heaven or hell is made throughout his life, one small choice at a time.

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But by the grace of God, the chain reaction can be broken. The traveler can be put back on the right path. Examination of life can produce repentance, which is that determination to turn from a particular course and to walk again in the path marked by the Lord.

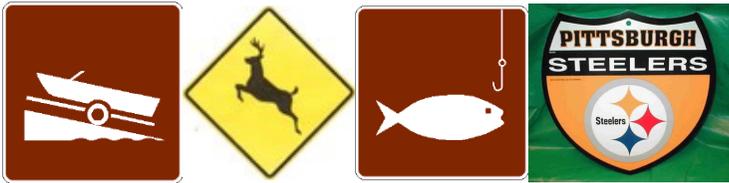
And one of the tasks of the Holy Spirit is to call us to that self-examination so he can show us ourselves as we truly are.

Repentance does not always do away with the immediate results of our choices. My finger will be sore for a time, no matter how determined I am never to close a door that way again.

But even while the soreness remains — especially while the soreness remains — I will remember the grace of God in making repentance possible and rejoice in my restored closeness with Him.

Eventually the soreness will fade. I charge myself now, while it still hurts, to remember to ask my Lord regularly about where I am in my walk with him.

Editor's Note; We Men Are Not! See:



Men are singleminded.

At least, according to some authorities, they are more singleminded than women are.



I heard somebody whose name I didn't catch express this thought on James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* radio show recently.

This guest expert said a man only uses one side of his brain at a time. He said that when a man changes from logical, fact-based thinking to the artistic, intuitive kind, his brain has to make a deliberate switch from one side to the other.

A woman, on the other hand, can go from one to the other with no problem at all because the connectors between the two sides of her brain allow continuous passage back and forth.

I understand that not all women seem to use both sides of their brains at any time, but according to this expert, they can!

The expert said this difference in brain operation helps explain why a man can ignore feuding children in the same room with him while he is watching a football game on television and a woman can hear — and have to deal with — crying children even while she is watching a favorite soap.

I wonder if this means my difficulties in concentrating on one thing at a time are just a basic part of my nature as a woman?

I would be relieved to think so, but I'm not sure that's all there is to it.

And as I think about it now, it seems to me that the ability to focus intently on one subject at a time can be a blessing — although a mixed blessing. Being singleminded makes you able to get things done, to finish what you start.

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But it also means that some other things that need doing — like caring for people along the way — don't always get done!

It is very confusing.

I have heard it suggested — by a woman, I must admit — that God may have thought better of it after making Adam and corrected the process in Eve.

Maybe. Maybe not.

Maybe it really is better to have one person who can follow one idea doggedly to its conclusion and another who can skip from one idea to another with ease.

Maybe God really intends men and women to complement each other, to be necessary to each other to make a complete whole.

He certainly intends them to need him to make it work.

Relating to each other is so difficult we cannot do it really well without him.

For example, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul tells us that God wants husbands to love their wives the way they love their own bodies. And he tells women to respect their husbands.

And, generally speaking, neither finds that easy to do.

Women find it easy to love. They can love scoundrels as well as good men. They can love men they do not respect at all.

Men respect ability in other people, but I am told they find it hard to really love women.



I certainly wouldn't have designed it that way if I'd been in charge. But I was not there when the plan was made.

Chances are that God did know what he was doing, however.

And maybe it isn't an accident that we find it hard to live the way he wants us to in our own strength.

Isn't it true that each of us can only fulfill God's command for our lives when we learn to rely on him?

Do you suppose that's what he had in mind all along?

A Treasure In The Field

Recently I shared some thoughts on a particular interpretation of the parable of the hidden treasure, which is found in Matthew 13.' In that column, I quoted a conference teacher as saying that if a person wants to be a mature, spiritual Christians, he or she has to buy the whole field.

By that he meant that if you want to receive the blessing of salvation, you have to take everything that comes with it. Which can include some of the pains of growing spiritually and of dealing with the occasionally strange people you find in your path.

After reading the column, a friend, John Cowart, called to suggest another interpretation of the parable. It has added a rich new dimension to my understanding.

He said that during his years as a street preacher, he had always told his audiences that the

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world was the field, that we were the treasure and that God bought all of it because He saw us that way.

That took my breath away when I first heard it and it does again every time I think about it now.

I can see that it would be a very effective evangelical message.

Imagine being seen by God as such a precious treasure that he was willing to buy — at the cost of his life — the world in which we were buried.

But that is exactly what my friend believes the good news of Christianity is all about.

And I believe it, too.

I am the hidden treasure.

Oh, you are the treasure, too.

Absolutely.

Each of us can make this statement. I just hope that making it gives your heart the same lift it gives mine.

On further reflection, I find that the two interpretations complement each other in a way.

God loved me enough to buy the whole mixed-up and frequently rotten world on my behalf.

And he wants me to do the same thing.

He wants me to love the way he loved. And he wants me to accept the rough with the smooth, the tough with the easy and the sorrow with the joy.

The knowledge that I am that precious treasure in his sight certainly makes it easier to desire to do his will.

Barbara White



Another teacher told me once that gratitude is the only proper motive for a response to God, gratitude for what he has done for us.

But perverse as I am, I frequently find gratitude hard to come by. When things aren't going well, I sometimes don't feel a bit grateful.

But when I remember the price he paid for the whole field, just so I could belong to him, thanksgiving and gratitude well up and overflow.

I am also the lost sheep.

The lost coin.

And the pearl of great price.

I knew all that, but I had forgotten.

I am to be like the shepherd, too, and like the woman searching for the coin and the merchant who sold all he had to buy the pearl:

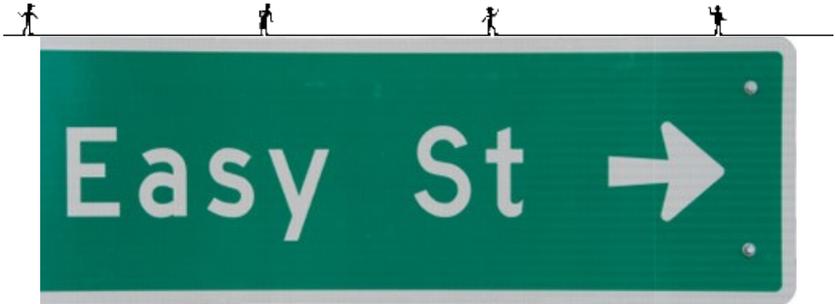
I am to feel about other lost sheep and lost coins the way my Lord does.

I am to search for them.

And I am to hold loosely all the things I call mine because I have already sold them to have my Lord's great gift to me: redemption, restoration, salvation, life eternal with him.

How wonderful that is, but how hard it is to remember and to do.

How grateful I am for the presence of the Holy Spirit with me every step of the way.



On Winning The Lotto

There's a new form of gambling in Florida now. We can bet a dollar that we will win more than that.

That is, we can pay \$ 1 for a lottery ticket, having been assured by the state that at some time and in some place, someone will win some amount of money. And very rarely a very few will win a lot of money.

The odds aren't great in favor of the individual, of course. After all, this is *supposed* to be making money for the state.

But it's not much to gamble. A dollar isn't much to lose — for most of us.

Of course, a ticket a week would be \$52 a year. And more than one ticket a week — well that could mount up to a tidy sum in a year.

But we seldom look that far ahead. Besides, the prize may seem worth it.

Also each person who lays down a dollar for a ticket must have some degree of faith in his ability to win or he wouldn't do it.

We may not believe it *will* happen to us. But we must have faith that it could happen.

Even that little bit of faith could keep us playing. It would keep hope alive.

Barbara White



Isn't that interesting. I'm talking about a form of gambling and I'm using words like faith and hope.

Sounds like religion, doesn't it?

I remember the day it dawned on me that it just might be true that Jesus was alive today, sitting at the right hand of God.

Once the idea appeared, it wouldn't go away — even when I wanted it to.

At that point I had no choice but to make a choice. I would either believe it or reject it.

I really did not want to make that decision. The evidence was not so conclusive that the choice was made for me. After all, I knew lots of people who ignored the whole subject or who rejected the very idea of a God who relates intimately with his creation and his creatures.

It looked like a risky gamble either way. A lot more was riding on it than a \$1 ticket purchase.

But suddenly it seemed to me that if, just if, Jesus really was the one who had been given dominion over all of life — that would mean over my life as well. And in that case, it seemed like a good idea to be for him instead of against him.

Now I had tried for years to settle this question my own way — through reading, study and discussion — and had come no closer to a conclusion.

There always seemed something left to question. And I couldn't possibly commit my life to something I wasn't sure of. I guess I wanted a system to go by because I didn't trust my luck.

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But now the question had been asked. I had to answer. And the only options given were yes and no. Maybe was no longer available.

So I gambled.

I bought the ticket.

I bet that by choosing to follow Jesus I would be a winner.

And I am.

Every day.

Oh, not in cash. Not even happiness.

But every time I trust the Lord, he proves trustworthy.

And every time I even try to do what Jesus said to do, I know a peace and joy that can only come from him.

And I know his teaching is from God.

Back before I decided to make this big gamble, I wanted just that assurance, that knowledge. And I didn't see why it shouldn't be given.

But God didn't ask me how I thought he should manage his relationship with me. And he chose not to do it the way I thought best.

I frequently don't understand what he is doing. I just gamble that he is here doing it.

I can't buy this kind of ticket once a week. I need to do it daily.

Every time I do, I come up with a winning combination.

Oh, occasionally I consider not buying a daily ticket. Rebellion dies hard — and slowly.

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But I always find at least a little faith in him as my loving Father. And it builds hope and helps me keep on gambling on him.



Like A Tree Planted...

I received an unusual and unexpected gift during the holidays. A friend had a tree planted in Israel in my honor.

I am *enormously* pleased and proud.

I have never seen Israel. I may never see it.

But somewhere in that land that means so much to this friend, who is Jewish, and to me a tree has been planted in my name.

I can imagine it, a small, green shoot standing upright in the sunshine.

I will think of it often, growing there, casting a longer and longer shadow as the years go by.

I'm fairly sure this friend didn't know it, but planting trees is kind of a special thing to me. I have planted a lot of them in my time.

Most have lived, too.

When I bought my house, there was one tall pine in the side yard, a small evergreen at the corner of the garage and not much else.

Then the pine died.

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I love trees, all kinds of trees. So I tried planting different kinds around the house.

I tried several dogwoods before realizing they just would not grow in my soil — or with my kind of care.

And I had planted three citrus trees, which were producing nicely — before the freezes of 1983 and 1984.

But I still have a good sized oak tree and a red maple in the front yard and a pine and a tea olive on one side and several unidentified trees, which I call "free throws" because they just grew there with no help from me, in the back yard.

Unfortunately, not all trees are wonderful in domestic settings.

My craving for tall, green things in my yard may have led me astray in regard to the free throws. Their roots are tearing up the whole back yard and they may have to be cut down and dug out.

I hate to do it. It seems a terrible shame to cut down any tree in a place that had none at all such a short time ago.

And I certainly would hate to think that "my" tree in Israel might ever have to be cut back, or worse, cut down.

There is, of course, a spiritual lesson in all this.

Sometimes the things that we plant — or at least allow to grow — in our lives are not as nice as we think they are going to be.

When we aren't looking, they produce long "roots" — like habits — that lie just under the surface



and cause problems or that grow deep inside, sending little tendrils into the water supply and blocking it up.

No matter how much we may like them, they have to go. The benefits they provide no longer outweigh the dangers they pose.

And although I am often slow to do what needs to be done, God, who made the tree, does not hesitate to prune his creation.

He never loses sight of the goal he has set for the lives of his children: to produce good fruit.

And that requires pruning.

He is the master gardener. When it comes to turning scraggly shoots into fruit-bearing trees, he knows exactly where and when and how much to prune.

But he has given us some good, clear instructions for the ordinary sort of removal of dead wood and overgrowth.

And although we may need a little practice, we can learn that some things are better pulled up while they are small. It causes less damage in the long run.

I'm still learning this.

I'm slow, but I am learning.

I am sure the people who plant trees in Israel know which kinds to plant. I am sure they know what to do to assure proper growth. After all, they *want* the trees to flourish and thrive.

I rejoice that they will do their best for "my" tree.

I rejoice that my Lord will do his best — which is THE best — for my life.

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And I hope I have learned something about what to allow to grow in my yard — and in my life.



Dog In The Road

There's a dog that crosses a five-lane road I use regularly.

I've seen him do it more than once. And my heart rises into my throat every time.

The dog is large, a mostly black Labrador retriever type, and slow-moving. He looks old and arthritic and a bit blind.

He steps out into the road and begins moving slowly forward, head down and slightly to one side as if he is listening.

He acknowledges the presence of cars, when they get close enough, but most of the time he does not stop. He just keeps walking, ever so slowly, toward the other side.

When he does stop, he seems uncertain whether to go forward or back, but since he is usually in the middle of the road by this time, neither direction offers a guaranteed safety.

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So far, he has always made it across. Cars have stopped and let him go by.

But in a five-lane road, when one car stops, I fear that another car coming up beside the stopped car will not see the dog in time to stop — with dire results.

I guess I pray while all this is going on, but I don't know if what I do is actually prayer.

It feels more like reaching out and grabbing God's hand and hanging on tight until the old fellow is safely on the other side, then beginning to breathe again.

Usually I forget the whole thing as soon as he is safe. But I saw him again last weekend and have kept remembering.

I don't know how often the old dog crosses the road. He may do it several times daily and I only have seen a few of the total.

He is in the same amount of danger each time. But I pray for his safety only when I see him embark on his perilous journey.

And I pray only that he will get across the street. That is the extent of my prayer.

If a car does eventually hit him, I will be sorry. But not for long. If I do not see it happen, but only learn about it, I will probably feel little more than a brief pang of sorrow.

The truth is that I don't really care much about that old dog. I just don't want to see him die.

But I also don't want to put my own life in jeopardy by trying to stop traffic for a dumb dog. I don't want to spend time trying to find out who owns

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him and trying to make them take better care of him or anything like that.

I really don't want to get involved.

So why am I still remembering him?

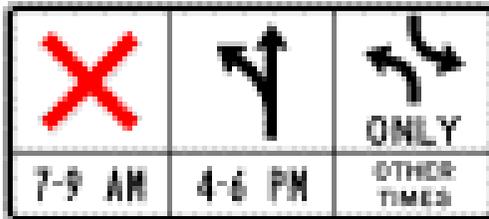
Why is the image of that old dog, walking slowly across the road, head slightly down and turned toward the oncoming traffic, still there before my mind's eye?

I think it's because he reminds me that there are people out there who are trying to get across the dangerous places in life without being at all sure they will make it. He reminds me that they need help and I'm not doing much for them, either.

I wrote a story recently about some people who do help.

They feel called to solve some specific problems for some specific people, even though they know they cannot solve all the problems for anyone.

Maybe it was my conversations with them that have made me remember the old dog — and made me ask myself what I am doing to love my neighbor.



Finding Time For God

There is simply not enough time in the day to do the things I need to do — much less the things I want to do.

Barbara White



That's the way I see it most days, anyway. And I suspect that's the way lots of other people see it, too.

Time — especially the lack of it — was the topic of discussion among a group of women I was with one morning last month.

By the end of our conversation, we had reminded ourselves of a lot of important things we already knew about time, but weren't using. So we prayed.

Since then I've been trying to remember — and live by — at least a few of the things we said in our conversation and our prayers.

For example, one woman pointed out that everybody has the same amount of time in each day.

Sometimes it seems to go very fast — "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle" Job said (Job 7:6). Sometimes it drags — as one woman said, we all know people who can make a two-day visit seem to last a week.

But we have all been allotted exactly the same amount of time each day. Nobody has 25 hours. Nobody has 23.

The only thing different is what we do with our time.

For what we choose to trade our time makes a difference, that speaker said.

What do I trade my time for?

Well, I trade a certain amount of time to my employer for my salary. That's a given.

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I trade a certain amount for sleep — sometimes not quite enough, even when I try — and another bit for eating, bracketed by cooking and cleaning up.

More time than I like goes for travel — not the interesting kind, the getting-to-and-from places kind.

And I fritter bits and pieces of it away — sometimes big bits and pieces. Oh, yes. I really try to trade some time each day for being with friends, for conversations like that one on time.

And a tiny, but cherished piece of time is traded each morning for coming into the presence of the Lord.

Is it enough?

We talked about priorities. Someone suggested that we set priorities for the use of our time whether we are aware of it. or not. She suggested it is much better to choose our priorities, rather than just let them happen.

Time is a valuable commodity and since there is only so much of it, we need to spend it wisely.

Jesus had some things to say about treasure, like the pearl of great price and the field with the hidden treasure. He said the people who were searching for rich treasure sold all they had to buy these things when they found them.

Time is one of the commodities we have to trade for treasure.

We can either trade it for this world's treasures or for those that will last forever. But I don't think that means we are to read the Bible and sit in our prayer closets all day. That's simply not the calling for most of us — not for me or for most of the women I was talking

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with. If we made that trade, the baby wouldn't get fed and the job wouldn't get done.

But this kind of trading also functions at a deeper, more subtle level. That's because time has more than one level. There's the "what I'm doing" level and the "how I'd doing it; what I'm thinking" levels.

While I am working for my employer, am I conscious of the Lord's presence with me? Jesus said, "And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20b).

He said always!

Doesn't that include the time I'm at work?

Doesn't it include the time when I'm eating, or talking with friends or driving through traffic? Isn't the Lord present, then, too?

Of course He is!

How then should we consider the time we have been given, the hours of this day that we have been allotted by God?

As his gift — All of it.

Even the "bad" times.

To be used in his presence and for his purposes.

It overwhelmed most of us to think how far short of those goals we constantly fall. But we found hope and purpose in the reminder that we only have to deal with the hours of one day at a time. The day called today.

We concluded with a prayer for the proper use of our time and found that wish summarized in a dozen

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words from Psalm 31: "I say, 'You are my God. My times are in your hands' ".




My Broken Wrist

I know what my lenten discipline is going to be this year..

It's going to be dealing with all the ramifications of living with a broken right wrist. Ramifications like not being able to drive for a month or open my pill bottles by myself — thanks to all those child-proof caps.

Or tie or buckle a belt or hook my, uh, well, you know.

Or write legibly or type with even a modicum of speed.

It happened at church two Sundays ago.

God was right there when it happened, too.

In fact, I'm sure he was very close to me when I made that ungainly misstep and fell backwards into a pew.

He wasn't in Hawaii on vacation and he hadn't even blinked.

He was there, fully, completely and lovingly there.

But he didn't prevent the fall. And he didn't prevent the bones from breaking, either.



It is just possible that he did prevent me from having a broken hip. The huge bruise there tells me it could have been worse.

But that's not the point. The point is that I know there are spiritual lessons for me to learn from going through the healing and dealing with process.

One of these lessons was brought to my attention last Sunday in church. I returned to the scene of the accident very carefully, but joined in the service as much as possible. During a quiet time near the beginning of the service, I thought I heard the Lord talking to me — through my thoughts.

I thought I heard him say, "I whispered and you didn't pay attention, so I shouted.

"All the things you have been trying to hold in your hands — things I have told you not to try to carry — you will no longer be able to hold. But do not worry. They will not drop. You and all these things you care about are in my hand."

That's very comforting news, I thought to myself. I instantly thought of several things I had been trying to let go of, things I had been fairly sure I could not handle by myself, but could not seem to put down either.

And I definitely won't be able to do anything about them for a while, anyway. I won't ever be driving myself anywhere for a month!

And the Lord is the only one to whom I could give these things and be at peace about no longer being in control. But, Lord, I mused, what do you want me to be doing with myself while I'm not doing all that stuff I was doing?

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The only answer I heard was, "I'll tell you." But he didn't say when. This morning, however, I think I found a piece of the answer.

While reading Psalm 89, I came across this verse, "O Lord God Almighty, who is like you? You are mighty, O Lord; and your faithfulness surrounds you."

God's faithfulness surrounds him. It is so real, so present a part of him, that when you are conscious of trusting him, it is as if you are touching him, himself.

I hadn't thought of him that way before. I've known that God was faithful. I've known it very well intellectually and I've known it a little bit in my life. But there has been plenty of room for growth in real knowing.

Now, when I find myself facing a task I cannot handle, or a concern I can't do anything about — in fact, in all the places where two hands are really much better than one — I will remember that God is faithful. It is part of his very being.

And I will remember that I can sense him in his faithfulness. In my awkwardness, in my inabilities, even in my failures, he is faithful.

And as I grow in ability to trust that faithfulness — not because I am so dedicated or so spiritual, but because I must — I shall grow in the knowledge of the one who is faithfulness itself.

"O Lord God Almighty, who is like you? You are mighty, O Lord; and your faithfulness surrounds you." And when I am close to you, Lord, your faithfulness surrounds me, too.



Another Monday

I woke up grumpy on Monday.

It had been two weeks since my accident and I was ready for the wrist to be healed.

I told God so, too — but he didn't pay any attention to me.

Unless, perhaps to laugh at my foolishness.

I did a rotten job of bearing my burden that day. I groused at all sorts of things and actually cried once in sheer frustration.

I'm ashamed of it, but it happened.

The next day was better. I was able to remember some things I've heard recently.

I remembered what Margaret Welsh had to say.

Margaret said she had broken her left wrist and her right elbow some time back while out walking and that she had been given some lessons to learn from the process.

One day, as her daughter was trying to wash her face, Margaret started telling her how to do it right.

"And she said, 'Mother, do you realize this is the first time I've ever had to do this?'

"And I said, 'Well, it's the first time I've had to have it done!' "

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Margaret said that, like me, she had asked the Lord what lessons she had to learn out of her predicament.

His answer: Be a gracious receiver.

She said that sounded lovely, but she didn't know how to do it.

The Lord told her that the first step in learning to be a gracious receiver was to learn patience.

"When you learn to wait for others to do things for you, the best they know how, then you have begun to learn to be a gracious receiver," she said.

The second lesson turned out to be closely related.

It concerned humility.

"It was, Don't think you always know how to do something better than anyone else," Margaret said. "Accept it their way. Your way is different, but not necessarily better."

And, of course, she said, always be thankful.

Margaret said that, to help drive the lessons home, the Lord gave her an opportunity to test herself.

One of her sisters had by-pass surgery. The other two sisters work outside the home, so she was the only one who could take the convalescent in for a while when she left the hospital.

"I had just gotten the cast off," Margaret said.

"And I said, 'Lord, how can I handle this?' And he said, 'Your patience will make it possible.' "

Scripture says that if you wait on the Lord, your strength will come from your patience, she said. Isaiah

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says that in quietness and confidence will be our strength.

Just as he had said he would, the Lord gave her strength through her patience. "And we had a beautiful week of sharing the love of the Lord," she said.

Last Sunday my minister had some things to say about the spiritual lessons to be learned from adversity.

He said he had almost joined the Barbara White club the day before. He had tripped over a sprinkler in his front yard and had bruised some ribs.

But these things are simply part of life, he said.

And the life of the Christian will always include a cross — because Jesus carried a cross and died on it for us.

But because he did, our crosses are easy.

Then he cited something Octavius Winslow had to say about why Jesus died.

"Who delivered Jesus up to die? Not Judas, for money. Not Pilate, for fear. Not the Jews, for envy. But the Father, for love."

Margaret, my minister and I — all of us — may reap spiritual benefits from that cross, from that love.

If it were not for that love, I would be trapped in my own nature, that nature that grouses and complains. But because of it, I can be changed.

A loving Father made it possible for Margaret to learn to be a gracious receiver. And in his great love, he has given me the opportunity to learn to trust him more.



Extra Pain

Sometimes life seems to pile on extra pain — not all physical.

And it becomes hard to rejoice — and harder to believe you are not a total failure as a follower of Christ because you cannot do it.

I've found myself in this trap before, but when it happened recently, I remembered something I had read in a little book. John Claypool wrote *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* after his young daughter died of leukemia. He said he was simply sharing what he had learned about handling grief.

He also said we all grieve — for the loss of loved ones or for the loss of other, less identifiable things, such as innocence or expectations.

In one of the four chapters of the slim book Claypool talked about how he came to a new understanding of how God supplies the strength we need to make it through tough times. And this was the part I returned to.

Isaiah 40:31, says, "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

And that's a wonderful promise, Claypool wrote, but the words "to mount up with wings of eagles" seem to imply that we should soar away in exuberance over all our troubles.



Now most of us have known such moments of "abandon and celebration and joy," he said. But if we conclude that this is the only way God gives his strength to us, we could set ourselves up for bitter disappointment.

Sometimes — as when standing by the bed of a child who is moaning in pain and wondering if the night will ever end — ecstasy is both inappropriate and impossible, except for an escapist, he said.

"There are people who will tell you that religion can make everything easy and who claim that any time a person prays, he is caught up in light and soars above his problems until they appear small and inconsequential. But I don't believe such words!" he wrote.

"If that is the only form of expectation — the only shape of God's strength one can acknowledge — one is sure to feel betrayed and forsaken in the darkness."

To that I add guilt feelings for feeling betrayed and forsaken.

But, Claypool said that God's help is available in a second way: "They shall run and not be weary."

Most of us can identify with that, too, he said. We have been able "to work while it is yet day, for the night cometh when no man can work."

But, again, if we think this is the only way we can respond to God, we may still find ourselves frustrated and despairing. Sometimes there is nowhere to run to, nothing we can do.

"Fortunately, there is one other form that the promise of God's strength takes: "They shall walk and

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not faint' Now I am sure that to those looking for the spectacular this many sound insignificant indeed. Who wants to be slowed to a walk, to creep along inch by inch, just barely above the threshold of consciousness and not fainting?"

That may not sound like much of a religious experience, he said, "but believe me, in the kind of darkness where I have been, it is the only form of the promise that fits the situation.

"When there is no occasion to soar and no place to run, and all you can do is trudge along step by step, to hear of a Help that will enable you to 'walk and not faint' is good news indeed."

And this is not the least of the gifts, Claypool said. It was the thing he needed most in his situation.

And because he was willing to settle for "so little and yet so much," he was able to keep from giving up.

My circumstances are not as severe as his, but they have been severe enough — and I weak enough — to harass me sorely.

But God is faithful. I am walking and not fainting.

I believe I will yet run without tiring — and even soar on eagle's wings.

But right now, I'm thankful for what God, in his mercy, has made me able to do.





His Mighty Hand, Not Mine

My doctor was unimpressed with my progress in getting back the use of my right hand.

"You must work harder!" he said.

"It isn't what she [the therapist] does! It is what you do!"

Obviously, he didn't read last week's column. That's exactly what I told myself then.

But my version of working hard and his are not the same.

He said that going through my exercises three times a day wasn't enough! I needed to do them constantly! And to do them as hard as I possibly could!

He really did talk in all those exclamations, too. I felt every one of his exclamation points — like a knife stabbed me.

So I'm trying.

As the saying goes, no pain, no gain.

Sigh.

It's hard for me to believe that such a simple action, putting my foot in the wrong place, could cause a fall that could lead to a broken wrist and that a broken wrist could lead to so many unpleasant — and long term — complications of my life.

But I'd better believe it! Otherwise I won't work at my exercises hard enough!

Anyway, I'm very conscious of hands these days.

Not only my own and their limitations. And I'm conscious of everybody else's hands, too.

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I check out whether a person is right or left handed. I am more ambidextrous now than I ever thought I would be, and I appreciate the trials of left-handed people in this right-handed world much more than I used to.

Also I am conscious of how casually people use their hands.

Hands are such marvels. How we take them for granted when they are working the way God intended them to.

We read about God's hand in church Sunday — his right hand.

I found it very comforting.

We read Psalm 98, which begins, "Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him."

I looked down at my own right hand and thought of its weakness and lack of mobility.

And I was very glad it was God's right hand and not mine that had to work salvation.

Of course, I couldn't have done that even if my right had been functioning at its very best.

But there are other things I cannot do now, lesser things than working salvation. I cannot open a jar if the lid is on tight. I cannot carry anything at all heavy.

Okay. So my hand is weak. God's isn't.

Besides, Scripture says that God can reveal his strength most easily in our weakness.



That thought led me to the Bible to see what else it has to say about God's right hand.

On the subject of his might and power I found Psalm 89:13: "Your arm is endued with power; your hand is strong, your right hand exalted." And Psalm 118:15: "Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: The Lord's right hand has done mighty things."

And Joshua 4:24: "He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God."

I also found this in Isaiah 59:1: "Surely, the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear."

And 1st Peter 5:6 says, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

To be humble is to be teachable, to be willing to be taught.

To humble myself under God's mighty hand, then, means to be willing to be taught by whatever circumstance he puts me in. Only then can he do whatever needs doing so I can eventually be lifted up.

But I can do that because I know that is able to change my circumstance or to change me — or both. And because I know I am important to him.

After all, the next verse of that passage in 1st Peter says, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

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Hold On Tight!

I really don't want to study perseverance anymore right now.

But I don't like the alternative, either.

I just want to finish this test and have a breather.

Not finishing the test — not persevering, not hanging in, not keeping on keeping on — doesn't lead to rejection. I won't be drummed out of the kingdom.

But it does mean I will have to do it again later. And the next test is apt to require at least as much perseverance, if not more, than the one I'm in.

And if I quit now, my "perseverance muscles" will just get weaker from lack of use.

But today I'm tired. I'm not sure I can do it today. At least not alone.

I guess that's why, when the disciples asked Jesus for guidance on how they should pray, he told them to ask for their bread every day.

I need some bread today, Lord. The kind of bread that strengthens me to continue to seek your face in my present circumstances.

I believe God is with me today. I believe it is his wish that I follow him. I believe if I let him, he will strengthen me so I can.

The key, then, is not whether God wants me to be able to hang on today or not.



The key is whether or not I am willing to let him help me.

That sounds easy enough.

Surely, if you were trying to do something that was hard and somebody came along and offered to help you do it, you'd let them.

Wouldn't you?'

Sure you would. Unless you suspected they had their own way of doing things and they would probably help you their way instead of yours?

Would you accept help if you didn't know how the help would be given?

Well, God isn't into telling you ahead of time what he will do.

Except in general, of course.

In the Bible he tells you lots about how he does things. He does them his way every time. But he does them according to his nature, which is love, and according to his purpose, which is to make us more like Jesus.

I can understand that intellectually, but sometimes I have a hard time with the practical application.

Sometimes I tell God I want his help, but I am really reserving the right not to accept it if I don't want to.

Which reminds me of a story I heard recently about a watch-eyed mare. (I'm not sure what a watch-eyed mare is, but the story teller said the mare had large, open eyes and looked all around her all the time.)

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In any case, the storyteller said one time when his horse could not be ridden because of a sore foot or something, he went to a stable to rent a horse to ride.

And the only horse left was this huge, white mare with the big eyes. The woman who owned the stable hesitated to rent her to this fellow, because she wasn't sure he could handle her.

But he assured her he could and jumped on.

And the horse knew right away that he couldn't. The mare took the bit in her teeth and took off on a fast 54-minute run through an orchard, trying to scrape her rider off on every tree she passed.

When she got tired, she went back to the stable and let him dismount.

The storyteller said that if he had known what she was like, he would never have gotten on in the first place.

God knows what I am like. He knows sometimes I get the bit in my teeth and take off in my own direction.

But when I do, I am the one who ends-up sore and all scratched up.

If I ask for direction, then grasp the bit in my teeth, there's no use complaining about the results.

When I am finally willing to let him direct the way, we go along just fine, getting where he wants us to go.

And isn't that really what I want?

Just one last thought. There are actually horses that respond so well to their riders that all the riders



have to do is lay a rein alongside the horse's neck and the horse will turn in the desired direction.



I'm Scared To Witness

What is the relationship between the words *witness* and *martyr*?

The author of a group study guide to the Book of Acts used the words, if not interchangeably, at least in conjunction. And I wondered about the connection.

One must be willing to be a martyr to be a witness, I thought.

Look what happened to Stephen. He was stoned for speaking out about Jesus.

But some people say they find no difficulty in witnessing; they have no reservations about standing up for what they believe in.

I'd like to think it is because they have safe, secure worlds made up of people who will not reject them for their beliefs. I'd like to excuse my own hesitations on the grounds that I live outside the walled city, in the world, and I don't want to "come on too strong," to look too pious and put the other fellow off.

But the truth is I don't want to be a martyr.

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The best kind of witnessing, it seems to me, is not the type that occurs when you "talk" someone into accepting your version of who Jesus is or what He is all about.

That's fine for debates among those who already know Him, I suppose (though I'm not sure it's productive even there).

But for reaching the ones who don't know Him, the best kind of witnessing is when you tell — very specifically — what knowing the Lord has done in your life. And that is to risk martyrdom.

The man born blind did not try to argue with the Jewish leaders about the finer points of scriptural references to the Messiah. He simply told them once he had been blind, now he could see and it all happened when he met Jesus.

The woman at the well urged the men of her Samaritan village to come see Jesus because "he knew all about me." Encounter, not argument.

And so, little by little, a glimpse here, a reflection there, I begin to talk about what Jesus has meant in my life.

But I don't rush toward martyrdom. My deaths of personal pride and my putting aside protection of my privacy are hard for me to do. Impossible for me to do by myself. The fact they are done at all is a witness to the presence of the Lord in my life.

In places of the world today men and women are dying for their witness. Some die little deaths of rejection and ridicule; others are tortured and slain.

Barbara White



But though Lent helps me understand the need for witnessing-martyrdom, only Easter makes it possible for me to trust and to do.



Ash Wednesday

Lent is here again. Easter is coming and it is time to prepare.

The liturgical calendar indicates the appropriate color for this season is purple, the color of penitence. But purple is also the color of majesty and my heart is so full of the wonder of God that I shall prepare for the gift of the resurrection with praise and thanksgiving.

Sometimes when I want to praise my Lord with words appropriate to His awe-full majesty, I find myself speechless. Then I usually turn to the Psalms where I find recorded the words of a poet and lover of the Lord; these help me lift my heart in praise.

Ash Wednesday morning I saw the sun rise.

It was an especially beautiful sunrise — perhaps in contrast to the many rainy days recently — although I suspect they all are beautiful. The air was cool, frost was visible on parts of the front lawn and a faint mist hung in the air.

And I thought of the wonder of creation, the glory of a God who made and sustains all that is and has being.

When you look at a sunrise — or any other part of creation — what do you see? Francis Schaeffer,

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author and founder of La Brie in Switzerland, in his film series and the book that came from it, "How Should We Then Live?" traces the development of secular humanism. He describes the modern world view that does not see the Creator God or know that creation came through His Word — and the despair that is the end result of believing man is in charge of his world.

But I am greatly blessed. When I look at the little bit of creation my eyes can take in, it is not just a pale blue sky tinged with a breathtaking glory that I see. But beyond and at hand, as far away as forever, and as close as my breath, I see the handiwork of my Lord.

The heavens tell out the glory of God, the vault of heaven reveals his handiwork.

One day speaks to another, night with night shares its knowledge, and this without speech or language or sound of any voice.

Their music goes out through all the earth, their words reach to the end of the world.

In them a tent is fixed for the sun, who comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, rejoicing like a strong man to run his race, his rising is at one end of the heavens, his circuit touches their farthest ends; and nothing is hidden from his heat.

— Psalm 19 (The New English Bible)



Lenten Praise

Barbara White



God created the world. He created me and gave me a hunger and thirst that could only be satisfied by Him.

And I give Him thanks and praise for that — but I haven't always.

Not everyone does, I know. Some people even curse the day the world began, the day they were born. But that is because they do not know that the Lord is a good God, a sovereign God, and that their present pain or frustration is not all there is.

Peggy Lee does a wonderful job with the song, "If That's All There Is." If this situation or that is all there is to life, to love, then "bring on the booze, let's have a ball," she sings.

That's what some do, though I don't believe they thank and praise anyone for it. And when the ball is over?

Besides, that *isn't* all. There's more and in the yearly repetition of the life story of Jesus, we are approaching the events that make that "something more" clear to us and available to us.

God wants me to be perfectly in His will. I'm not, so how can I praise Him?

The Ten Commandments are not simply the rules of the road of life. They are the description of what I would be like if I were what God wants me to be. They are a description of perfected man.

If all God had given me was the Ten Commandments, I would not thank Him. I would see my failure and despair. But that is not all. He promised a Savior and He keeps His promises.

Jesus is man as God means man to be.

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And He is that Savior, that sovereign Lord, and those who call Him Lord may enter, through Him, into the presence of God.

What of those who cry out in pain and anger, who curse instead of praise?

Perhaps my giving thanks will be used by God to speak to those who do not know how.

"How can I repay the Lord for all his gifts to me? I will take in my hands the cup of salvation and invoke the Lord by name. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people." (Psalm 116, New English Bible)



Giving Up; Taking On

Some things are given up regularly for Lent — candy and cigarettes for example.

Some things are regularly taken on during Lent, such as extra Bible reading or time spent with a good devotional book.

This Lent my minister asked the congregation to give up and take on — to fast one day a week and devote the time usually spent eating to reading the Bible and to prayer for our families and the nation.

The first day of not eating wasn't a bit hard. I was so busy I truly never thought about it — but I didn't spend extra time reading and praying, either.

The second and third fast days were worse. I still did not pray during the time I usually spent eating,



and I was more conscious of missed meals. In fact, I became absolutely grouchy by Wednesday evening this week.

I'm halfway through Lent and haven't gotten it right yet. I'm doing a halfway job of the fast and an even worse job of adding prayer time. But I'm going to keep trying. I may not be doing too well, but I'm not going to quit.

Sometimes what we have to give up is not food or time.

I met a woman this week who had to give up her children to the Lord. She found it agonizingly hard to do.

They weren't in serious trouble. They were grown and gone from home and all making it on their own. But she was always thinking about them, fretting was the way she put it, and she felt that she had to give them away, give them to the Lord.

It was, she said, very hard to do. But He wanted her to do it.

We give our children to the world whether we want to or not — and giving them to the Lord is a lot better than giving them to the world.

When I first gave my children to the Lord, we were all in such trouble I knew that only God could possibly turn the chaos of our lives into a proper creation. Giving them up then was not so difficult.

Once things were going better, though, I took them right back, so it had to be done all over again. I thought I had given all my life to Him, but I hadn't.

Giving up control of anything is hard. It is, in fact, the sin that separates man from his Creator. This

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woman knew she no longer had control of her children, but she let fretting about them get between her and her Lord, so she had to turn them completely over to Him.

I had made a stab at giving up, but I hadn't taken on anything in its place. Taking on trust, acceptance of the fact that His time is the right time, is harder to do than the initial giving up. But this is what giving up to the Lord really means.



Our Defense Attorney

A lawyer friend made a remark the other day that stuck in my mind. Confession, he said, may be good for the soul, but it makes life difficult for defense attorneys.

Confession is undoubtedly good for the soul, when done in the context of repentance and forgiveness. But when it isn't — and I've known that kind, too — then it can have some pretty negative ramifications, and not just the legal kind my friend was talking about.

Lent began Wednesday. This season of preparation for Easter is also called a penitential season, a special time of repentance. But before a person repents, he must know what his sins are — therefore, self-examination.

There are many guides to self-examination, ranging from a careful and thoughtful reading of the



Ten Commandments to the use of a variety of step-by-step question-and-answer formats that have been published.

Sometimes self-examination is painful. It hurts to see what we are really like. If we are not careful, to ease the pain we find someone else to blame for our faults. That is self justification and produces no change for the better.

Or we find those faults so overwhelming we feel trapped, weighted down by them. Instead of growing, we shrink into ourselves, despondent.

Neither of these things would happen if the self-examination was not done by self alone, but by the Holy Spirit working in us. When that is how it's done, we still see the sin, but we also see the redemption held out and waiting.

If our "defense attorney" is the Lord, then the case is already won. He is not only our mediator, He has paid the price of our freedom, he has served the sentence. We can face anything about ourselves the Spirit brings to our attention because He already knows the worst — and loves us still.

But sometimes there is fear, anger, even despair. It seems I will never change, but will go on forever doing the things I now see are wrong and hurtful to me and others. I feel powerless — damned.

I need not fear self-examination. I do not have to blame others or submit to fear. Not when the Spirit is my guide.

But when He isn't? And how can I know who is showing me my faults?

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There is a distinct difference between the actions of the Holy Spirit and the evil one in bringing about confession. Satan accuses us and leads us to guilt and depression. The Spirit convicts us of our sins and leads us through repentance and forgiveness to new life.



Getting Ready

So Lent is here again, time to get ready for another Easter.

You'd think after all these years of getting ready, I'd have the system down pat by now. But every year, there is more work to do.

Lent is a season for self-examination and amendment of life. It is a time set aside for drawing closer to God. It is 40 days of special attention given to being a disciple.

But for the Christian who has proclaimed Jesus Lord and Savior, what is the point? I mean, I am already saved, aren't I, already close to God? What is this business about penitence, self-denial and discipline all about anyway?

The great message that God is a God of love has masked for some people the truth that He is also a God of justice. This dual nature provides a clue to the wonder of Easter and a reason for the observance of Lent.



For God to love us and ignore our faults would be for Him to ignore His just nature. For Him to treat us as we deserve would be for Him to go against His love.

Though He has chosen not to put us aside, because He loves us, by His very nature He cannot bear to look at our sin. And if He looks away, that is hell.

Sin is not some nasty thing we step in occasionally by accident. It is at the core of our humanity. Forgiveness for our sins is not a simple matter. It can't be accomplished by an "I'm sorry" from us; that would be contrary to true justice. Our faults deserve more than a light brush-off. There is nothing we can do to atone for our own sinfulness, nothing we could do to prevent a death sentence.

But love conquered all. Love gave Himself as the peace offering. Love paid the price. The love that is basic to God's nature satisfied the requirements of the justice that is equally a part of His being.

Lent is a time for considering that.

What would I give to know every day the cost of my sin? What must I do to teach myself how to please Him — not so I can be saved, as He has already done that — but so I may avoid making Him unhappy.

I read once that God could have been happy without us if He had never made us, but that having done so, He has tied His happiness up for eternity with us. He will be truly happy only when His plan is complete.

Lent reminds me to be a partner in His plan — not by accident or when it's easy, but by design, by effort of my will, by Bible reading, discipline, fasting, prayer, confession and repentance.

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And no gloomy faces, please. For what pleases Him most while I am doing it, is if it doesn't show. And what I want to do most of all is please Him.



Another Lent

Another Lent! The season comes around with great regularity. The problem becomes how to use it creatively.

Let's see. What have I tried lately?

I've tried fasting a couple of days a week.

That reminded me this is a penitential season — especially when I used the time spent in eating for Bible reading. I almost always found something in Scripture that needed changing in my life. Then I could pray and ask God to make me new.

I've tried taking on special reading.

Extra Bible reading has produced some very good fruit. And such books as *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer and *Prayer is Invading the Impossible* by Jack Hayford have helped me ever since I read them in Lents gone by.

I've tried going to extra services.

Attendance at Lenten services has offered me time to share the preparation for Easter with other members of the Body of Christ. It has reminded me that I am not alone in my walk, that I need those others to help me and I need the opportunity to help them.

Barbara White



Being with groups of Christians has helped remind me how human I am. Just when I'm thinking how dull, obstinate, tiring, selfish or hypocritical all those other people are, something happens. The Lord reminded me He loves each of them — and me, a person just like them.

I've tried writing a journal during Lent.

Taking the time occasionally to consider where I stand with the Lord, to ask Him what He has to teach me, to record prayers (and answers to prayer) is good for the spirit.

It is so easy to forget to look for the Lord in my regular life. I know He is there in the big, bad times. He is the only reason I make it through. But He is also there in the simple times, as when I speak to a friend, stand in line at the grocery store, fix a meal, answer the phone. He is ALWAYS there, and a journal helps me remember that.

What haven't I tried?

I guess I haven't tried asking the Lord each and every day to tell me what He wants me to do with that day.

Fasting would help me hear the answer.

But I think I'll just try asking.



After I Say I'm Sorry

I have been pondering the usefulness of Lent.

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Why do some churches promote what they call a season of penitence? What does such a season have to offer me?

I decided I needed to know what penitence means, so I turned to the dictionary. According to *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate*, penitence means being sorry for sins or faults.

Webster lists some synonyms that enrich the meaning. Repentance adds the implication of a resolve to change. Compunction implies a painful sting of conscience. And remorse suggests prolonged and insistent self-reproach and mental anguish for past wrongs, especially for those whose consequences cannot be remedied.

Those are not popular ideas today. Penitence seems to be out of fashion.

Saying "I'm sorry" has not gone out of date, however. We do that all the time.

I concluded that we may sometimes be sorry for what we have done, but more often than not we are merely sorry for having been found out.

About that time, I remembered a line from an old ballad. It goes: *What can I say, Dear, after I say I'm sorry.*

The rest of the lyrics escaped me, but that one line kept running around in my mind.

After all, being penitent means being sorry.

I tried to find out more about the song. A couple of co-workers had heard of it, but could not remember any other words.

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One of the staff members in the art and music department of the downtown library offered to look it up for me. His research paid off.

The song is titled *What Can I Say After I Say I'm Sorry*. It was written in 1926 by Walter Donaldson.

The lyrics go like this:

I don't know why I made you cry. I'm sorry, Sweetheart. And though you shouldn't be lenient with me, I hope you'll forgive and forget. What can I say, Dear, after I say I'm sorry?

What can I do to prove it to you. I'm sorry I didn't mean to ever be mean to you. If I didn't care I wouldn't feel like I do.

I was all wrong, but right or wrong, I don't blame you. Why should I take somebody like you and shame you? I know that I made you cry and I'm so sorry, Dear. So what can I say, Dear, after I say I'm sorry?

The singer is supposedly penitent. He says he is sorry for something he has done that hurt his loved one.

But does he acknowledge whatever it was as a sin or a fault?

Is he repentant? Does he know compunction? Is there remorse?

He says nothing about never doing it again, of changing his behavior. The pangs of conscience do not seem to bother him as much as the lack of response from his beloved.

Perhaps not, but if he truly loves the one he sings to, he may know regret. He may not be able to remedy the consequences. She may refuse to forgive and forget.

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Why did I think of that song? Does it help me understand penitence as a necessary part of getting ready for Easter?

Can I say the words of that song to my Lord? Words like "I didn't mean to do it" or "I hope you'll forgive and forget."

True penitence is something more than realizing I did something I didn't mean to do. It is more than hoping the Lord will forgive and forget.

It means recognizing that I am incapable of always doing the right thing.

The good news is that my hope of forgiveness is real. He has said he will forgive and forget. He has said that though my sins were as scarlet, I will be as white as snow.

I think the most significant line in the song is this one: *If I didn't care, I wouldn't feel this way.*

That is true. If we don't care, compunction has nothing to touch. If we don't care, remorse has nothing to feed upon.

So true repentance comes from the heart of one who has learned to love the Lord and then to see himself, of one who has come to understand the price God paid that we might be restored to him.

Easter is the celebration of that restored relationship. For Jesus, who died for our sins and our faults, has risen to new life.

After remorse comes repentance. After repentance comes restoration.

Now I know what to say after I say I'm sorry!



Thank you for the gift of your Son. Thank you for forgiveness.



Am I Ready?

Well, Lent is winding down now. Easter is just a little over a week away.

Has it done its work in my life? Has it prepared me for Easter?

Have I learned anything about who I am in relation to my Lord that I did not know before Lent started?

Actually, I think I have.

Maybe not as much as I would have liked, but then I tend to be greedy, sometimes wanting more than I can handle.

But I have found some new ways of looking at that relationship. And I have tried them out and found that they work.

This week, while pondering what this Lent has meant to me and how prepared I am for this Easter, I put together two comments that had recently come to my attention. One was said directly to me by a local minister; I found the other in a book.

Together they formed a guide to living after Easter, to the day-, by-day process of following the Risen Lord.

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During an interview with the Rev. Bob Weeks for an article on the biblical approach to sexuality, which appears in this issue of *Religion*, he said that knowing God's purpose for our sexuality is not a limiting or confining process, as many people think. It is actually liberating.

The world has told us a big lie that says to limit ourselves to what God blesses is to deny ourselves fulfillment. The truth is actually the opposite.

It should be obvious, to the believer anyway, that as God's creations, we will be fulfilled only as we fulfill his intentions for us.

But how many difficulties even believers throw in the way of accepting that perfectly plain truth. How unwilling we are to hear it, much less to begin to follow it.

Once, perhaps, the world helped by at least acknowledging the rightness of the walk, but not any more. Today the world mocks any attempt to reshape our lives according to the Bible.

So now, even if we accept the need for this reshaping, how can we go about getting this to happen in us in a world that has so blinded us to the truth?

That is where the other remark comes in. I found it in a chapter of the book *Loving God* by Charles Colson.

In speaking of the Bible, Colson said it was not for the reader to interpret Scripture; it was for Scripture to interpret the reader.

Someone once told me that God never buys anything he isn't willing to pay for. And God never asks us to give him anything he has not already given us.

Barbara White



If he wants gold from us, he gives us gold. If he wants obedience, he gives us his Spirit to make that possible.

First he has to show us the disobedience in our lives. He does this through his word.

But his word is not merely a guide to how I should live. It is like a sword and can separate bone from marrow, deception from reality, truth from lie.

When I read his word, it becomes my interpreter, revealing my life and my heart to me. It tells me how I am living and how God would have me live.

Then I can choose — to follow Jesus or not to follow Jesus.

The good news is that real freedom lies in obedience to the truth.

"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciple," Jesus said to the Jews in John 8:31, 32. "Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

Jesus did more than announce the path to freedom. He prayed for that freedom. In John 17, he prays to the Father for all whom the Father has given him. And that includes me.

He did not ask that we be taken out of the world — after all, he has work for us to do in it — but he did ask that we might be protected from the evil one.

Then he asked the Father to sanctify us by the truth. And he said how that would happen.

"Your word is truth."

My task for the rest of Lent — and all the days that follow — is to let his word, his truth, perform its sanctifying work in my life.



Self Examination

There's good and bad news about this whole business of self-examination.

The bad news is that the process of identifying things about myself that need to be changed can be painful.

In fact, if it isn't painful, it probably isn't real, because the knowledge that can make a difference in my life is always accompanied by the breaking of my heart. Otherwise it's just factual knowledge and does not necessarily lead to the slightest desire for change.

The good news — and the thing that makes it possible for me to go through the process — is that God already loves me, even the way I am right now today and even before I make a single correction.

Oh, and that he is in the business of mending broken hearts and reshaping lives. That's good news, too.

In fact there is a lot more good news than bad. For example, it is also good news that:

- We don't have to find all the flaws at the same time.



No one could possibly stand seeing the truth about all the areas of his life at once. The weight of his grief would be unbearable.

- We have enough time to do the work allotted.

However much time we have, it is enough — if we will just use it. God sets the proper pace and if we cooperate with him, the task of remaking us will move along just fine.

Of course, we don't have so much time that we can go around wasting too much of it, as did those foolish virgins who were left outside when the bridegroom appeared. And nobody knows exactly how much time too much time is.

- We do not have to go through the process alone.

By the time we are able to see something in our life that needs changing, the Holy Spirit has already been at work. Only spiritual eyes can see spiritual things and the things we need to change always have spiritual dimensions. It is not the outward behavior that really needs work, but the condition of the heart.

- And we do not have to do the actual changing.

We have to cooperate, fully and extensively. But the Lord who began the change in us when he opened our eyes to see ourselves is the only one who can really finish it. The job is his. The willingness to let it happen — as often as necessary — is ours.

Which brings me back to the original good news I listed in this column — that God loves me the way I am and is in the business of changing me.

Those are not contradictory truths. Actually, they are complementary. It is that very love of God that

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causes him to desire my perfection, which obviously will require change.

And how grateful I am for this good news!

Frankly, if I thought I had to achieve that perfection on my own efforts, I would be defeated before I start. I know my own track record for turning good intentions into daily habits.

I am also grateful because I know God is capable of making change happen. And my knowledge is not merely theoretical. I know because God has already made changes in my heart.

Not great huge changes, perhaps. But the little ones are still significant.

I have seen a couple of posters that speak to the idea I'm talking about. One says, God loves me the way I am — and too much to leave me that way. Another says, Be patient with me. God's isn't finished with me yet.

Gigi Graham Tchividjian, Billy and Ruth Graham's oldest daughter, shared a slightly different version of this in her talk at the luncheon last month sponsored by the Women for Christ of Jacksonville. She said her mother's choice for something to be written on her tombstone was:

**End of construction.
Thank you for your patience.**

Any time is a good time for self-examination, of course. But it is one of the stated purposes of Lent, a season set aside for us to prepare our hearts for the wonder of God's love revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.



For we will miss the wonder of Easter if we don't know we need that death and resurrection, if we don't know we need to be changed.

Easter is all about the truth of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life," which everyone knows.

And the truth of the next verse, too, which is not as often quoted, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

Not to condemn, but to save.

And part of being saved is being changed. I need to be saved from myself. I need to be changed;

And every change that makes me more like Jesus enlarges that portion of his resurrection life that lives in me.



A Sacrifice

"How can God require anything as awful as sacrifice?" asked a friend of mine who was struggling with belief in God. "How can I believe in a God who needs blood?"

How can you not, I wonder. If you decide not to believe in God as He has revealed Himself, then you don't believe in God. You may reject Him, but you can't decide what He is. I am, God said — and that's all there is to it.

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Let's stop trying to decide what we believe God is; let's try to receive the revelation of Himself He has given. And included in that revelation is sacrifice. He does "require" it, so instead of turning away in horror — or civilized distaste — at the thought, let's consider why.

You see, my friend, God does not need that sacrificial blood. We do. And what is more, God provided it for our sake.

How can a good God — and God is altogether good — abide anything less than perfect goodness? Can we really think He doesn't care what we do? What we are?

God wants us to be able to know Him, to come into His presence. And our fallen nature simply cannot abide with His goodness, just as water and fire cannot abide in the same place.

How can we approach Him with all our sins in tow? Or how can we be made clean so we can come into His presence, know Him, abide with Him?

A price must be paid. That's how.

But gold or diamonds will not pay the price.

So we come to sacrifice. In the beginning it was animal sacrifice — but that had to be done over again and again and again. And still men sinned.

Will our lives always be in peril under the weight of our own sin? No, for God Himself became the sacrificial lamb and shed the blood that is the perfect cover for our sin, repented and forgiven.

The cross is ugly. Crucifixion is hell. The tomb is dark.



But it is empty. Easter proclaims the end of death — for those who accept the gift of life at the price of His blood.

If He had not loved us and wanted us to know Him now and forever, there need have been no sacrifice, no saving blood.

If we do not accept that sacrifice made for us, then there is no redemption. How can we not believe in it?



Passover Freedom

In Passover, Jews celebrate their freedom from slavery in Egypt, their deliverance from social and political oppression. They celebrate God's saving action on behalf of His chosen people through the blood of the lamb.

On Easter, the Christian celebrates his freedom from slavery to sin and death, his deliverance by Jesus from the personal bondage to sin. He celebrates God's redeeming love for all His people through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Paschal Lamb.

In both we see God's hand at work, first delivering a community from the oppression of society and its injustice and then, in Jesus, the deliverance of the individual from the oppression of sin and self.

Along The Way



In God's economy, each contributes to the other: the saved community and the saved individual.

An article in Thursday's Journal told of a group of Jewish prisoners who celebrated the Seder, the Passover meal, inside a Florida correctional institution.

The article was beautifully written. The story was touching — men celebrating freedom from behind locked doors and prison walls.

There is a kind of freedom that prison walls cannot touch. Someone I know in prison says so.

"Don't ever be sorry I'm here," she told me one visiting day. "If God hadn't put me here, I would probably be dead in some hospital emergency room by now."

Not only is she not dead, she is alive in a way she was not before.

It was the state that put her in prison, of course, a judge who sentenced her. It has, she says, given her time to think — and time to know herself.

"I've learned I don't have to do things the way I used to," she said. "I can do them Jesus' way, instead."

Shortly after she was put in prison, she heard the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection for the first time.

It wasn't actually the first time the words had been said in her presence, just the first time they had made sense.

The minister who told her, starting from the story of the Prodigal Son, thought she had paid no attention.



"I don't know why she asked me to come," he said at the time. "She just sat and didn't say anything."

But she listened.

"That night, I asked the Lord to come into my life," she told me later. "I asked Him to forgive all the things I had done wrong and I told Him I forgave everyone who had done anything wrong to me.

"It was a wonderful feeling."

It was freedom.

She lives now free within prison walls.

She wants to try to live that way outside those walls, of course, and hopes for the chance to do so soon.

But from behind the locked doors and barbed-wire fences, she knows the difference between slavery and freedom.

"I can *choose* how to act now," she said. "Before, I couldn't."

She's not perfect, of course, but she is on the way.

And, with Him, she knows the joy of living free — right now.



Watching Daffodils Grow

Along The Way



I bought a container of daffodils last week. It had tall green spikes of leaves surrounding a half-dozen mostly green buds, with just a hint of yellow showing.

They should be open in time for Easter, the saleslady assured me.

People sometimes compare being bored to "watching grass grow." Watching buds open is not boring.

Of course, you don't just sit and look at them. You check them out every morning to see how they look today and glance at them briefly whenever you pass by.

It is amazing how suddenly the change takes place. From a hint of yellow to a little more and a little more yellow is slow and steady.

Then suddenly — there is the bloom. It bursts into view all in a moment, it seems, between one glance and the next.

Actually, I've never observed a flower opening — except in time-lapse photography. But it seems that fast.

The bursting open, that sudden unfolding, follows extensive, hidden preparations.

Sometimes people bloom into new life, too, new life in the Spirit. A friend who had been showing only hints of color for a long time has suddenly burst into full flower.

It wasn't sudden, of course. The Lord had been arranging her life for some time, putting particular people in her path, bringing certain readings to her attention, surrounding her with events and



circumstances until they formed the perfect time and place for new life to appear.

It seems sudden, but it has been "in the works" for months, maybe years. Maybe even since the beginning of time.

God started Easter then. Jesus is the first bloom of a new promise, bursting forth into new life now available to us.

He is the risen Son to whom the rising sun on Easter morning is only an echo.

He is the life and beauty of the daffodil, the warmth and energy of the sun. He is the source of life, and the giver of new life, like the life suddenly, overwhelmingly present in my friend.

Tomorrow is the celebration of Jesus' Easter. Any day can be Easter for one who calls Him Lord.



A New Beginning Time

Albert Einstein concluded that time is not the same everywhere. He put it differently, of course, but that is one layman's version of what he meant.

Tomorrow is Easter and time is moving very slowly today. All through the 40 days of Lent time has moved with deliberate pace ever closer to the mystery and majesty of Easter morning. Now that it is almost here, I long to rush to meet the anticipated wonder, but instead slow my step to let time come in its own way.

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So here in the void between death and resurrection let me praise Him. I know what tomorrow brings because this "tomorrow," which is nearly two thousand years old, has already happened.

But what of my own little tomorrows, my own voids of waiting?

How that Saturday, the day after Jesus' death, must have dragged for those who knew and loved Him. Time must have seemed eternally the same, empty and without meaning or full of fear and uncertainty.

Time has never been the same since that day. All time is new because of it.

Tomorrow is a time of new beginnings, a new beginning for all creation and for all His creatures.

As we seek our individual "new beginnings," whatever they may be, we may do this without fear, without anguish, because of what tomorrow represents. As He rose from the grave and lives today to intercede for us, so we may approach all our new beginnings, all our tomorrows, with confidence.

For if death has no more hold over us, if death has been vanquished, then the power of the prince of this world has been broken — forever. And if, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we live as sons and heirs of God, why should we be anxious for tomorrow?

So I will trust in You for my tomorrow, all my tomorrows.

There will be difficulties. Easter does not wipe away the presence of sin in the world; it changes the outcome.

Barbara White



"But I will sing of thy power; yea, I will sing aloud of thy mercy in the morning: for thou hast been my defense and refuge in the day of my trouble.

"For unto thee, O my strength, will I sing: for God is my defense, and the God of my mercy." (Psalm 59, King James Version)



Crown Of Thorns

Even though I was wearing gloves with leather palms, I managed to stick myself with a thorn while pulling blackberry vines out of the shrubbery by my house — one little thorn prick, leaving behind a tiny drop of blood.

I can't really imagine a crown of thorns.

If I knew that being a Christian meant having to wear a crown of thorns, could I do it? I don't know if Jesus knew about the crown of thorns, but I'm sure He knew about the pain ahead, the pain involved in doing His Father's will. He sweated blood while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Here on the eve of Easter, I consider the cost of doing the Father's will. Becoming a Christian is free; being one is very costly.

And it may hurt, too.

I have known small pains, like the one I felt when I confessed my human failings to my neighbor and asked to be forgiven. Some know the pain of dying at the hands of those who do not know or honor the Lord they serve.

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All of us will surely know the pain of dying to self. No matter how easily I give up some of my own desires, others take skin and bone with them as they go.

Jesus wore that crown of thorns willingly. He could have refused. Of course, He couldn't refuse and still walk in His Father's will.

Since I walk along the way with Him willingly, I will know other more serious pains than my small thorn scratch, my small embarrassment.

Sometimes, though, I turn aside; for a moment I run away and try to hide. This world is not yet fully His and the prince of this world still has his day. So there is death all around.

In whose service will I die, then? In whose hands will I place my life? To whom will I be obedient?

It is only possible to die to self willingly — as He walked obediently to the cross — because I know Jesus has gone ahead and waits to raise me to new life in Him. I could not do it alone.

Jesus said, "In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Tomorrow, on Easter Day, we will cover the cross with lilies and roses and other signs of resurrection.

On the blackberry vine I found a small, white flower.

As I sucked my finger and admired the bloom, I thought of this saying: Do not complain because your rose bush has thorns. Rejoice that your thorn bush has roses.



Pine Trees

A woman called this week to talk to me about pine trees.

She said she had been walking around the golf course at the Tournament Players Championship, when suddenly she had seen tiny crosses at, the tips of all the branches of the pine trees.

"It was beautiful," she said. "Have you ever seen it? The new growth on each branch forms a little cross."

She thought the paper should run a story about it.

"There must be a story," she said. "It must have something to do with Jesus and the Crucifixion. It must have something to do with Easter, coming so close to that time."

I said I had seen the pine's crosses for the first time some years before and have watched for them every year since then.

I said I knew there was some kind of story about why dogwood blossoms came in the shape of a cross, but that I had never heard of a story explaining why the pine's new growth took on that particular shape.

I told her that at least once in the past the newspaper had carried a photograph of the pine branch crosses, calling attention to the coincidence of nature and religion.

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We chatted a bit longer, sharing a mutual delight in the wonders of God and nature, and broke off the telephone connection.

Her final thought was to wonder why she had never seen the little crosses before.

Why are we suddenly able to see something that has been there all along, but we have never seen before?

She may have seen new growth on pine trees before but simply not have related the shape to the cross.

Perhaps her perception of a spiritual significance to the shape was related to new growth in her relationship with the Lord. Perhaps it was preparation for a deepening of that relationship to come. The Holy Spirit may have been sharpening her vision for events still, ahead, so that she would be better able to see the spiritual side of whatever was to happen.

Whatever the cause, the result was a quickening of her senses, natural and supernatural. Her delight in the new vision was evident in what she said and the way she said it. It seemed to be for her a new sign of God's saving action in the world and in her life. Her excitement was contagious. It has made me look wide-eyed at the world around me each day as I have driven home.

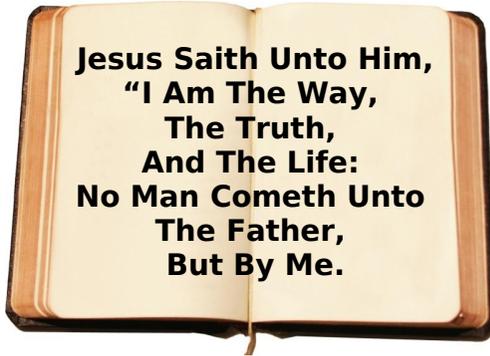
The meaning of the events that Christians celebrate at Easter cannot be contained in the renewal of spring, for it is much more than that.

Death itself was slain on the cross. Life itself rose with Jesus on Easter. All crosses remind us that he bore our sins when he went to his cross.

Barbara White



The living pine tree crosses remind us that he opened a way for us into life, new life, eternal life, when he rose from the dead.



Dealing With Stuff

A friend said my articles on forgiveness challenged him more than he wanted to be challenged.

"Am I going to have to go back and deal with a lot of stuff ! don't want to deal with," he asked.

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"I don't know," I replied. "I'm not the one who tells you what hurdle you have to cross. You only have to jump the fences the Lord sets up for you."

"Thanks a lot," he said. "The Lord sets the tough ones."

That's true!

And just when you think you have scaled the impossible heights, he makes the next jump a little harder!

But none of the hurdles we face is as tough as the one he had to scale.

Tomorrow we will celebrate his resurrection to new life. We celebrate because by it he gave us new life.

Today, before that celebration, however, I remember that to reach that goal, he had to face the cross. There was no going around it.

And because he did, I don't have to.

My conversation with my friend reminded me of an exercise we used to do in physical education classes years ago when I was teaching school.

Two of the children would hold a stick of some kind and the rest would run between them, jumping over the stick.

Each time the front of the line came around, the stick was raised slightly, until almost everybody was having to work to get over it.

It wasn't a high-jump contest, however. Everyone had to participate.

Learning to forgive is very much like that physical education exercise.

Barbara White



As we master one level of competence — learning to forgive this slight or that injury — the bar is set a little higher, and the leap becomes a little harder.

This is not only true for forgiveness, of course. It is also true for patience, long-suffering, kindness, gentleness, goodness, love — in fact, for all the characteristics of the Lord that add up to the fruit of the Spirit.

However, there are a couple of differences between the way things works in God's economy and the way they worked in phys ed.

In the class, everyone had to tackle the same height at the same time. And the bar was raised gradually, allowing jumpers to stretch slowly to new heights.

In walking with the Lord, everyone does not face the same kind of barrier at the same time. Some of us are just learning how to forgive people who have stepped on our toes. Others are dealing with hurts that go much deeper.

It is extremely risky to assume that everybody is at the same spiritual level at the same time. It tempts us to comparisons. We begin to judge how well others are doing instead of how we are faring. And God may not be giving us all the same lesson at the same time.

Also, everyone does not seem to start with little jumps and work up slowly. God seems to give some people big hurdles to cross the minute they begin to follow him, while allowing others to progress slowly in small steps.

I don't know why. He never seems to answer that kind of question. I will settle for the fact that he knows.

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Besides, everyone gets all the practice he or she needs. We all face many opportunities to practice forgiveness and the other virtues. We face them every day and at all sorts of levels. We may face a 3-inch hurdle one minute and a 9-foot one the next.

But once we face it, it is ours to cross. We must try to leap it — and keep getting up and trying again — until we succeed.

An athlete must rely on his own strength and training for success. We have help.

We are like the horse, who has the benefit of a rider when he takes a hurdle. The rider, who knows the horse's abilities and weaknesses intimately, directs its approach to the jump, guiding it to just the right spot for lift off.

The Lord will do the same for us, if we will be responsive to his direction.



Live Forever Where?

People turned out in droves to attend church Sunday.

I wonder how many of them will come back this weekend.

The Sunday after Easter has often been called "Low Sunday." And the callers weren't talking about



the form of worship. They were talking about the number of people who came.

Why does this happen?

Obviously some folks come to church on Easter only for the flowers, the music and the pageantry. Or perhaps to have a place to wear new clothes.

Others, who were particularly busy directing a preparation time for Easter and in putting on the special Sunday celebration, may decide they need a break

But I wonder if the real reason for the difference in attendance on Easter and the Sunday after isn't that many of us celebrate only spring and not the resurrection.

To celebrate spring is to rejoice in new life, but only a kind of life that will again die. To celebrate the resurrection is to rejoice in something totally different.

God raised Jesus from the dead in a different way than Jesus called Lazarus back from the grave. For Lazarus only returned to the old life, the one he had lived before. The resurrection speaks of a new kind of life, one that did not exist until that day.

Do we really believe that Jesus began to live in a new way on Easter? And lives that way today?

Charles Colson wrote about the difficulty of believing in the resurrection in his book, *Loving God*. He said he believed the resurrection of Jesus actually happened because he knew first-hand how hard it is to keep any kind of public action a secret.

He said his experience in the Watergate scandal made him sure the conspiracy theory about the resurrection was not true. This theory asserts that the

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disciples stole the body, hid it and lied when they said he rose again.

The fallacy of that supposition, Colson wrote, is that it meant they had to lie about it for the rest of their lives, even when threatened with physical harm and ultimately with death.

Colson reasoned that at least one of the leaders would have cracked under the strain of secrecy and dread if this had actually been the way it happened. And once one folded, others would have rushed to follow.

He has good reason to doubt the ability of any group of people to maintain a lie that way. He was one of the people eventually sentenced to prison in the attempted cover-up by the Nixon administration of information about the break-in at the Democratic headquarters.

Their small group of men could not maintain a conspiracy for even a few months, although the worst they faced was a short prison sentence, he said in the book.

Were the hundreds of people who claimed to have seen the Risen Jesus any different? Could they have continued to say so when faced with the choice of dying or recanting unless it were the truth?

Does it matter whether or not Jesus really rose from the dead? Whether he lives today in a new way?

It matters. In fact, nothing else matters as much.

For if the resurrection is not true, then everything we know about Jesus is subject to doubt. But if it is true — and what an incredible option this is — then we trust him in all that he has said and done.



We can know that Jesus did indeed die for our sin, that as our Savior, he set us free from the penalty we would have had to pay. And we can know that as our Risen Lord, our Living Lord, He set us free from the power of sin.

For the resurrection does not proclaim a mere "living forever."

The preface to a book of C.S. Lewis' essays, *The Seeing Eye*, says the question for Lewis was not whether we will live forever, but whether we will live in heaven with the Beatific Vision or in hell with the Miserific Vision

No. The resurrection is the sign of new life. Not only Jesus' new life. Ours as well

This is the good news we celebrated on Sunday and every Sunday and all the days in between. We are an Easter people. We can live every day of our lives here on Earth — and all of eternity — with our Father in heaven.



Low Sunday

Crowds turned out for church services all over the city Sunday to celebrate Easter.

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If the pattern of past years holds true, most of those churches will see much smaller crowds of people seated in their pews tomorrow.

But Easter is still real, whether the crowds turn out tomorrow or not. What difference does it make that Easter happened?

It makes all the difference in the world. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, each of us can be lifted out of whatever pit we have fallen into and can be given the place of honor at the right hand of God.

This happens not because of anything good we did or because we are such nice people. It happens because of what Jesus did and who he is. It is because of this that we have the place of honor. It happens because we are "in Christ."

And because we are, we have been set free to really live life every day, not just Easter. We have been set free to fly like the eagle, not scratch around in the dirt like chickens.

Ah, you say, but I am too sorry a person to fly. I have done too many things wrong and the guilt of them weighs me down so that I could not possibly fly.

Not to worry. Everybody is too sorry. Everybody has done too many things wrong.

Everybody but Jesus. And it is because of what he did, and because we are in him, that we have the privilege of sitting at God's right hand.

That is true on Easter — and on the week after Easter, too.

And because it is, God will never abandon us!



Even if we don't make church tomorrow, God will not turn his back on us.

As Bible teacher Bob Mumford put it. God may break every bone in your body, but He will never abandon you.

God is determined that we shall mature and become more effective followers of the Lord, Mumford said.

Following Jesus does not get us that seat of honor, but it is our response to having been given that seat of honor.

Mumford gets this message across every time he is asked to dedicate a child to God.

"I take the little sinner — the parents love it when I call the baby a sinner — and I pray: Lord, wrap your covenant love around the heart and will of this child and let it be everlasting — and ever-stretching."

That, he explained, is because he knows that at some point the child will stray from the faith and God's love will need to be elastic.

"And eventually, it will snap him back," Mumford said.

I'm like that child sometimes. I forget why God placed me at his right hand in the first place. And having forgotten, I begin to live as if I were not there.

I begin to wander — until God's elastic love snaps me back.

"God is not easily offended at what we do," Mumford said. "Like most parents, he overlooks 98 percent of what we do."

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But for the other 2 percent, "He chases us down and puts His foot on our necks," he said.

The good news is that while God may knock us down, He also puts us back on our feet.

Mumford pointed out that when a boxer is knocked down, the referee counts from 1 to 10 and calls him out. When God knocks us down, he counts from 10 to 1 and we stand up again. God starts with us already dead — and brings us back to life.

I think that's really what Easter is all about. It's about sitting, in Christ, at God's right hand — and about falling down and standing up again, following the Lord.

And Easter is not just one day that has passed. It's every day.

Alleluia. He is risen!



After Easter

The problem with having a "high" is that it is almost always followed by a "low."

The Sunday after Easter is sometimes called "low Sunday." That may refer to attendance at church on that day, which is traditionally low, and it may also refer to the wiped-out condition of many Easter church-goers. It is, in fact, the condition that causes the attendance level.

Some of us have expended more than the usual amount of energy getting ready for Easter: reading



more, spending more time in prayer, attending more services. We are exhausted from the effort, just as the novice jogger is after running his first marathon.

Others find Easter so beautiful, the church so full of flowers, the choir at its best, that a "regular" Sunday pales by comparison and we allow that "let down" feeling to excuse us for sleeping late.

We become, as a friend of mine put it, "easy pickings for the devil". That is where the practice of religion comes in handy. A lot has been written about physical fitness in recent months, what with the River Run and such. We have been told of the need to exercise, to develop our hearts and lungs as well as our muscles. Well, spiritual fitness is equally important and it takes practice, too.

There are all sorts of guides to exercising our spiritual muscles; they are available at any Christian book store (and many secular ones). And almost all are helpful, though some more than others.

But the problem is not only the need for guides for spiritual exercise. There is the need for the power that makes exercise effective.

We are like the dry bones littering Ezekiel's vision. God told Ezekiel that He would open graves, take dry bones and fill them with breath, with new life.

We need that breath, that new life to fill the dry bones of our spiritual lives with glowing, energetic health.

After His resurrection Jesus told His followers that He would send them the enabler, the spirit which would not only teach them all they needed to know, but give them the power to do what needed to be done.

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We need to exercise our spiritual muscles and we need the Spirit to enable us to do so effectively. What we need has been prepared for us. Pentecost comes soon on the calendar, but it is actually already here.



Pulling Out My Hair!

I spent almost an entire day recently snatching myself up by my hair, yanking myself back from the edge of depression.

Fortunately this was not a literal process or I would have a very sore head. It required a lot of yanking to keep me out of the doldrums.

I understand spring is a common time for people to get depressed. The difference between the beauty of the season and the reality of their lives becomes so evident. And so painful.

As I prepared for Easter this year, the gap between my intention and my execution began to depress me. Not to mention the difference between my expectations for myself and my circumstances.

So it isn't too surprising that I found myself sitting over a cup of coffee last Saturday morning with my chin on my chest. I could have given you a dozen reasons why life was really not much to brag about. I could have explained why it was obvious that things weren't going to get any better, too.



In fact I believe I could have justified my drooping posture to anyone's satisfaction.

Except God's.

That thought dropped into the midst of my gloom like a very small pebble into a mud puddle. But even in a mud puddle, a tiny pebble sends out ripples. And even in a deep gloom, the thought of the Lord is a light that awakens the heart of the one who loves him.

OK, I thought. So this day isn't wonderful. So life isn't what I wanted it to be. So I'm not all I wish I were.

God is still God.

And he is not unaware of where I am or what I am or what is happening to me.

So, I thought, what will I do with this day? This day which he has made? This day which he has given me?

That's when I gave the first yank.

What *will* I do, I asked myself, shifting the emphasis from the "what" to the "will."

I can't seem to control my emotions or my feelings. But, I reminded myself, I can direct my will.

What does that mean to someone in the middle of a mud puddle? It means making a choice.

I made it through a prayer, saying, "By an act of my will, Lord, I choose to surrender myself to you — and the day which you have made — this very minute.

"I will choose to rejoice in it, no matter what it's like. I will choose to praise you, Lord, in it, no matter how I feel I will choose to accept it with open arms, however painful that might be.

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"But, Lord, you know I can't actually do all that by myself. I can only will to choose it. You have to make it happen."

For a little while the day was brighter and I was more at peace. But it didn't last. Before I knew it, I was back in the gloom again.

That's when the second yank came.

I repeated my determination to accept the day and all it held as from God's hands. And I called again upon the Lord to make me able to do what I desired to do, what I willed to do.

And the gloom receded again.

It was an all-day battle to keep it back, however. And, while I felt pretty good about things by the end of the day, I also felt rather sore from all that yanking.

A day or two later, looking back at the process, I saw something wonderful. It wasn't just a case of forgetting and remembering and forgetting and remembering again.

It's true that as often as I remembered, I forgot. But it is also true that as often as I forgot, I was *reminded*. I wasn't remembering all by myself.

The Spirit of the Lord was with me, stirring my spirit, helping me do what I could not do alone.

The Lord *IS* my shepherd.

He is my rock of refuge and a strong fortress to save me.

He is my hiding place, the One who protects me from trouble and surrounds me with songs of deliverance.

Barbara White



He came to me in my distress and touched my mind with his presence, quietly, softly, but persistently, until I recognized him, acknowledged him and turned to him.

And then, when I called upon him, he answered with strength and power, over and over again.

But in between, I had to exercise my will. I had to exercise it over and over again, too.

Nothing has changed. None of the details of my life are any different. The things I was so depressed about remain in place. But my decision-making abilities have had a workout and my trust muscle is stronger now.

I'd like to think there won't be a next time for this particular lesson, that I won't let myself get "down" about things again,

But if I do, maybe it won't take so much yanking next time to get me to stay on the rock.

Maybe that's how it works!

Barbara White

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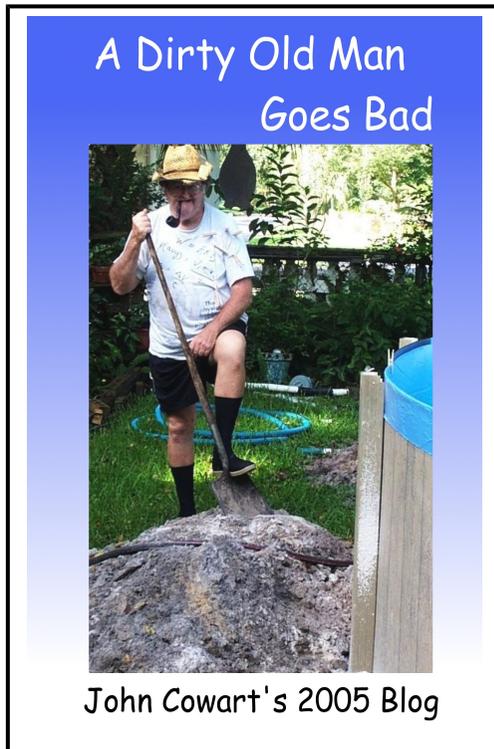
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**If you enjoy Barbara White's Along The Way Series,
You may also enjoy her friend John Cowart's book:**



A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad records the humor and happiness of a frustrated writer. John's daily blog, *Rabid Fun*, bears the caption, "A befuddled ordinary Christian looks for spiritual realities in day to day living." Sounds like a downer. Yet, over 104,000 readers from 102 countries visited his website in 2005. *A Dirty Old Man Goes Bad* reveals John's happy joys as well as his struggles with temptation over bitterness, resentment, pornography, Microsoft, depression, laziness, Google, Blogger, pettiness, sloth, Krispy Kreme Donuts, and

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anger. All in all, this is a real-time love story told day by day by a man who loves reality.

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